

SOCIETAL SECURITY AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE IN EUROPE

Mircea Brie
Ana-Maria Costea
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I. Brie, Mircea (coord.)

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Address of the editorial office:

**University of Oradea
EuroINCLUS Research Center**

1 Universitatii Street, CP 114, OP 1, Oradea, Romania
Tel/Fax (004) 0259 408167. E-mail: analerise.oradea@gmail.com

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SOCIETAL SECURITY AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE IN EUROPE. EDITORIAL AND INTRODUCTORY STUDY

Mircea BRIE*
Ana-Maria COSTEA**

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 central theme of this volume focuses on Societal Security and Democratic Resilience in Europe. The main focus is on analyzing and operationalizing the concepts of societal security, identity and democratic resilience in European space. The papers evaluate societal resilience against multiple sources of European insecurity and societal conflicts. The volume offers a critical analysis of how Europe is reconfiguring its defense mechanisms at both societal and democratic levels. The structure of this collective volume is symmetrically divided into three pillar sections: Identity and Societal Security, Societal and Democratic Resilience, and Challenges and threats to societal security.

Keywords: Europe, societal security, democratic resilience, identity.

This paper is an introductory and editorial approach for the second 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 *Societal Security and Democratic Resilience in 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 societal security, identity and democratic resilience in European space.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Europe is facing a profound redefinition of its security paradigms. Beyond the traditional military or geopolitical dimension, the stability of the continent is increasingly linked to the capacity of societies to maintain their cohesion, democratic values, and identity in the face of hybrid and cross-border threats. The present volume, *Societal Security and Democratic Resilience in Europe*, brings together a series of interdisciplinary studies that explore this complex reality from a threefold perspective: identity dynamics, institutional resilience, and emerging threats.

Through the included academic contributions, the volume offers a critical analysis of how Europe is reconfiguring its defense mechanisms at both societal and democratic levels. The structure of this collective volume is symmetrically divided into

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

** Ana-Maria Costea, PhD Associate Professor at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania. E-mail: anamaria.costea@dri.snsa.ro.

three pillar sections: 1. *Identity and Societal Security*, 2. *Societal and Democratic Resilience*, and 3. *Challenges and threats to societal security*.

Through its thematic diversity and methodological rigor, this collective volume demonstrates that societal security is not a static concept, but a dynamic process. It is built at the intersection of European inclusion policies, digital resistance to dezinformation, and the preservation of local cultural identities within the wider European family.

This volume is addressed to researchers, students, and policymakers interested in the future of democracy in Europe, offering not only a diagnosis of current vulnerabilities but also essential conceptual tools for understanding resilience on our continent.

1. Identity and Societal Security – is the first section containing 4 papers on various topics in the field of identity and societal security at various levels. These are both theoretical approaches and analytical research.

Mircea Brie and Ana Orjuhovschi proposed the paper *Gagauz Community from the Republic of Moldova. Identity as a Border and Societal Security*. The paper investigates the complex interplay between ethnocultural autonomy, societal security, and geopolitical polarization within the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia. Utilizing longitudinal sociological data alongside the results of the 2024 constitutional referendum, the study demonstrates how deeply entrenched ethno-national, religious, and linguistic cleavages effectively function as rigid internal geopolitical borders that disrupt national cohesion. The empirical findings reveal a profound identity enclave that remains structurally isolated from the mainstream Moldovan state. Culturally, the population anchors its loyalty within localized Gagauz traditions and the broader post-Soviet matrix, leaving European alignment heavily marginalized. This structural alienation is severely compounded by linguistic and informational barriers, as the Russian language completely dominates both private households and the local media landscape. With over ninety percent of the population relying exclusively on Russian-language channels, the region operates as an insulated informational echo chamber. The study validates its dual hypotheses by showing that Gagauzia's overwhelming Euroscepticism and its powerful consensus to expand regional autonomous powers stem directly from this identity-driven dependency. The authors conclude that territorial autonomy has failed to foster deep social cohesion, rendering the territory a severe societal security vulnerability heavily exposed to external hybrid exploitation (Brie and Orjuhovschi, 2026).

The following article signed by Simona Camelia Fer and Carmen Ungur-Brehoi (University of Oradea, Romania) is called *Policy Perspectives on Societal Security in Europe through Fostering Communication, Diversity and Inclusion. A Comparative Critical Discourse Analysis of the Political Rhetoric of Emmanuel Macron, Ursula von der Leyen and Georgia Meloni*. The authors analyse the relationship between political rhetoric and societal security through a comparative critical discourse analysis of speeches delivered by Emmanuel Macron, Ursula von der Leyen and Georgia Meloni. Representing different political traditions and institutional roles, these political leaders advance distinct perspectives on migration, identity, European integration and social inclusion. Using as a methodological apparatus the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study explores the linguistic choices, argumentative strategies and underlying assumptions that support competing policy approaches to societal security. The developed comparative analysis identifies both common themes and significant

differences in the interpretation of security, diversity and inclusion, highlighting the way in which political rhetoric contributes to the public justification of policy decisions. One of the main arguments of the paper is represented by the fact that contrasting discursive approaches reflect broader ideological differences regarding the future of European governance and the balance between national priorities and collective European values (Fer and Ungur-Brehoi, 2026).

The next article of the chapter is signed by Aurelian Roland Boiț (Babeș-Bolyai University, Romania) and is titled *Neo-Chivalric Organizations as Actors of Societal Security: Cultural Microdiplomacy in the Practice of the Sovereign Templar Order Saint Martin*. The paperwork aims at analysing the conditions under which a neo-chivalric organisation can contribute to inclusion, community cohesion, and societal security. The theoretical framework brings together the Copenhagen School's perspective, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital, the understanding of Europe as 'a culture of cultures', and the concepts of soft power and cultural microdiplomacy. The research uses a qualitative case study of the Sovereign Templar Order Saint Martin (OSTSM), based on an analysis of institutional documents and cultural, educational, and philanthropic projects. Moreover, the paper examines the public recognition of merit, cultural dialogue and transnational cooperation, as well as solidarity and the inclusion of vulnerable people. As a result, the analysis indicates that tradition and ceremonial visibility are insufficient to ensure the legitimacy of a contemporary organisation (Boiț, 2026).

The study *Reframing border security through Frontex focusing on identity dynamics and inclusivity in southeast Europe*, proposed by Ioana Bordeianu, Florentina Chirodea, and Luminița Șoproni, proposes a profound reconfiguration of how border security is analyzed in Southeast Europe. Frontex acts as an active producer of security knowledge and categorization. Using a qualitative methodology based on the analysis of official documents and specialized literature, the article provides a comparative evaluation of two critical operational theaters, namely the Greek-Aegean border and the Western Balkans route. Through this approach, the study highlights how Frontex's operational practices go beyond technical management to actively shape and export the EU's border-control culture into non-member states. These control processes generate othering by constructing a racialized and gendered "migrant Other," a dynamic that simultaneously redefines national and European identity narratives within the region. Finally, the authors show that formal normative commitments to fundamental rights are structurally constrained by operational pressures. This creates a regime of "differential inclusion," where access to protection and asylum is distributed selectively based on administrative categories. The study convincingly argues that questions of belonging and rights must be treated as constitutive rather than residual dimensions of contemporary European border governance (Bordeianu, Chirodea and Șoproni, 2026).

2. Societal and Democratic Resilience is the second section of this volume, containing 5 papers on various subjects in the field of societal and democratic resilience at various levels and different types of public policies about these topics.

The article *AI-driven political communication and its implications for democratic resilience in the Republic of Moldova: consequences for EU accession conditionality* signed by Maria Enachi (Babeș-Bolyai University, Romania) has as a main goal to see how artificial intelligence is changing political communication in the Republic of Moldova and why these changes matter for the country's path towards the European Union. Rather than focusing on artificial intelligence as a technological

innovation, the paper examines its effects on the information environment and on democratic resilience. The paper emphasizes that the artificial intelligence by itself does not create new democratic vulnerabilities on its own, but it reinforces existing ones by making information manipulation easier to produce, distribute, and adapt to different audiences (Enachi, 2026).

The study *The Impact of Public Opinion on the EU Security Architecture: from Institutional Integration to Societal Resilience*, published by Pavlo Molochko, examines the influence of public opinion on the emerging European defense architecture. Drawing on Eurobarometer and Gallup data, the author demonstrates the existence of a significant gap between political support and the behavioral readiness of citizens. Although heightened perceptions of geopolitical risk—such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine—drive widespread support for increased military spending, this political backing does not automatically translate into a personal willingness to participate in national defense. The analysis identifies distinct regional patterns, highlighting countries like Finland and Sweden, where defense commitment is deeply internalized as a shared civic responsibility, in contrast to Germany or Italy, where security tends to be "outsourced" to professional armed forces and NATO. The study emphasizes that the long-term sustainability of European security depends fundamentally on strengthening societal resilience and civic preparedness, with Ukraine's mobilization experience offering valuable lessons for future development (Molochko, 2026).

The next article of the chapter is titled *Societal Cohesion as a Foundation of Societal Resilience: Evidence from the Republic of Moldova* and has as its author Natalia Putină from Moldova State University, Republic of Moldova. Throughout the paper, the author analyses the societal cohesion as a structural determinant of societal resilience in the Republic of Moldova, drawing on theoretical frameworks from the literature on social capital, governance, and resilience. Thus, the research focuses on how dimensions such as institutional trust, social solidarity, and inclusion shape the capacity of societies to absorb, adapt to, and transform in response to internal and external shocks. From a methodological point of view, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining empirical data from recent sociological surveys, policy documents, and academic literature. The findings highlight a set of structural vulnerabilities, including low levels of institutional trust, identity-based polarization, and social fragmentation, which undermine societal cohesion and resilience. At the same time, the paper identifies emerging resilience mechanisms, such as community-level social capital and processes of Europeanization (Putină, 2026).

The first article of the chapter is called *Framing Societal Security in European Border Regions: Cohesion, Resilience and Multi-level Governance* and was written by Cristian Bente from "Vasile Goldiș" Western University of Arad, Romania. His paper researched upon the topic of how societal security is framed in European border-region policy and how resilience priorities are reflected in Romania's disaster-risk governance. From a methodological point of view, it applies qualitative, theory-guided document analysis to a corpus of four European Union border-region documents and one Romanian national strategy published from 2017 to 2025, comparing developments across time and governance levels. The framework combines framing, societal security, securitisation, translations of security and multi-level governance. The findings show that border-region policy did not shift linearly from cohesion to security. Preparedness and resilience were instead layered onto continuing commitments to territorial cohesion, mobility, public services and the removal of legal and administrative obstacles. Referent objects

broadened from citizens, businesses and regional development to essential services, healthcare, infrastructure, institutional capacity, vulnerable groups and community welfare (Bențe, 2026).

The following article is focusing on *The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine: Institutional Policies, Response* and it is signed by Victoria Bevziuc from Moldova State University (the Republic of Moldova). The analysis aims at highlighting the similarities and differences between the Republic of Moldova's national policies regarding information resilience and the Ukrainian institutional regulations and capacities to face modern security challenges. In doing so, the author examines the evolution of strategic communication, cybersecurity, counter-disinformation mechanisms, and interinstitutional coordination in both countries within the context of the evolving regional security environment (Bevziuc, 2026).

3. Challenges and threats to societal security is the fourth section of this volume, containing 6 papers on various subjects about challenges and threats to societal security in Europe.

The article is the *European Cyber-Security in the Area of Technology: The European Union's Response* and it is signed by Ana Maria Costea from National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (Romania). The aim of the paper is to analyse the behaviour of the European Union in cyberspace, assessing how it reacts to these threats through mitigation strategies, public policies and institutional implemented mechanisms. In order to assess the Union's response capacity, the analysis delves into two interconnected dimensions of security dynamics: those within and those outside the organization. On the internal dimension, the study places particular emphasis on educational level and digital literacy of EU citizens, demonstrating the marked heterogeneity between Member States. On the external dimension, the article examines the EU's capacity to respond to threats originating from outside the EU bloc, testing the empirical applicability of the mutual assistance clause (Article 42.7 of the TEU) proving its rather impossible implementation (Costea, 2026).

The following article was written by Răzvan Chiș from University of Oradea, Romania and is called *Disinformation as a Challenge to the Republic of Moldova's European Accession*. The paper represents a research regarding a new challenge that can disturb the already difficult mission of aspiring states to align with the Union's standards, namely disinformation. This does not constitute a stand-alone obstacle but rather operates as an amplifying factor in existing vulnerabilities. The research take place within the context of the process of European Union enlargement that encounters obstacles which require the aspiring state to align with the Union's high standards. In this regard, the integration path is conditioned by the achievement of a specific level of development in areas such as the reform of the rule of law, consolidation of democratic institutions, the reduction of economic gaps relative to member states and the adaption of the domestic economy to the European single market (Chiș, 2026).

The paper *Trafficking and Smuggling of Irregular Migrants from Nigeria to Europe: Strategies and Challenges of the European Union to Migration Governance* signed by Peter Odion Irabor from Osun State University, Nigeria ascertains the causes of trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants from Nigeria to Europe, and examines the European Union's strategies and challenges to migration governance in curbing trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants from Nigeria to Europe. As a methodological apparatus, the article employs qualitative data through individual in-

depth interviews conducted on European External Action Service, EU delegation to Nigeria and ECOWAS, Frontex, International Organisation for Migration, Nigeria Immigration Service, Idia Renaissance and the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons. Findings showed that the causes of trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants from Nigeria to Europe are not limited to border porosity with other Africa countries, cultural perspective that remittance flow improves economic standard of families, and demand of bribe by the security officials from smugglers and traffickers. Moreover, findings revealed migration governance put in place by the EU to curb trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants from Nigeria to Europe such as the adoption of revised 2000 Cotonou agreement, establishment of European Centre Against Migrant Smuggling, Europol Information Clearing House, Visa Information System, and European Union Trust Fund for Africa (Irabor, 2026).

The next article of the chapter deals with *How Disinformation Turns Protection into a Threat: The Securitisation of Solidarity with Ukrainian Refugees in Romania* and it is signed by Marius-Ioan Tătar from University of Oradea, Romania. This paperwork analyses how disinformation narratives can erode solidarity with Ukrainian war refugees. Drawing on societal security theory, deservingness research and framing analysis, it develops the concept of the securitisation of solidarity to designate discursive moves that recode humanitarian protection as a threat to the host community's resources, fairness, institutional loyalty, identity or political autonomy. The analysis combines thematic discourse analysis with systematic content coding of disinformation cases from the Romanian information environment and a comparative layer of narratives circulating beyond Romania. Thus, the authors' results show that contestation of refugee protection is voiced predominantly in a distributive register in the Romanian corpus, while criminalisation and cultural othering dominate the comparative corpus (Tătar, 2026).

The paper, *Juvenile Delinquency, Social Inclusion, the Question of (Lowering) the Age Limit and the Criminal Responsibility of Minors: The Experience of the Republic of Serbia*, is signed by Jovana Škorić and Marko Škorić from University of Novi Sad (Serbia). This text analyzes one of the most sensitive and complex challenges facing contemporary society: juvenile delinquency and the ways in which communities choose to respond to youth crime. The central focus of the discussion revolves around a profound legal and ethical dilemma, which intensified in the Republic of Serbia following the tragic mass school shootings in 2023: should the minimum age of criminal responsibility—currently set at 14 years—be lowered? The core of the paper is a massive sociological study involving over 5,600 citizens. The results reveal a concerning reality: the general public, often driven by fear, emotional reactions, and sensationalist media narratives, tends to adopt a highly punitive and intolerant stance. Most respondents believe that modern children mature faster and argue that young offenders should be isolated from society or tried as adults. In doing so, the public almost completely ignores the broader family and social context, as well as the importance of early intervention, family support, and rehabilitation programs. The text highlights the arguments of developmental psychology, neuroscience, and major international organizations like UNICEF and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. These fields demonstrate that an adolescent's brain is biologically immature, leading to a diminished capacity for self-regulation in stressful situations. Furthermore, the authors present clear empirical evidence from other countries (such as a temporarily implemented and subsequently repealed reform in Denmark) showing that lowering the age threshold does not deter crime. Instead, early exposure to the criminal justice system severely damages children's

educational outcomes and increases the likelihood of reoffending. In conclusion, the paper advocates for a shift from a repressive, punitive model toward restorative justice and social reintegration. It strongly warns policymakers against shaping legal frameworks based on temporary, collective emotional impulses (Škorić and Škorić, 2026).

The last paper in this section is *Between Home and Europe: Youth Political Socialization in Overlapping Social Environments*, proposed by Radu Sorin Turcescu and Laurențiu Petrilă, develops an integrated framework to analyze how contemporary youth form political orientations. Moving beyond classical paradigms that focus strictly on nationally bounded agents like family and school, the authors introduce the concept of overlapping socialization environments. This perspective accounts for how traditional influences actively intersect with the realities of migration, European integration, and digital communication in an increasingly interconnected Europe. Utilizing an integrative literature review that highlights Romanian transnational dynamics and youth online engagement, the study outlines three defining characteristics: simultaneity, interaction, and variability. The paper argues that a youth's political subjectivity is not merely the sum of isolated inputs but a dynamic process conditioned by how these environments reinforce or challenge one another, providing a context-sensitive agenda for future empirical testing (Turcescu and Petrilă, 2026).

Laurențiu Petrilă signed the paper *Challenges to Romania's National Security in the Context of Rising Addictive Behaviours: Community-Based Inclusion in a Border-State Context*. This article examines addictive behaviors in Romania as a societal and human security vulnerability, moving beyond classical military definitions. The author argues that alcohol and illicit substance addiction undermines national resilience through cumulative impacts on public health, human capital, community cohesion, and institutional trust. Within this framework, social inclusion emerges as a vital security mechanism. The study qualitatively evaluates three community-based recovery models in the country: Teen Challenge Romania, the "Izvorul Tămăduirii" Centre, and the Romanian Blue Cross Association. Their faith-based programs integrate core mechanisms such as continuity of care, community as a therapeutic method, family and peer support, meaningful occupation, and the reconstruction of social identity without stigmatization. However, the author cautions that available evidence reflects documented organizational practices rather than independently demonstrated clinical outcomes. While the National Drug Strategy 2022–2026 acknowledges multi-dimensional cooperation, implementation is hindered by a lack of rigorous, long-term evaluation frameworks. The author proposes a five-level community inclusion model is proposed, prioritizing predictable financing, territorial accessibility, and state-civil society complementarity.

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I. IDENTITY AND SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

Mircea BRIE, Ana ORJUHOVSCHI ⇔ *Gagauz Community from the Republic of Moldova. Identity as a Border and Societal Security*

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GAGAUZ COMMUNITY FROM THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA. IDENTITY AS A BORDER AND SOCIETAL SECURITY

Mircea BRIE*
Ana ORJUHOVSCHI**

Abstract. *Societal security and internal political transformations in the Republic of Moldova are intrinsically linked to broader geopolitical fluctuations and existential identity cleavages within the population. The Gagauz community constitutes a highly significant expression of ethnocultural pluralism, underpinned by a specialized framework of territorial autonomy. The purpose of the research is to investigate the Gagauz community in the Republic of Moldova through the analysis of the dynamics of identity borders, the state of societal security, and the identity-driven geopolitical preferences manifested within the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia. This examination aims to elucidate the structural mechanisms utilized by foreign powers, particularly the Russian Federation and the Republic of Türkiye, to project influence within the community. We advance a twofold hypothesis regarding the Gagauz community: first, that geopolitical preferences are fundamentally determined by ethno-national, linguistic, cultural, and religious identity markers; and second, that societal security is intrinsically linked to external influence. Consequently, this space exhibits a pronounced geopolitical polarization and fragmentation, which actively drives the construction of identity-based boundaries. In this paper, the research question formulated is: how did the identity borders influence the geopolitical choices and societal security of Gagauzians in the Republic of Moldova?*

Keywords: *Republic of Moldova; identity; societal security; Gagauz Community, EU, Russia*

1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY FRAMEWORK

Societal security and internal political transformations in the Republic of Moldova are intrinsically linked to broader geopolitical fluctuations and deep-seated identity cleavages among the population. Within this complex landscape, the Gagauz community constitutes a highly significant expression of ethnocultural and linguistic pluralism, supported by a specialized framework of territorial autonomy in the southern part of the country. „The Gagauz community is one of the most significant expressions of ethnocultural diversity in the Republic of Moldova, benefiting from a special status of autonomy, which gives it both political visibility and a decisive role in the dynamics of relations between state and regional authorities. The level of integration of this community is shaped by the interaction between its cultural identity, linguistic particularities, collective perceptions of the Moldovan state, and external influences that

* PhD Professor at the University of Oradea, Department of International Relations and European Studies. E-mail: mbrie@uoradea.ro.

** PhD candidate, Faculty of European Studies, Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania. E-mail: orjuhovschia@gmail.com.

shape the social and political behaviors of its members. In a context marked by prolonged political transitions, internal polarization, and geopolitical pressures, ATU Gagauzia is emerging as a space that reflects tensions between traditionally pro-Russian orientations and those oriented toward other external centers of influence, particularly Türkiye” (Putină, 2012; Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025: 54). Conceptually, identity manifested at the individual, group, or community level serves as a catalyst for both convergence and divergence in relation to the "Other," inevitably driving the construction of symbolic or ideological borders (see more Literature Review section).

Currently, the space of the Autonomous Territorial Unit (ATU) of Gagauzia presents a pronounced polarization and geopolitical fragmentation, a process that actively stimulates the drawing of rigid identity borders. These borders are not uniform, but are determined by a constellation of factors: citizenship and civic dimension, ethnic origin, linguistic identity, religious structure and, especially, cultural-media identity and influence. The Gagauz community evolves in a tense dynamic between its historical origin and dominant Russian influence, an intersection where Turkish, Bulgarian, Russian and Moldovan perspectives often compete to define collective loyalties. ATU Gagauzia constitutes a pivotal zone of convergence, wherein the distinct ethno-confessional attributes of its Turkic-origin population intersect with the fluid dynamics of regional power structures (Putină, 2011a). Positioned at the geopolitical nexus of the competing spheres of influence exerted by the European Union and the Russian Federation, this autonomous territory exhibits an amplified degree of socio-political complexity (Goreainov and Brie, 2018). Inhabited primarily by the Gagauz (a Turkic-speaking, Eastern Orthodox Christian minority), the region functions as a contested space where deeply entrenched cultural identity, institutionalized political autonomy, and external geopolitical pressures systematically coalesce (Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025: 59).

The region's societal vulnerability is exacerbated by the fact that narratives favorable to the Russian Federation maintain a near-total presence in the local information environment, generating a dependency on Russian-language mass media that symbolically distances the community from the linguistic space and strategic orientation of the central state. Investigating this reality is fundamental to understanding how the internal dynamics of an autonomous minority directly affect the national security and macro-political stability of the Republic of Moldova.

The aim of this research is to investigate the Gagauz community in the Republic of Moldova through the analysis of the dynamics of identity borders, the state of societal security, and the identity-driven geopolitical preferences manifested within the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia.

To achieve this aim, the scientific endeavor is structured around four *specific objectives*:

- To identify the constitutive factors of identity borders in ATU Gagauzia (the civic dimension, ethnic origin, spoken language, religion, and media consumption).
- To analyze the level of trust in central institutions and the manner in which the authorities in Chişinău influence the integration process of the community into the society of the Republic of Moldova.
- To evaluate how the external influence of the Russian Federation and Türkiye reconfigures public perceptions and the geopolitical choices of the population within the autonomy.

➤ To analyze the level of societal resilience against the phenomenon of disinformation and to determine the primary lines of division perceived in society.

In accordance with these objectives, the research advances a dual working *hypothesis*:

➤ H1: The geopolitical preferences of the Gagauz community are fundamentally determined by the ethno-national, linguistic, cultural, and religious identity cleavage.

➤ H2: Societal security and the inter-community balance within this space are intrinsically linked to the intensity and forms of manifestation of external influence.

From this perspective, the study directly addresses the core *research question*: *How did the identity borders influence the geopolitical choices and societal security of Gagauzians in the Republic of Moldova?*

To ensure a systematic deconstruction of the issue, the investigation is operationalized across three complementary *levels of analysis*:

➤ The Institutional-Regulatory and Political Framework Level. This level focuses on analyzing the administrative structure of ATU Gagauzia—composed of 32 localities, including 2 municipalities (Comrat and Ceadăr-Lunga), one district center town (Vulcănești), alongside 6 villages and 23 communes. It tracks how regional political leverage and tensions between the center and the autonomy affect the implementation of shared public policies.

➤ The Community Perceptions and Societal Level. Centered on the socio-cultural dimension, this tier examines the tension between civic identity (as a citizen of the Republic of Moldova) and regional identity (as a citizen of ATU Gagauzia). The analysis highlights everyday linguistic realities (where the Russian language remains the primary medium of communication at home compared to the Romanian/Moldovan language) and measures how linguistic barriers translate into symbolic distancing from the state.

➤ The Geopolitical Level. This analytical level addresses the structural mechanisms utilized by foreign powers to project influence within ATU Gagauzia. It comparatively analyzes the duality of this influence: the actions of the Russian Federation (based on leveraging cultural and linguistic connections, media dependency, and the role of the Russian Orthodox Church) and the actions of the Republic of Türkiye (centered on economic and educational support, alongside historical ethno-linguistic affinities).

Methodologically, this research adopts an integrated qualitative approach, centered on the deconstruction of identity borders, generated by ethno-religious, linguistic, and cultural factors, corroborated with a critical analysis of the unique regional mentality. To ensure a high level of academic rigor, the methodological design combines documentary analysis with the interpretation of regional public discourse and the evaluation of opinion barometers. As in our previous research on this subject, present analysis is instrumental „not only for examining international relations and Republic of Moldova's geopolitical trajectory but also for elucidating the underlying sources of societal insecurity” (Brie and Goreainov, 2026: 27; Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025). This systemic insecurity manifests within a fragmented landscape where identity-driven communities adopt profoundly divergent stances on core matters of national interest,

most notably the state's strategic geopolitical orientation. The resulting socio-political cleavage is so deeply entrenched that it functions as a latent source of structural conflict, fostering diametrically opposed and uncompromising positions. Consequently, such a polarized framework precludes constructive inter-community dialogue, as the potential for reconciliatory discourse remains severely constrained by institutionalized ideological and identity-driven antagonisms (Brie and Goreainov, 2026: 27).

The validation of the hypotheses relies on the rigorous processing of panel-type *sociological data* (comparative analyses from 2011, 2015, and 2021) provided by the Institute for Public Policy (IPP) in Chişinău, particularly within complex studies focused on the evolution of views among the population of ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia district.

Research sources. To substantiate the conceptual framework of "identity borders" and the management of societal security in the post-Soviet space, this work draws upon a solid base of contemporary scientific documentation, integrating established contributions and bibliographical sources in the field:

- *Studies on identity cleavages and borders:* Conceptual analyses previously developed by Brie (2016, 2021, 2023) and published studies regarding the transformation of identity into political and social boundaries in Central and Eastern Europe are utilized (Brie and Goreainov, 2026; Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025).
- *Analyses focused on resilience and societal security:* Recent sources decoding the impact of European integration processes in the context of hybrid pressures are integrated, such as research authored by Brie and Solcan (2025) or synthesis works produced by Brie, Costea, and Toderas (2025).
- *Research on the role of civil society and the management of societal risks:* The methodology assimilates critical perspectives offered by Putină and Brie (2023) or by Costea and Brie (2025) regarding structural vulnerabilities, funding, and the degree of involvement of community organizations in mediating identity-based disputes within geopolitical border spaces.
- *Institutional and monitoring reports:* To calibrate contextual data, national security analyses and societal risk mapping studies authored by Marzac and Sandu (2021) are taken into account, alongside official statistical documents published by the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova.

Through this methodological construct, the paper shifts from a demographic, statistical, and cultural-identity description of the Gagauz community (distribution by localities, cultural-identity elements, linguistic and media consumption) to a causal explanation of the phenomenon of political distancing and the societal security vulnerabilities affecting the Republic of Moldova.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

The present literature review and conceptual framework are theoretically anchored in the intersection of two primary concepts, *identity borders* and *societal security*, specifically operationalized within the context of the *Gagauz community* and *ATU Gagauzia*.

Although not very numerous (according to the 2004 census, it had 147,500 members, of whom 127,835 lived in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia), this community stands out for the importance it had in the history of Bessarabia (NBSRM, 2024a). According to the 2014 census, 134,535 inhabitants lived in the ATUG, of which 112,387 were Gagauz (NBSRM, 2024b).

The investigation of the socio-political dynamics within the ATU Gagauzia requires a theoretical foundation based on the correlation between identity construction and the genesis of symbolic borders (Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025; Brie, 2025; Brie, 2016; Brie and Goreainov, 2026: 29). In contemporary political and sociological theory, identity—whether articulated at the individual, group, or collective level—is not a static given, but a fluid process of self-definition permanently referenced against a collective alter-ego, generically termed the "Other" (Brie, 2016) (Goga and Brie, 2026: 33). From a conceptual standpoint, this process of demarcation serves as a bivalent catalyst: on the one hand, it can ensure educational, cultural, or societal cohesion, while on the other, it generates identity-based, political, and societal fragmentation (Brie, 2016; Goga and Brie, 2026: 33-34).

In this context, the borders of communities transcend strictly physical or administrative boundaries, materializing as **identity borders** or symbolic barriers (Brie and Horga, 2014; Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025: 57) (Literature... p. 1). As research in the field reveals, these identity borders manifest as symbolic separation rather than physical barriers, facilitating social segregation even in the absence of formal administrative or state borders (Brie and Horga, 2014; Goga and Brie, 2026: 33-34). The entire architecture of identity building resides in managing at least two elements of specificity from its very inception (Brie, 2016; Goga and Brie, 2026: 33-34):

- National identity born of ethnic belonging.
- National identity born of civic/citizen affiliation.

In regions characterized by great ethnic and religious diversity, establishing a national identity based on citizenship, and respectively on a civic identity, has proven difficult to achieve (Brie, 2024; Goga and Brie, 2026: 34). When the architecture of a nation-state conflates statehood with a single dominant ethno-national identity, alternative communities are systematically marginalized from this legitimizing process (Brie and Goreainov, 2026: 29; Goga and Brie, 2026: 34). This structural exclusion functions as a primary catalyst for persistent inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions (Goga and Brie, 2026: 34). This historical reality often leads to the sacralization of state territory considered national territory (Gabor, 2011)—viewed as the rightful property of a single nation—while the dominant cultural-historical philosophy tends to delegitimize as much as possible the contribution of other national communities (Brie and Blaga, 2015; Brie and Solcan, 2025; Brie and Goreainov, 2026: 29; Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025: 57).

According to the cleavage model, a multitude of borders associated with identity configure within borderland areas (Brie, 2024), which can be operationalized through the following key dimensions:

- **The ethnic border.** Determined by the self-perception of group belonging and lineage (Goga and Brie, 2026: 34-35).
- **The linguistic border.** Linguistic distinctiveness is systematically instrumentalized as a political tool within the nation-building paradigm (Goga and Brie, 2026: 34, 36).
- **The Cyrillic alphabet as an identity border** (Brie, 2024). The alphabet is used as a distinct identity element that can take the form of a cleavage, playing a vital role in justifying decisions to draw a linguistic boundary of an identity nature (Goga and Brie, 2026: 34, 36).

- **The religious border.** In fragmented regions, religion plays a crucial historical role in shaping community identity, in relation to which the boundaries of identity-national communities and even states are drawn (Goga and Brie, 2026: 34, 36-37). Religious affiliation is deeply intertwined with politics, national identity, and collective belonging, functioning as a symbolic public good that political actors and parties use to anchor broader socio-political projects (Putină, 2011b; Putină, 2025; Sprinceană, 2013; Brie and Goreainov, 2026: 30-31).

- **The civic/citizen, cultural, and geopolitical border.** These define the macro-structural loyalties of the group (Goga and Brie, 2026: 34).

All these identity borders hinder integration processes at any level.

The concept of **societal security** addresses the ability of a society to persist its essential characteristics—including language, culture, religion, national identity, and customs—under conditions of change and in the face of potential threats (Brie and Goreainov, 2026: 28-29). In states marked by structural identity fragmentation, societal security often transforms into a source of friction due to the lack of societal consensus regarding the role of regions with special status within the state architecture (Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025: 57).

This dynamic generates a state of **chronic societal insecurity**, wherein identity-defined communities adopt divergent and often antagonistic stances on matters of fundamental national interest, most visibly regarding the state's strategic geopolitical orientation (Brie and Goreainov, 2026: 31-33). The depth of this cleavage is so pronounced that it constitutes a latent source of conflict and irreconcilable positioning. Such a polarized framework often precludes constructive inter-community dialogue, as the availability of reconciliatory discourse remains severely constrained by entrenched ideological and identity-driven antagonisms (Brie and Goreainov, 2026: 31-33).

In these polarized environments, ethno-nationalist elites have a rational interest in maintaining divisions (Mujkić, 2010: 129-130). Any integration initiative that implies a transfer of sovereignty to the center is contested not on technical grounds, but because it is perceived as a threat to ethnic-based patronage networks or as an existential threat of local identity assimilation. Consequently, reform processes stagnate, generating a limited and predominantly functional form of integration without deep societal integration (Brie, 2021; Marzac and Sandu, 2021; Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025: 59). The resulting blockages cannot be explained solely by the lack of administrative capacity, but must be understood as manifestations of identity resistance to the redistribution of power implied by integration or alignment with external standards (Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025: 59).

The analysis of the level of integration of the Gagauz community in the Republic of Moldova is addressed in the specialized literature within the broader framework of studies on identity, societal security, and the relationship between the state and ethno-cultural minorities (Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025). Authors emphasize the distinct character of the Gagauz community in the post-Soviet context, determined by the combination of territorial autonomy, a pronounced ethno-linguistic identity, and geopolitical orientations that often diverge from those of the majority population of the state (Brie, 2016).

ATU Gagauzia is an area of convergence between the ethno-confessional particularities of the Turkic population and the dynamics of regional power relations. Its position at the intersection of the spheres of influence of the European Union and the Russian Federation amplifies the socio-political complexity of this autonomous territory

(Goreainov and Brie, 2018). Inhabited mainly by a community of Turkic origin, speaking a Turkic language and practicing the Christian Orthodox religion (Brie, 2022), Gagauzia represents a singular synthesis within the Eurasian continuum, effectively merging an Eastern cultural heritage with Byzantine spiritual traditions (Vintilă, 2025). The community has consistently functioned as a borderland community, a reality stemming largely from its often-contested positioning between Bulgarian, Turkish, and, more recently, Russian identities (Brie and Goreainov, 2026: 30-31; Vintilă, 2025).

The process of identity construction of the Gagauz community took place in a tense relationship with the national identity project of the Moldovan state, often being articulated in opposition to it, a memory deeply rooted since the Russian imperial period and consolidated during the Soviet regime. This dynamic contributed to the formation and maintenance of an identity divided between the central authorities and the Gagauz autonomy (Brie, 2021). Although autonomy, established in 1994 through Law No. 344/1994, is described as a political compromise that helped prevent the escalation of conflict, the absence of consistent public inclusion policies and a sustainable long-term integration strategy has led to the perpetuation of societal fragmentation (Marzac and Sandu, 2021; Brie, 2021; Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025: 57-58).

This societal vulnerability and identity-based dependence within ATU Gagauzia are analyzed through the decisive impact of external actors on regional political discourse (Nantoi et al., 2016):

The Russian Federation. It is identified as the main external actor exerting influence in the region through soft power instruments such as the media, economic support, identity discourse, and memory policies (Nantoi et al., 2016). Its influence is structural, multidimensional, and enduring, operating through symbolic, informational, religious, economic, and political mechanisms that together sustain a coherent system of identity-based dependence (Vintilă, 2025). From Moscow's perspective, ATU Gagauzia is a strategic vector of influence used to counterbalance the active presence of Western actors in the Republic of Moldova (Brie, Costea, and Toderaş, 2025). These mechanisms contribute to the consolidation of a distinct political identity among the Gagauz population, characterized by a predominantly Eurosceptic attitude and a critical stance towards the integration policies promoted by the central authorities (Nantoi et al., 2016; Brie and Goreainov, 2026: 31; Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025: 59). As in the case of other areas that belonged to the former Soviet Union, the post-Soviet landscape of the Gagauz-inhabited region is being redefined: it is not simply an administrative unit of the Republic of Moldova, but instead functions as an identity enclave where Russian cultural and historical consciousness remains a primary vector of influence (Goltsov, 2020).

The Republic of Türkiye. It exerts a different type of influence, focused mainly on the cultural and economic dimensions. Turkish support manifests through educational projects, academic exchanges, and investments in infrastructure, capitalizing on the linguistic and historical affinities between Turks and Gagauz. These policies contribute to strengthening the cultural identity of the community and maintaining transnational links without directly challenging the sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova (Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025: 58). At the same time, the literature highlights the ambivalent nature of this influence, as it can accentuate the perception of distinct autonomy from the central authorities (Komm, Terzi, and Zamejc, 2021).

The role of civil society in ATU Gagauzia has been discussed critically in the specialized literature. Although civil society organizations are considered, in theory, to

be essential actors in integration and interethnic dialogue, studies indicate that they are underdeveloped, dependent on external funding, and vulnerable to political instrumentalization, thereby reflecting and reproducing existing regional identity and geopolitical divisions instead of functioning as a mediator (Brie and Putină, 2023; Putină and Brie, 2023).

Sociological data provided by the Institute for Public Policy reveal a low level of mutual trust between the majority population and the Gagauz community, influenced by language barriers, divergent geopolitical orientations, and competing narratives regarding state identity (IPP, 2019; IPP, 2021; IPP, 2023). Recent literature emphasizes that the level of integration of the Gagauz community is decisively influenced by public perceptions of the state, national identity, and geopolitical orientation. Integration is often perceived not as a two-way process based on recognition and participation, but as pressure to assimilate or as a potential threat to local identity, converting the management of these public perceptions into a critical variable for the overall stability and national security of the Republic of Moldova.

3. SOCIETAL SECURITY AND IDENTITY BORDERS. CASE STUDY: ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

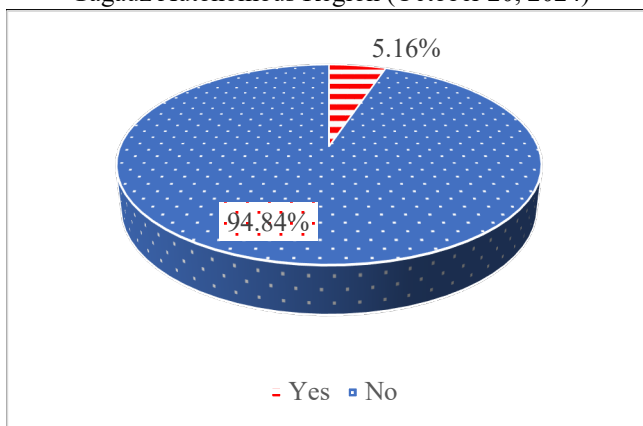
Within the context of the Republic of Moldova's European integration process, public perceptions in the ATU Gagauzia constitute a critical variable for analyzing domestic political and social dynamics. This region possesses distinct ethno-linguistic and cultural characteristics that heavily modulate the population's alignment with both the central government and the European Union. An analysis of these perceptions is necessary to understand why attitudes towards European integration differ significantly from those in other regions of the country (Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025: 69).

This domestic polarization and geopolitical fragmentation were vividly demonstrated during the referendum of October 20, 2024, concerning the constitutional entrenchment of Republic of Moldova's EU accession objective, which passed with a narrow majority of 50.35% (Brie, Costea, and Toderaş, 2025: 68). While this societal cleavage is multi-dimensional—encompassing socio-economic, political, and institutional fractures—we contend that the deeply rooted identity dimension remains a primary structural driver of this division.

The region possesses distinct ethno-linguistic and cultural characteristics that heavily modulate the population's alignment with both the central government and the European Union. A systematic evaluation of these perceptions is indispensable for elucidating the underlying factors that cause local attitudes toward European integration to diverge markedly from national trends. Furthermore, such an analysis is paramount for safeguarding societal security, as understanding these local narratives is vital for mitigating potential internal vulnerabilities and maintaining stability. Simultaneously, investigating these perceptions offers critical insights into the preservation of inter-ethnic relations and cultural-linguistic dynamics, ensuring that democratic integration processes accommodate minority identities rather than marginalizing them.

During the referendum on accession to the European Union, only 5.16% of the citizens of the ATU Gagauzia answered yes. Thus, almost 95% of the Gagauzians present at the polls voted against the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union (Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova, 2024).

Figure 1. Vote in the referendum to amend the Constitution in view of EU accession in the Gagauz Autonomous Region (October 20, 2024)



Source: author's elaboration based on data from the Central Electoral Commission, 2024

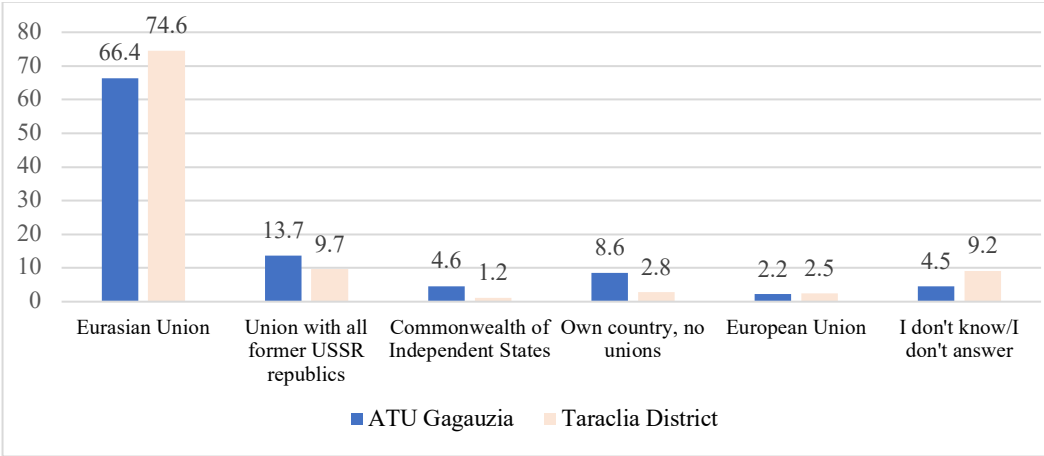
In the case of this region, inhabited mainly by Gagauz, 57,847 people voted in this referendum, and only 2,985 were in favor of amending the Constitution in order to join the EU, while 54,862 people voted against. We can conclude that the Gagauz people almost completely reject the idea of joining the EU, while at the same time preferring a geopolitical rapprochement with the Russian Federation (Brie, 2025).

The conclusion is unequivocal: 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.

Starting from the premise that the Gagauz people have almost unanimously rejected the idea of joining the EU (expressing a preference for geopolitical rapprochement with the Russian Federation), we propose to conduct an analysis using the database of the Institute for Public Policy (IPP), which has carried out complex surveys in ATU Gagauzia (inhabited mainly by Gagauz people) and Taraclia (a district inhabited mainly by Bulgarians and Gagauz people). The IPP has conducted three surveys on this topic (2011, 2015, and 2021).

Based on the complexity of the analysis conducted by the IPP as part of the project “Moldova between East and West: views from ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia,” we would like to analyze the main perceptions of the Gagauz population regarding a series of elements related to societal security, inter-community relations, the management of inter-ethnic and cultural-linguistic relations, through relations and the role of external actors in shaping these opinions. The analysis also examines aspects such as identity in relation to geopolitical orientation, media influence, relations with the Russian Federation or the level of trust in the European Union.

Figure 2. Preferences of residents of ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia District regarding a possible union (%) (2015)

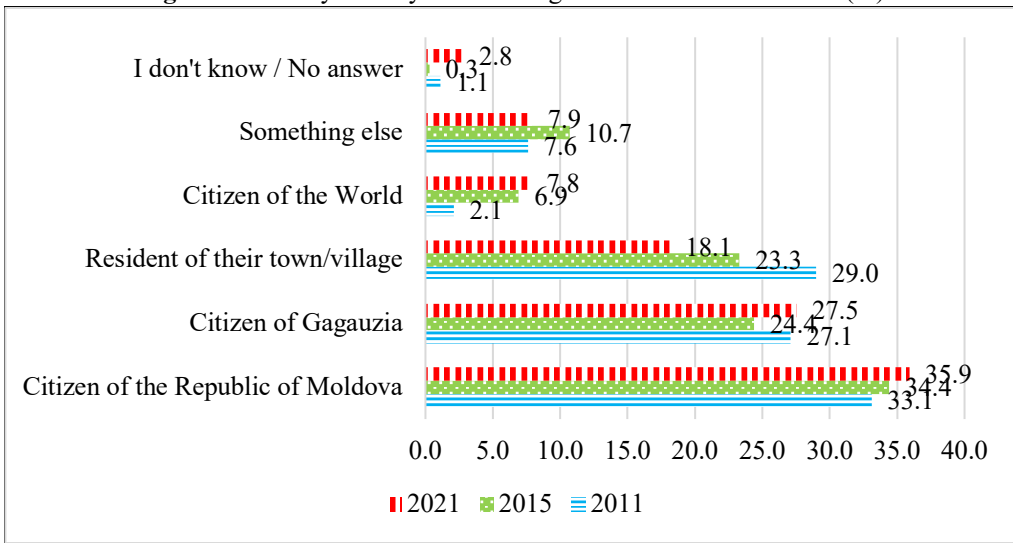


Source: author's elaboration based on data from the IPP, 2015; Nantoi et al., 2016: 35

Sociological data from 2015 and the 2024 referendum results confirm a highly stable, overwhelming geopolitical alignment toward the Russian Federation within ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia District, with pro-Russian support exceeding 85%. Despite the implementation of EU-funded projects in the region, deeply rooted ties inherited from the Soviet period continue to severely limit pro-European sentiment. This strong identity-driven cleavage is factually validated by the constitutional referendum of October 20, 2024, where a mere 5.16% of voters in Gagauzia supported EU accession.

The identity cleavage visible in the case of options and preferences towards international actors is also very present domestically: the result is an *identity fragmentation* and a source of *societal insecurity* determined by a process of building *identity borders* that exist in society.

Figure 3. Primary identity in ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia district (%)

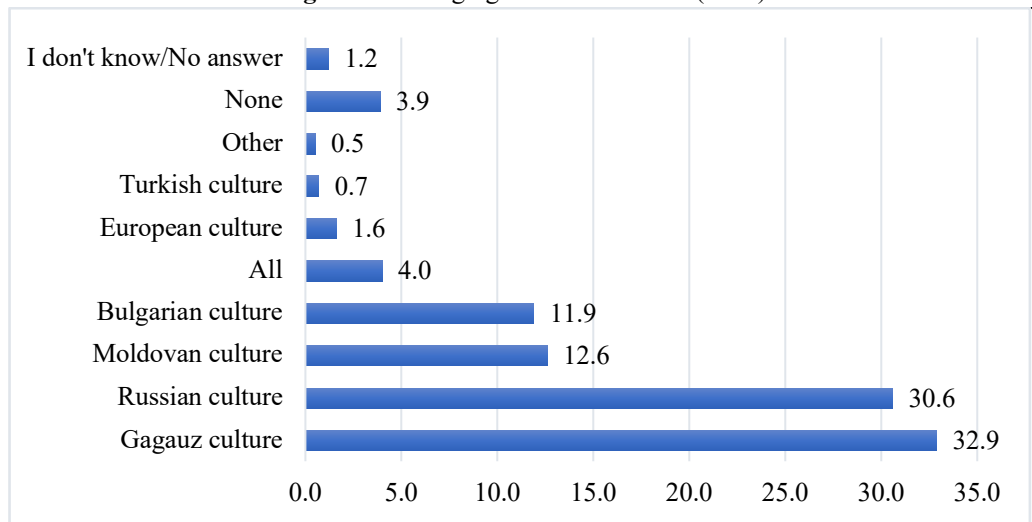


Source: author's elaboration based on data from the IPP, 2021: 9

Identity dynamics within ATU Gagauzia exhibit a complex equilibrium between national civic belonging and localized regional attachment. While empirical data from 2021 indicates that 35.9% of residents identify primarily as citizens of the Republic of Moldova, a robust 27.5% prioritize their regional status within the autonomy (IPP, 2021). This narrow divergence demonstrates that while formal civic ties are structurally recognized, regional identity exerts a more profound impact on sociopolitical behavior, actively reinforced by the territory's administrative autonomy and the polarizing rhetoric of local elites. Regional identification serves as a core benchmark for community solidarity and distinct geopolitical alignments, primarily manifested through deep-seated Euroscepticism. This stance is further anchored by cultural positioning; Russian culture functions as a stable frame of reference associated with continuity and security, whereas European culture is perceived as distant and detached from daily realities. This ethno-cultural configuration solidifies internal identity boundaries, thereby facilitating a high societal receptivity to political and media narratives emanating from the Russian Federation (Brie, 2025).

These empirical findings directly validate Hypothesis 1, demonstrating that public perception within ATU Gagauzia is structurally fragmented by a durable identity cleavage. The regional identity boundary (expressed through local citizenship and residency) acts as a powerful counterbalance to state integration efforts. This configuration creates a chronic societal landscape where the lack of absolute consensus regarding state architecture continues to limit deep societal integration, fostering an environment vulnerable to strategic geopolitical polarization.

Figure 4. Belonging to the felt culture (2021)



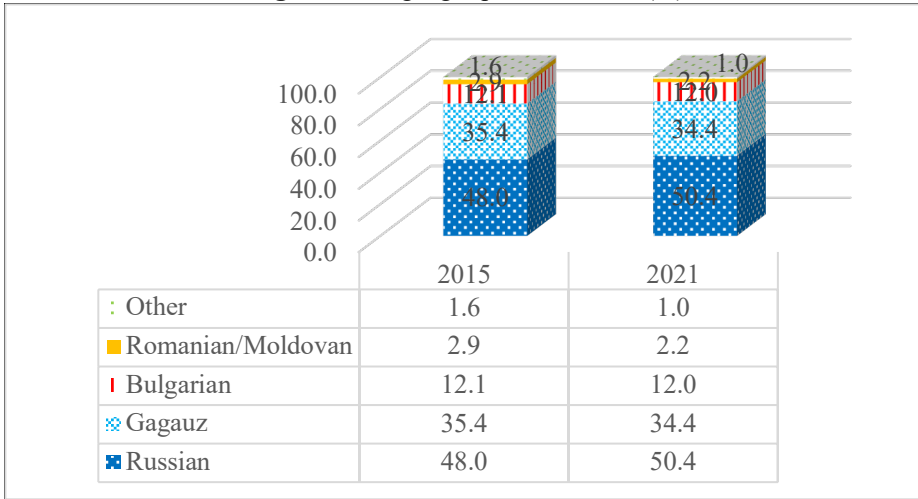
Source: author's elaboration based on data from the IPP, 2021: 10

Data from the 2021 survey on felt cultural belonging provides a compelling quantitative substantiation of these entrenched identity borders. Culturally, the population is overwhelmingly anchored within a localized and post-Soviet matrix, with Gagauz culture (32.9%) and Russian culture (30.6%) commanding the vast majority of personal identification. In stark contrast, European culture represents a marginal 1.6%, mirroring the profound skepticism and symbolic distance toward Western integration described by Brie (2025). This cultural configuration reinforces a dual-loyalty system

where regional traditions and Russian linguistic-media influences coalesce to form a stable framework of continuity and perceived security. Meanwhile, ties to the broader titular state remain weak, as Moldovan culture attracts only 12.6% of alignment, closely followed by Bulgarian culture at 11.9%. Despite historical and linguistic affinities with Ankara, Turkish culture accounts for just 0.7%, underscoring that geopolitical soft power in the region is heavily mediated through a shared Russian-language information environment rather than purely ethnic lineage. This deep asymmetry—where pro-Russian cultural vectors outweigh European indicators by a factor of nearly twenty to one—validates the working hypothesis that societal security vulnerabilities are structurally anchored in deeply rooted, identity-driven cleavages.

Public attitudes toward the institutional status of ATU Gagauzia reveal a powerful consensus favoring the expansion of regional powers. Empirical indicators from 2021 demonstrate that 56.9% of respondents advocate for the strengthening of autonomy, compared to a negligible 4% supporting its reduction. This stark divergence highlights a persistent, systemic distrust in the capacity of central authorities to safeguard local interests. For the local population, territorial autonomy transcends a mere administrative arrangement, functioning as an existential shield for collective identity and political agency. In a landscape characterized by external hybrid influences and a polarizing domestic discourse, this perception is frequently weaponized by regional elites to contest the Republic of Moldova's European integration trajectory, thereby reinforcing alternative cultural alignments and traditional symbols (Pleşca, 2024).

Figure 5. Language spoken at home (%)



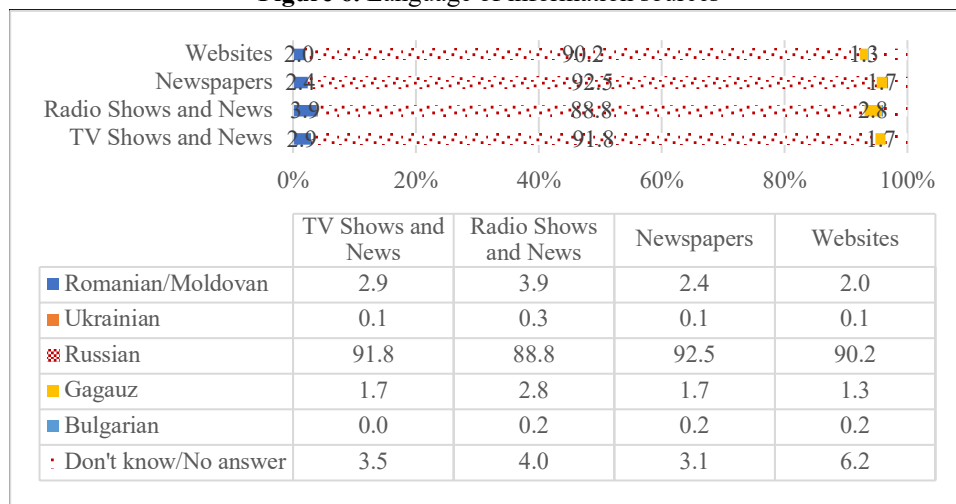
Source: author's elaboration based on data from the IPP, 2021: 13

Linguistic practices in ATU Gagauzia are directly integrated into the dynamics of regional and cultural identity. Just as cultural belonging and autonomy emphasize the community's connection to local values and external influences, the Russian language dominates the private sphere, reinforcing these connections. In 2021, 50.4% of respondents communicated predominantly in Russian at home, while only 2.2% used Romanian/Moldovan, highlighting the symbolic distance from the state's linguistic space and emphasizing the region's cultural autonomy (Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025: 73-74).

The linguistic hegemony of the Russian language within ATU Gagauzia systematically facilitates unhindered access to the Russian Federation's cultural and informational sphere while simultaneously restricting direct engagement with the public discourse of both central authorities and the European Union. Language transcends its conventional role as a vehicle for community cohesion, operating as an indirect determinant of geopolitical orientation that solidifies regional identity and preserves cultural autonomy against the state's European integration vector (IPP, 2021). This private linguistic dominance directly reconfigures regional information consumption patterns; in 2021, over 91% of respondents primarily relied on Russian-language media channels, whereas Romanian-language sources remained heavily marginalized (IPP, 2021). This asymmetrical consumption isolates the region within an informational enclave separate from the national matrix, establishing a highly receptive environment where geopolitical narratives favorable to Moscow become structurally dominant.

This overwhelming systemic dependency on Russian-language media—empirically anchored across print media (92.5%), television (91.8%), websites (90.2%), and radio (88.8%)—substantially amplifies the autonomous region's societal security vulnerabilities. In the geopolitical context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, this absolute media monopoly serves as a critical mechanism for maintaining and reproducing deep-seated Euroscepticism. The structural absence of viable informational counterweights effectively insulates the local population from alternative macro-political narratives. This cognitive vulnerability is further exacerbated by the severe marginalization of alternative communication channels; native Gagauz-language media fails to provide a meaningful alternative, remaining structurally minoritarian at less than 2.8% across all formats, while official Romanian-language platforms are functionally excluded from the regional sphere, capturing a maximum of only 3.9% via radio and a mere 2.0% on web platforms. The empirical distribution of media consumption validates the premise that the regional information space operates as a closed echo chamber. By systematically blocking direct access to pro-European perspectives and state-aligned public discourse, this linguistic enclave reinforces external hybrid influence over local public opinion, thereby entrenching a geopolitical alignment that directly challenges national cohesion and state integration vectors.

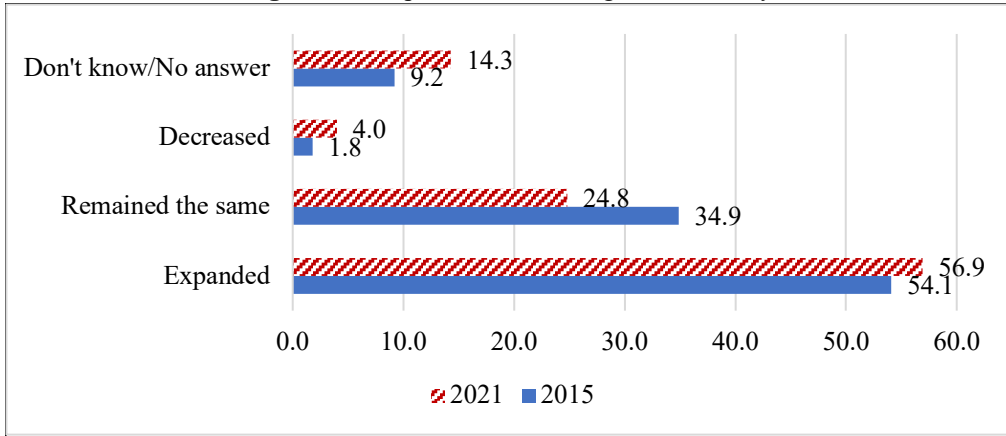
Figure 6. Language of information sources



Source: author's elaboration based on data from the IPP, 2021: 21

In a space where Gagauz and Russian cultures predominate, the Russian language governs everyday life, and Russian-language media control the flow of information, autonomy becomes a tool through which the community retains control over its own destiny. For residents, autonomy is not just an administrative arrangement, but a mechanism for protecting local identity and political interests.

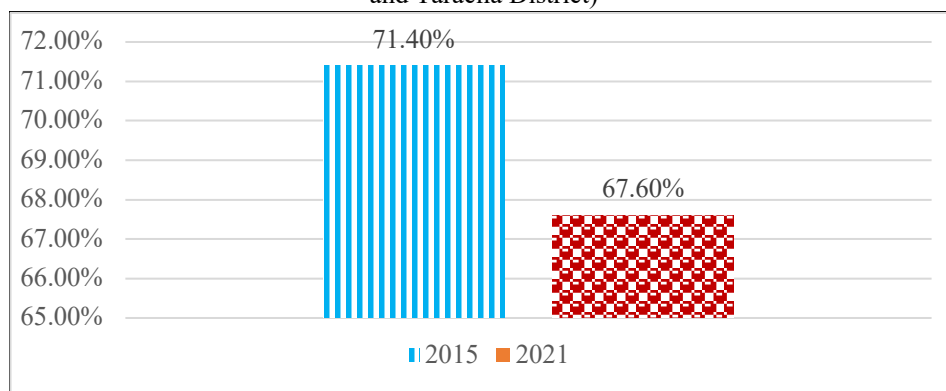
Figure 7. Competences of the Gagauz Autonomy



Source: author's elaboration based on data from the IPP, 2021: 24

In this context, support for the autonomy of Gagauzia is easier to understand. In 2021, 56.9% of respondents believed that the powers of autonomy should be expanded, while only 4% supported their reduction. This preference reflects a structural distrust of the central authorities' ability to represent the region's interests and continues the logic of strengthening regional identity, visible in cultural affiliation, language, and media consumption (Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025: 75).

Based on the processed data from the 2021 IPP, we identify a deeply fragmented identity framework within ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia District, characterized by an uncertain, tripartite alignment where civic, regional, and local community layers coexist without any achieving clear dominance (IPP, 2021). This structural uncertainty mirrors a diffuse, bi-directional cultural identity, with residents simultaneously anchoring themselves within their specific ethno-cultural matrix and the broader Russian cultural sphere. Furthermore, while general civic duties are broadly accepted, the mandate to acquire proficiency in the state language remains a contested responsibility. Despite this institutional resistance, longitudinal data reveals incremental linguistic integration; between 2011 and 2021, self-reported fluent spoken Moldovan/Romanian doubled from 11.6% to 23.4%, while fluent reading comprehension advanced from 9.7% to 16.8%. However, these linguistic gains have not yet disrupted the regional media ecosystem, which remains heavily dominated by broadcasting from the Russian Federation. This specific informational enclave continues to condition and reproduce localized political behaviors, directly anchoring regional public opinion within a pro-Russian geopolitical alignment (Brie and Solcan, 2025: 170).

Figure 8. Perception of integration into the society of the Republic of Moldova (ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia District)

Source: author's elaboration based on data from the IPP, 2021: 12

In this region, there is a profound fragility of social cohesion, characterized by societal insecurity and alienation among the Gagauz and Bulgarian population. Structural linguistic barriers, reflected by the lack of knowledge of the official language, limit these communities' access to the labor market and the public sphere, amplifying the feeling of exclusion. Identity fragmentation, sustained by an eastern geopolitical orientation and distrust in the institutions in Chişinău, undermines the formation of a common civic identity. This situation places minorities in the position of communities vulnerable to external influences, highlighting the inefficiency of socio-cultural inclusion policies. These deficiencies demonstrate a chronic deficit of integration, where territorial autonomy has failed to compensate for the need for real cohesion. In accordance with the conclusions of the IPP analysis (2015 and 2021), the level of integration of the Gagauz in ATU Gagauzia and the Bulgarians in Taraclia district is low (and decreasing). Furthermore, in 2021, 53% declare that they do not know the state language (IPP, 2021: 12).

CONCLUSIONS

Domestically, the study reveals a profound fragility in social and societal cohesion and a chronic deficit in macro-political integration. A clear tension persists between civic national belonging and localized regional attachment, with 27.5% of residents prioritizing their status as citizens of Gagauzia over state citizenship. This regional isolation is structurally reinforced by severe linguistic barriers, as 50.4% of respondents primarily speak Russian at home, and 53% reported no knowledge of the official state language in 2021. Despite institutional resistance, minor incremental gains in state-language proficiency were documented between 2011 and 2021.

Consequently, territorial autonomy has failed to foster deep societal cohesion, instead giving rise to a rigid framework of identity resistance. This is further highlighted by the powerful consensus in 2021, where 56.9% of the population advocated for the expansion of regional autonomous powers, reflecting an enduring distrust in central institutions. The identity borders operating within ATU Gagauzia transcend physical boundaries to function as structural cleavages. They preclude constructive inter-community dialogue, lock the region into a state of chronic societal insecurity, and continue to pose a significant challenge to the overall national security, stability, and strategic integration vectors of the Republic of Moldova.

The Gagauz community in the Republic of Moldova illustrates how ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identity can become a boundary in a societal sense. Divergent perceptions regarding geopolitical orientation, low levels of trust in central institutions, and informational vulnerabilities contribute to widening the gap between the ATU Gagauzia and state authorities. In this context, societal security depends on strengthening social cohesion, fostering dialogue between Chişinău and Comrat, and developing a shared civic identity that respects Gagauz specificities while promoting integration within the Republic of Moldova.

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POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIETAL SECURITY IN EUROPE THROUGH FOSTERING COMMUNICATION, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION. A COMPARATIVE CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE POLITICAL RHETORIC OF EMMANUEL MACRON, URSULA VON DER LEYEN AND GEORGIA MELONI

*Simona Camelia FER**

*Carmen UNGUR-BREHOI***

Abstract. *The evolving understanding of societal security in Europe has extended beyond traditional concerns of territorial defence to encompass social cohesion, democratic resilience, diversity and inclusion. In this context, political communication has become an important instrument through which policy priorities and responses to contemporary challenges are legitimised. This article examines the relationship between political rhetoric and societal security through a comparative critical discourse analysis of speeches delivered by Emmanuel Macron, Ursula von der Leyen and Giorgia Meloni. Representing different political traditions and institutional roles, these political leaders advance distinct perspectives on migration, identity, European integration and social inclusion. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study explores the linguistic choices, argumentative strategies and underlying assumptions that support competing policy approaches to societal security. The comparative analysis identifies both common themes and significant differences in the interpretation of security, diversity and inclusion, highlighting the way in which political rhetoric contributes to the public justification of policy decisions. The article argues that contrasting discursive approaches reflect broader ideological differences regarding the future of European governance and the balance between national priorities and collective European values. By integrating insights from political communication and security studies, the article contributes to current debates on societal security in the European context.*

Keywords: *societal security, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), political communication, diversity and inclusion, European Union.*

INTRODUCTION

The European Union is currently experiencing a period marked by profound political, social and security challenges that have expanded the meaning and relevance of societal security.

Issues such as migration, geopolitical instability, social polarisation, economic uncertainty and debates surrounding identity and belonging have intensified discussions about the resilience of European societies and the capacity of democratic institutions to

* Associate Professor PhD., University of Oradea, Romania, E-mail: simonag_1976@yahoo.com.

** Lecturer PhD, University of Oradea, Romania, carmenbrehoi@yahoo.com.

respond to complex transformations. In this context, societal security has increasingly moved beyond traditional understandings of protection and stability, encompassing broader concerns related to social cohesion, inclusion, diversity and public trust.

Political communication plays a significant role in interpreting and addressing these challenges. Through public statements and policy-oriented discourse, political leaders define priorities and justify particular approaches to social and political issues. The language employed by political actors influences the way in which concepts such as security, diversity, migration, solidarity and European values are understood within public debates. Consequently, examining political rhetoric provides valuable insights into the different perspectives that guide contemporary discussions on societal security in Europe.

While existing scholarship has extensively explored societal security through the perspectives of security studies, migration governance and European policy-making, less attention has been given to the role of political discourse in articulating competing understandings of security and inclusion. In particular, further research is needed on how prominent European political figures communicate societal security concerns and how their rhetorical choices reflect different ideological positions regarding diversity and European cooperation. A comparative analysis of political discourse can therefore contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how societal security is discussed in contemporary Europe.

This article addresses this research by examining the political rhetoric of Emmanuel Macron, Ursula von der Leyen and Giorgia Meloni, these three leaders representing distinct political positions and institutional perspectives within the European context, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the context of protection of national identity and democratic sovereignty. Macron's discourse combines a commitment to European cooperation with an emphasis on republican values and social cohesion. Von der Leyen's communication reflects a supranational perspective centred on European unity and democratic resilience. Meloni's political rhetoric places stronger emphasis on national sovereignty, cultural identity and border governance while engaging with wider European debates. The comparison of these perspectives enables an exploration of the similarities and differences in the ways societal security is understood and communicated.

The article seeks to answer the following research questions: How is societal security presented in the political rhetoric of Emmanuel Macron, Ursula von der Leyen and Giorgia Meloni? And What similarities and differences emerge from their approaches to European societal security?

By focusing on the relationship between political rhetoric and societal security, this study contributes to ongoing debates in European studies, political communication and security research, highlighting the importance of discourse in understanding contemporary policy debates and demonstrating how different political perspectives contribute to competing interpretations of security, diversity and inclusion within the European Union.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

To investigate competing perspectives on societal security in contemporary Europe, this study applies a Comparative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the political rhetoric of Emmanuel Macron, Ursula von der Leyen and Giorgia Meloni, and this is particularly suitable for analysing political communication because it enables an

examination of the relationship between language, political meaning and the legitimisation of policy preferences. The analysis focuses on the ways in which linguistic choices and argumentative strategies influence the interpretation of social and political issues within political discourse.

The study adopts a comparative perspective in order to identify both common elements and significant differences among the three selected political figures. The selection of cases is based on their distinct institutional roles and ideological positions within the European political landscape. Emmanuel Macron represents the perspective of a national executive leader advocating European cooperation while emphasising republican values, social cohesion and strategic autonomy. Ursula von der Leyen represents the supranational dimension of European governance as President of the European Commission, with a focus on European solidarity, democratic resilience and collective responses to shared challenges. Giorgia Meloni represents a conservative political perspective that places stronger emphasis on national sovereignty, cultural identity, migration control and the protection of social order. The comparison of these cases allows for an exploration of different political interpretations of societal security within the European context. The empirical material consists of selected political speeches and public statements delivered by the three leaders during the period 2019–2025.

2019 marks the beginning of Ursula von der Leyen's first mandate as President of the European Commission. It includes Emmanuel Macron's second presidential term (from 2022), when issues such as European sovereignty, migration, and social cohesion became prominent. It also includes Giorgia Meloni's rise to power in 2022 and her influence on European debates concerning migration, identity and security. And less but not least, it covers several major events affecting societal security debates: the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, increased migration pressures and debates over European values and democratic resilience.

The empirical material consists of campaign speeches, public statements, official addresses and politically significant interventions, including televised debates and media appearances, delivered in contexts of high public visibility. By combining discourse analysis with a comparative research design, the article provides an examination of the ways in which political language contributes to the interpretation and communication of security-related challenges (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1997)..

As with all qualitative discourse-based research, the study has certain limitations. The analysis focuses on selected speeches and public statements, and not necessarily on the entire body of communication produced by the three political actors. Moreover, the discourse analysis does not measure the direct effects of political communication on public opinion or policy outcomes, but provides an in-depth examination of the ways in which political actors express their concerns, priorities and proposed responses within a specific historical and political context.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of societal security has become increasingly significant in European political and academic debates, mainly in response to challenges such as migration, public health emergencies, geopolitical instability, democratic resilience and social cohesion. Unlike traditional understandings of security, which focus primarily on military threats and state sovereignty, societal security places greater emphasis on the protection of communities, identities, democratic values and the conditions that enable

societies to function effectively (Buzan, 1991; Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). Within this perspective, security extends beyond territorial defence and incorporates social, political, cultural and institutional dimensions that influence the stability of democratic societies.

The development of societal security as a distinct analytical concept is closely associated with the Copenhagen School of Security Studies. Buzan et al. (1998) argue that security issues are socially and politically constructed through public discourse, where political actors identify specific developments as requiring exceptional political attention. Although the securitisation approach has generated extensive scholarly debate, it has also encouraged researchers to examine the ways in which political language contributes to defining collective vulnerabilities and legitimising policy responses (Huysmans, 2006; Balzacq, 2011).

Within the European context, societal security has become increasingly connected to questions of identity, migration, democratic governance and social cohesion. McSweeney (1999) argues that collective identities are not fixed entities but evolve through political and social interaction, making identity an important dimension of security debates. Similarly, Wæver (1993) emphasises that societal security concerns the preservation of collective identity under conditions of social and political change. Contemporary discussions recognise that communication plays a central role in defining both perceived threats and appropriate political responses.

Political communication provides the principal arena through which security-related issues are interpreted and communicated to citizens. As McNair (2018) observes, political communication is not limited to the transmission of information but also influences public understanding of political priorities and institutional legitimacy. Norris (2000) similarly argues that communication contributes to the relationship between democratic institutions and public trust, particularly during periods of uncertainty and crisis. Consequently, political speeches constitute valuable sources for examining how political leaders communicate security concerns, define collective responsibilities and establish legitimacy.

Research on political rhetoric has demonstrated that language performs important political functions beyond persuasion. Charteris-Black (2011) argues that metaphorical language allows political leaders to simplify complex realities and generate emotional engagement, while Chilton (2004) emphasises that political discourse contributes to representing power, legitimacy and ideological differences. These perspectives are relevant for understanding how concepts such as security, sovereignty, solidarity and identity acquire political significance within public communication.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers an appropriate theoretical perspective for examining these processes. Fairclough (1995, 2003) conceptualises discourse as a form of social practice through which political and institutional realities are represented, interpreted and reproduced. Wodak (2001) also demonstrates that political discourse must be interpreted within its historical and institutional context, while van Dijk (1998, 2006) highlights the role of discourse in expressing and legitimising political ideologies.

Political identity has become an increasingly important topic in European studies, following successive economic, migration, health and security crises. Castells (2010) argues that collective identities emerge through processes of social interaction and political representation, while Hall (1996) emphasises that identities are continuously negotiated. These perspectives are relevant for analysing how European political leaders

define the communities they represent and how concepts such as citizenship, belonging, diversity and inclusion are communicated within contemporary political debates.

Recent scholarship has also explored the relationship between diversity and democratic resilience. Modood (2013) argues that democratic societies require institutional mechanisms capable of accommodating cultural diversity while preserving social cohesion. Meer and Modood (2012) similarly demonstrate that debates concerning multiculturalism increasingly intersect with broader discussions of citizenship, equality and democratic participation. Within the European Union, diversity and inclusion have become central policy objectives, reflecting the recognition that social cohesion contributes to both democratic legitimacy and societal resilience (European Commission, 2020).

European political leadership represents another important field of research relevant to this study. Schmidt (2006) argues that political leaders play a crucial role in legitimising European integration through public discourse, while Rosamond (2000) highlights the importance of ideas and communication in shaping European governance. More recently, scholars have examined the crises that have transformed political leadership by increasing the importance of communication and symbolic representation (Risse, 2010; Fabbrini, 2015). These developments have reinforced the central role of political rhetoric in communicating societal security and managing public expectations.

Despite the growing body of research on political communication, societal security and European leadership, comparatively fewer studies have examined how different European political leaders communicate societal security through distinct rhetorical strategies while simultaneously addressing diversity and inclusion.

The present study seeks to contribute to this area of scholarship by comparing the political rhetoric of Emmanuel Macron, Ursula von der Leyen and Giorgia Meloni, and through a Comparative Critical Discourse Analysis, it examines how lexical choices, identity representation, metaphorical language and moral evaluations contribute to different understandings of societal security. In doing so, the article integrates perspectives from security studies, political communication and discourse analysis to demonstrate the manner in which political leaders communicate competing interpretations of belonging and responsibility legitimacy within contemporary Europe.

ANALYTICAL DIMENSIONS

The analysis is organised around four main discursive dimensions, which function as analytical categories for examining the manner in which societal security is communicated through political rhetoric:

1) *Lexical fields and semantic polarisation* through the identification of ideologically significant vocabulary, recurring concepts and oppositional semantic structures through which political meanings are established;

Pronominal strategies and identity representation by examining how collective identities, social boundaries and relations between groups are expressed through the use of pronouns such as “we” and “they”;

Metaphorical language and emotional intensification consisting of the analysis of figurative expressions, symbolic references and affective elements that contribute to the interpretation of political issues;

Moral dichotomies and discursive simplification by identifying binary value structures through which complex political and social issues are presented in terms of opposition, responsibility or legitimacy.

1. Lexical fields and semantic polarization. A comparative analysis of Macron, von der Leyen and Meloni

Macron's televised address "We're at war" (16 March 2020) is a very strong case for our first analytical category because it contains a highly visible example of lexical militarisation, semantic polarisation and the redefinition of societal security during a crisis. The speech repeatedly uses the vocabulary of war, mobilisation, protection and collective responsibility. The repeated use of military terminology transforms a public health emergency into a matter of societal security, positioning the state and citizens within an exceptional situation requiring unity and coordinated action. The central expression, "We are at war," repeated throughout the speech, represents a powerful semantic choice that frames the pandemic as an existential challenge requiring extraordinary measures and collective discipline (Macron, 16 March 2020).

Through this lexical strategy, Macron expands the meaning of security beyond military concerns and connects it with the preservation of public health and collective solidarity. The population is positioned not as an audience receiving governmental instructions but as an active participant in a collective effort. Another significant lexical field concerns unity and solidarity. Macron's discourse repeatedly refers to the collective dimension of the crisis, emphasising shared responsibility and the necessity of coordinated action. Expressions such as "we must act" and references to collective mobilisation contribute to the construction of a political community united against a common challenge. The pronoun "we" is closely linked to the vocabulary of national cohesion, reducing internal divisions and presenting citizens, institutions and public services as parts of a common effort.

From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, the lexical choices in this address reveal a movement from a traditional understanding of security based on external threats towards a broader conception centred on societal resilience and collective responsibility. The vocabulary of war provides legitimacy for exceptional measures, while the language of solidarity supports the idea that security can only be achieved through coordinated social action. Therefore, Macron's discourse presents societal security through an inclusive but highly mobilising vocabulary.

Both leaders, Macron and von der Leyen address the COVID-19 crisis, but from different political positions: Macron speaks as a national executive leader addressing French citizens, while von der Leyen speaks as the President of the European Commission, addressing European citizens and Member States. The lexical analysis of Ursula von der Leyen's State of the Union Address delivered on 16 September 2020 reveals a discourse centred on the concepts of solidarity, resilience, unity and collective European responsibility. Delivered in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the speech presents societal security primarily through the capacity of European institutions and Member States to cooperate in response to shared challenges. Unlike Macron's nationally oriented vocabulary of mobilisation and resistance, von der Leyen's discourse relies on a Europeanised lexical field in which security is associated with coordination, mutual support, and common action. The repeated use of collective references to "Europe" and "we" creates a semantic association between security and unity, presenting cooperation

as the principal response to contemporary vulnerabilities. The dominant lexical field includes terms such as resilience, solidarity, protection, common response and European values. These concepts establish a semantic opposition between European cooperation and fragmentation. Whereas the absence of coordination is implicitly associated with weakness and vulnerability, collective European action is presented as the basis for overcoming crises. The pandemic is therefore not only described as a health emergency but also as a test of European cohesion and institutional capacity.

Another significant aspect of von der Leyen's discourse is the connection between security and social protection. References to protecting "lives and livelihoods," citizens' health and economic stability expand the meaning of security beyond emergency management towards a broader understanding of societal resilience. Compared with Macron's discourse of crisis mobilisation, von der Leyen's lexical choices construct a different political community of security. Macron's "we" primarily refers to the French nation united against an exceptional threat, whereas von der Leyen's "we" refers to a European community capable of overcoming challenges through cooperation. Both discourses rely on unity and collective responsibility, but they locate the source of security at different levels: national civic mobilisation in Macron's case and supranational solidarity in von der Leyen's case (von der Leyen, 16 September 2020).

Giorgia Meloni's inaugural speech to the Chamber of Deputies on 25 October 2022 introduces a different lexical configuration, centred on nation, identity, sovereignty, responsibility and protection. Her discourse constructs societal security through the preservation of the political community and the defence of national interests within the European context. While emphasising Italy's interests and sovereignty, she also refers to Europe as a common space where nations participate while preserving their distinct identities. This produces a discourse in which European integration is accepted but interpreted through the principle of national contribution and recognition. Consequently, security is associated with maintaining the balance between cooperation and sovereignty rather than prioritising supranational coordination. Meloni's discourse prioritises identity, sovereignty and protection, presenting security as closely connected to the preservation of the national community and its values (Meloni, 25 October, 2022).

Therefore, the lexical choices of the three political leaders reveal different understandings of legitimacy and belonging. Macron's political community is primarily civic and republican, von der Leyen's is European and institutional, while Meloni's is national and identity-oriented. These differences demonstrate how political language contributes to competing interpretations of societal security, diversity, and inclusion in contemporary Europe.

2. Pronominal strategies and identity representation

The analysis of *pronominal strategies* reveals the way in which political leaders define collective identities, establish boundaries of belonging and communicate ideas of responsibility and security. The use of first-person plural pronouns such as "we" and possessive forms such as "our" plays a central role in political discourse because it allows leaders to create imagined communities, establish relationships with audiences and indicate who is included within the protected social group. Conversely, references to "they" or implicit external actors contribute to the identification of threats, challenges or competing interests.

In Emmanuel Macron's televised address on the COVID-19 pandemic of 16 March 2020, the dominant pronominal strategy is centred on the construction of a unified

national “we”. The statement “we are at war” does not only introduce a metaphorical vocabulary of conflict but also creates a collective subject responsible for confronting the crisis. Through this inclusive use of “we,” Macron reduces internal distinctions and emphasises shared duty, discipline and solidarity.

The use of “we” establishes a relationship between citizens and the state based on mutual responsibility: institutions protect citizens, while citizens contribute to the protection of society through collective action. The implicit opposition is therefore not constructed between different social groups, but between the responsible collective “we” and behaviours that threaten collective security. In this sense, Macron’s pronominal strategy reinforces a vision of societal security based on civic unity and shared obligations.

Ursula von der Leyen’s State of the Union Address (2020) employs a different form of collective identification. While Macron’s “we” refers to the French national community, von der Leyen constructs a wider European “we”, positioning citizens, Member States and European institutions within a shared political space. References to “Europe” and collective responsibility create an identity based on cooperation and common purpose.

The pronominal strategy in von der Leyen’s discourse contributes to the construction of a supranational identity. The repeated association between “we” and European action creates a sense of collective ownership over the European project. The main distinction is established between a united Europe capable of responding to challenges and a fragmented Europe weakened by division. Unlike Macron’s discourse, where unity is achieved through national mobilisation, von der Leyen’s discourse constructs unity through institutional cooperation and shared European responsibility.

Giorgia Meloni’s inaugural speech to the Italian Chamber of Deputies on 25 October 2022 presents a different configuration of collective identity. Her use of “we” is strongly connected to the concepts of nation, people, history and democratic representation. The collective subject is constructed mainly around the Italian political community and its historical continuity. References to “our nation,” “our people” and “our identity” contribute to a representation of society as a community united by common cultural and historical references.

Unlike Macron’s civic “we” and von der Leyen’s European “we”, Meloni’s pronominal strategy places greater emphasis on belonging and identity. The collective subject is defined through attachment to the nation and the responsibility of political institutions to protect its interests. The implicit distinction between “we” and external actors is more visible, particularly in relation to sovereignty, migration and European decision-making. In this discourse, societal security is closely connected to maintaining the boundaries and continuity of the national community.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that the three leaders employ the pronoun “we” as a central mechanism for constructing different political communities of security. Macron’s “we” represents a civic community united by responsibility and solidarity in a moment of crisis. Von der Leyen’s “we” represents a European community whose security depends on cooperation and collective resilience. Meloni’s “we” represents a national community grounded in identity and historical belonging.

3. Metaphorical language and emotional intensification

The third analytical category, *metaphorical language and emotional intensification*, is particularly relevant for our study because metaphors are not only

stylistic devices. In political discourse they provide interpretative frames through which audiences understand responsibilities and collective identities. For our three cases, the comparison is especially strong because each leader relies on different emotional and symbolic resources:

Macron → crisis metaphor: *war, battle, resistance, mobilisation*

von der Leyen → collective recovery metaphor: *journey, resilience, rebuilding, strength through unity*

Meloni → identity and protection metaphors: *roots, homeland, defence, renewal*

Below is a CDA section written in the same academic style as the previous two categories.

In Emmanuel Macron's televised address of 16 March 2020 concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, metaphorical language is dominated by the conceptualisation of the crisis as a **war**. The repeated declaration that "we are at war" transforms a health emergency into an existential struggle requiring exceptional mobilisation. Through this metaphor, the pandemic is represented as an opponent that must be confronted through discipline, unity, and collective sacrifice. The emotional intensity of military vocabulary—associated with combat, resistance, and defence—creates a sense of urgency and reinforces the legitimacy of extraordinary governmental measures.

The war metaphor also contributes to a specific understanding of societal security. By presenting the pandemic as an attack on society, Macron constructs citizens as members of a collective defence effort rather than passive recipients of state protection. Emotional appeals based on courage, solidarity, and responsibility reinforce the idea that security depends on collective behaviour. However, the metaphorical construction of the crisis also produces a clear distinction between those who contribute to the collective effort and those whose actions may undermine it. Therefore, Macron's metaphorical language combines reassurance and mobilisation, presenting unity as the essential response to uncertainty.

Ursula von der Leyen's State of the Union Address (2020) employs a different metaphorical repertoire, centred on resilience, recovery and collective reconstruction. Her discourse presents Europe as a political community capable of overcoming difficulties through cooperation and solidarity. The pandemic is interpreted as a test of European capacity, but also as an opportunity to strengthen common action and institutional cohesion.

The metaphor of resilience is particularly significant because it presents Europe as an actor capable of adapting, recovering and becoming stronger after adversity. This metaphorical construction shifts attention from confrontation to transformation. The emotional dimension of von der Leyen's discourse is therefore based less on fear or urgency and more on confidence, responsibility and collective achievement. Europe is represented as a community that can overcome challenges by remaining united, with solidarity functioning as the central emotional resource.

In comparison with Macron's language of battle and von der Leyen's language of resilience, Giorgia Meloni's inaugural speech of 25 October 2022 relies more strongly on metaphors associated with roots, identity, continuity and protection. Her discourse frequently connects political responsibility with the preservation of a historical and cultural community. References to Italy's traditions, heritage and national identity contribute to a metaphorical representation of the nation as a living community with historical foundations that must be protected and transmitted.

The metaphorical construction of society in Meloni's discourse emphasises continuity between past, present and future. The nation is presented not only as an administrative entity but as a community connected through shared experiences, values and cultural references. This produces a stronger emotional emphasis on belonging and collective identity. Security is therefore associated with safeguarding the symbolic and cultural elements that define the national community. The emotional intensification in Meloni's discourse differs from the crisis-oriented mobilisation of Macron and the collective optimism of von der Leyen. While Macron appeals primarily to emotions of courage and solidarity, and von der Leyen appeals to confidence and European unity, Meloni mobilises emotions related to attachment, pride, responsibility and protection. The underlying conception of security is thus connected to the preservation of identity and social continuity.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that metaphors function as important indicators of different political understandings of societal security. Macron's war metaphor constructs security as a collective struggle against an exceptional threat. Von der Leyen's resilience metaphor constructs security as the capacity of a European community to adapt and recover through cooperation. Meloni's identity-based metaphors construct security as the protection and continuation of a national community.

These metaphorical differences reveal contrasting approaches to political legitimacy. Macron legitimises action through emergency mobilisation and collective responsibility; von der Leyen through solidarity and the promise of European renewal; Meloni through the protection of identity, belonging and continuity. Therefore, metaphorical language contributes significantly to the ways in which political actors communicate security concerns and define the communities they claim to represent.

4. Moral dichotomies and discursive simplification

The fourth analytical category, referring to *moral dichotomies and discursive simplification*, is a very important component of CDA because it examines how political actors reduce complex social and political issues into morally meaningful oppositions. In security-related discourse, these oppositions help leaders identify desirable behaviours and the boundaries between inclusion and exclusion.

In Emmanuel Macron's televised address of 16 March 2020, the dominant moral opposition is constructed between collective responsibility and individual irresponsibility. The COVID-19 crisis is presented as a situation requiring discipline and compliance with collective measures. Through the repeated appeal to unity and mobilisation, Macron establishes a moral distinction between citizens who contribute to protecting society and actions that may weaken the collective response. The central message is that societal security depends not only on governmental intervention but also on citizens' willingness to assume responsibility towards others. This moral structure transforms individual behaviour into a matter of collective ethics.

Ursula von der Leyen's State of the Union Address (2020) constructs a different moral dichotomy, centred on the opposition between European unity and fragmentation. Her discourse presents cooperation and common action as essential values for addressing challenges that affect European societies. In contrast, division and lack of coordination are implicitly associated with weakness and vulnerability. The moral dimension of her discourse therefore lies in the representation of European solidarity as not only an institutional necessity but also an ethical commitment. Through this opposition, von der Leyen presents the European Union as a political community based on shared

responsibility. The moral legitimacy of European action derives from the idea that collective challenges require collective responses. The simplification of complex crises into a choice between unity and fragmentation reinforces the importance of European cooperation and strengthens the symbolic connection between solidarity and security.

In Giorgia Meloni's inaugural speech of 25 October 2022, moral dichotomies are organised around the opposition between protection and vulnerability, as well as between the defence of national interests and perceived external pressures. Her discourse presents political authority as having a responsibility to protect citizens and social stability. Security is therefore associated with the capacity of the state to preserve order, defend its community, and maintain control over decisions affecting the nation.

The moral dimension of Meloni's discourse emerges through the distinction between responsible political action aimed at protecting the national community and approaches perceived as weakening sovereignty or neglecting citizens' interests. Issues such as borders and national priorities are presented within a moral vocabulary of responsibility and protection. This creates a discourse in which security becomes closely linked to the duty of political leaders to defend the collective identity and interests of the nation.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that all three leaders rely on moral simplification as a means of communicating societal security concerns, but they construct different moral boundaries. Macron's discourse creates a distinction between solidarity and irresponsibility, presenting citizens' cooperation as the foundation of collective protection. Von der Leyen's discourse contrasts European unity with fragmentation, presenting cooperation as the ethical basis of resilience. Meloni's discourse contrasts protection with vulnerability, presenting sovereignty and identity preservation as essential responsibilities of political leadership.

These different moral structures reveal competing understandings of legitimacy and belonging. Macron's discourse derives legitimacy from collective civic responsibility; von der Leyen's discourse derives legitimacy from shared European values and cooperation; Meloni's discourse derives legitimacy from the protection and representation of the national community. Thus, moral dichotomies contribute to the simplification of complex political debates while simultaneously revealing the deeper ideological assumptions underlying contemporary European discussions of societal security.

Table 1. Comparative discursive patterns in the political rhetoric of Emmanuel Macron, Ursula von der Leyen and Giorgia Meloni

Analytical category	Macron	von der Leyen	Meloni
Lexical fields	war, mobilisation, solidarity	resilience, unity, European values	nation, sovereignty, protection
Pronominal strategies	civic "we"	European "we"	national "we"
Metaphors	war/resistance	recovery/resilience	roots/protection/continuity
Moral dichotomies	responsibility vs. irresponsibility	unity vs. fragmentation	protection vs. vulnerability

CONCLUSIONS

The findings demonstrate that societal security is not presented as a fixed or universally understood concept but as one whose meaning varies according to political priorities and institutional contexts. Emmanuel Macron communicates societal security through the language of civic responsibility and collective mobilisation. His discourse builds security as a shared obligation requiring citizens to act together in response to common challenges. Ursula von der Leyen, by contrast, places greater emphasis on European cooperation, institutional coordination and resilience, presenting societal security as a collective European endeavour grounded in shared values and mutual responsibility. Giorgia Meloni foregrounds national sovereignty and cultural identity of the political community, linking societal security to the preservation of national continuity and the representative role of the state.

The comparative analysis further indicates that the three leaders construct different political communities through their rhetorical choices. Macron's discourse is centred on a civic community united by common responsibility, von der Leyen's on a European community sustained through solidarity and cooperation, and Meloni's on a national community defined by historical continuity and democratic representation. These differences illustrate the way in which political discourse contributes to competing interpretations of inclusion, diversity and belonging within the broader European context.

The study also highlights that political communication plays an important role in influencing public understandings of societal security. Lexical choices, pronoun use, metaphorical expressions and moral evaluations do more than communicate political priorities; they organise perceptions of collective responsibility, identify the communities to be protected and justify particular policy responses and consequently, discourse becomes an important element in the relationship between political leadership and public trust.

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NEO-CHIVALRIC ORGANIZATIONS AS ACTORS OF SOCIETAL SECURITY: CULTURAL MICRODIPLOMACY IN THE PRACTICE OF THE SOVEREIGN TEMPLAR ORDER SAINT MARTIN

*Aurelian Roland BOIT**

Abstract. *Against a European backdrop of identity fragmentation, social polarisation, and declining public trust, this article analyses the conditions under which a neo-chivalric organisation can contribute to inclusion, community cohesion, and societal security. The theoretical framework brings together the Copenhagen School's perspective, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital, the understanding of Europe as 'a culture of cultures', and the concepts of soft power and cultural microdiplomacy. The research uses a qualitative case study of the Sovereign Templar Order Saint Martin (OSTSM), based on an analysis of institutional documents and cultural, educational, and philanthropic projects. It examines the public recognition of merit, cultural dialogue and transnational cooperation, as well as solidarity and the inclusion of vulnerable people. The analysis indicates that tradition and ceremonial visibility are insufficient to ensure the legitimacy of a contemporary organisation. Legitimacy is built through transparency, congruence between declared values and concrete actions, open cooperation, and verifiable social outcomes. Neo-chivalry can thus be understood as a form of symbolic civil society, and cultural microdiplomacy as a complementary means of supporting societal security.*

Keywords: *societal security; microdiplomacy; neo-chivalry; legitimacy.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The security challenges facing contemporary Europe are not limited to border defence, military capabilities, or economic stability. They increasingly concern how people define their sense of belonging, preserve mutual trust, and manage to live together in societies characterised by diversity. Migration, political polarisation, competing interpretations of the past, and deepening social inequalities can weaken the ties between individuals, communities, and institutions. In a context marked by rapidly shifting social reference points, the need for continuity and stability does not disappear. People seek communities, values, and narratives that give meaning to their experiences and strengthen their sense of belonging. This interpretation builds on Bauman's observation that stable reference points, codes, and rules for orientation are becoming increasingly difficult to find, while individuals are compelled continually to construct their own trajectories (Bauman, 2000: 7-8).

This need can generate solidarity, but it can also foster rigid divisions between 'us' and 'them'. The issue is not the existence of collective identities, but the way in which they are defined and related to one another. An open identity can support cooperation, whereas one constructed through exclusion can turn diversity into a threat. For this

* PhD student, Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of European Studies, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Email: aurelianroland@yahoo.com.

reason, societal security does not entail preserving a fixed and immutable identity. It refers to a society's capacity to maintain its cohesion and identity continuity while adapting to change within a pluralist framework, without diversity being perceived as a threat to the community's existence (Wæver et al., 1993; Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1998: 119-120). Understood in this way, societal security extends beyond the traditional sphere of defence and encompasses the roles of civil society, cultural heritage, social capital, and community participation.

The subject is particularly important in Europe's border regions. In these spaces, national, ethnic, linguistic, and confessional identities coexist and influence one another against a background of mobility, shared historical experiences, and continuous cultural exchange. A border may separate jurisdictions, but it may also function as a contact zone. Arad is a relevant setting because of its proximity to the Romanian-Hungarian border, its Central European heritage, and its multi-ethnic, multicultural, and confessionally diverse character. These features encourage cooperation, but they also require the continuous cultivation of respect, dialogue, and mutual recognition.

The connection with Arad is also justified by the design of the case study. Although the headquarters of the Sovereign Templar Order Saint Martin are located in France, part of its European activities is coordinated from Arad. The city is mentioned not merely as a geographical reference point; it is analysed as a social environment in which the relationships between heritage, confessional plurality, civic initiative, and transnational cooperation can be observed. This positioning is consistent with the theme of the EuroINCLUS conference, which addresses identity, security, and inclusion in the border regions of South-Eastern Europe within the broader framework of European integration and the experience of Central and Eastern European states.

Public policies and state institutions play an essential role, yet they cannot build community cohesion on their own. Associations, foundations, religious communities, universities, and cultural organisations also contribute to this process. Through their projects and partnerships, they can bring together groups that rarely interact, mobilise resources, and create settings in which differences are encountered through dialogue and direct contact rather than merely managed from a distance (Putnam, 2000: 22-23; Kaldor, 2003). Non-state actors do not replace public authority, but they can complement institutional intervention through relationships based on proximity, continuity, and trust.

Contemporary neo-chivalric organisations may also be included among these actors, although their public functions have received relatively little sociological attention. The relevant literature has focused primarily on the emergence of chivalry, the evolution of medieval and monarchical orders, and the persistence of the chivalric imaginary in modern society (Keen, 1984; Boulton, 2000). Another line of research has highlighted the selective ways in which modern societies relate to the past and the role of traditions in constructing legitimacy and a sense of belonging (Hobsbawm, 1983; Anderson, 1991). Between the historical study of traditional orders and the critical analysis of contemporary organisations, however, an insufficiently explored question remains: what public role can an association that uses chivalric symbols perform today without claiming state authority or uninterrupted legal continuity with a medieval institution?

This question constitutes the starting point of the article. Rituals, titles, and heraldic insignia do not acquire social relevance merely by existing. Ceremonial can strengthen solidarity among members and support their commitment to shared values, but its public value depends on the organisation's openness to society and its connection

to concrete action. Likewise, declaring a philanthropic mission does not in itself demonstrate social impact. Symbolic capital must be assessed in relation to the effects of the organisation's activities on the community: strengthening trust, encouraging cooperation, recognising merit, including vulnerable people, and promoting intercultural and interconfessional dialogue.

The case study focuses on the OSTSM, a non-governmental organisation inspired by Christian and Martinian values and active in the cultural, educational, and philanthropic fields. The research question is as follows: to what extent, and through which mechanisms, can neo-chivalric heritage and symbolic capital be transformed into concrete contributions to inclusion, social cohesion, and societal security? The working hypothesis is that this transformation becomes credible when declared symbols and values are embedded in pluralistic civic networks, transparent institutional procedures, and social interventions whose results can be documented and verified. The article seeks to bring the neo-chivalric phenomenon into the debate on the role of non-state actors and to examine the usefulness of the concept of cultural microdiplomacy for understanding relationships built through culture, hospitality, memory, and solidarity.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research is qualitative and adopts an interpretive-constructivist perspective suited to studying the relationship between symbols, institutional identity, and social action. It is designed as a case study because it examines in depth an organisational actor situated within a specific regional and institutional context. The case study is not intended to support generalisations about all neo-chivalric organisations, but to identify mechanisms through which a symbolic identity can be directed towards activities of community relevance.

The purpose of the research is to understand how neo-chivalric heritage and symbolic capital can be harnessed in forms of civic engagement relevant to inclusion, community cohesion, and societal security. Two objectives were established in relation to this purpose. The first is to examine how the OSTSM defines its identity, status as an association, and public role. The second is to analyse the relationship between its stated values, institutional rules, and the cultural, educational, and philanthropic projects undertaken together with community partners.

The empirical material comprises the organisation's statute, internal regulations, strategic documents, press releases, public presentations, and materials concerning the main projects associated with the OSTSM. These include documents relating to the Arad Community Ball, including the regulations governing the conferment of the *Cross of Merit* at this event, as well as materials relating to the Arad Religious Music Festival, the JAZZAR International Jazz Festival, the conference dedicated to Saint Martin, the Knight-Art events, and the philanthropic initiatives 'Together, We Give Smiles' and the Spring Ball. Information provided by partners concerning beneficiary selection, project continuity, and mobilised resources was also analysed.

The empirical material is processed through a combination of documentary analysis, institutional discourse analysis, and sociological interpretation. The documentary analysis examines legal status, mission, institutional rules, and declared forms of cooperation, while the discourse analysis highlights how the organisation uses notions such as tradition, merit, protection, charity, and responsibility. The sociological interpretation relates these elements to societal security, social and symbolic capital, organisational legitimacy, soft power, and cultural diplomacy. Comparing declared

values with the documented structure and results of the projects makes it possible to examine the transition from internal identity to public benefit.

The case study analysis is organised around the organisation's principal fields of activity: public recognition and support for education, cultural dialogue and transnational cooperation, and solidarity and social inclusion. It examines inter-institutional cooperation, the promotion of merit, relationships developed through festivals, conferences, heritage, and hospitality, as well as projects for children, young people, vulnerable persons, and victims of domestic violence. Within these activities, ritual is examined both as a means of strengthening belonging and as a symbolic resource that can support public visibility and community mobilisation.

A substantial part of the analysed material comes from the documents of the organisation and its partners. Given its qualitative and interpretive character, the study seeks to understand the mechanisms through which declared values are translated into actions of community relevance, without quantitatively measuring social impact. The analysis examines the organisation's public discourse, the justification of its practices, and the relationship between its stated objectives and implemented projects. Data on beneficiaries and resources are used as institutional information and interpreted in relation to the available documents and materials. Accordingly, the conclusions highlight the identified mechanisms and directions of action without constituting an external evaluation of social impact. Future research based on interviews, direct observation, and independent assessments could complement and deepen the study's findings.

The study builds on previous research into the identity of contemporary chivalric orders (Boit, 2025), extending the analysis from the question of historical legitimacy to these organisations' public role and mechanisms of civic engagement. It focuses on how tradition is reinterpreted in relation to inclusion, societal security, and cooperation in a European border region.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Societal Security and the Role of Non-State Actors

The theoretical framework of the Copenhagen School extends security analysis beyond state-centred and military concerns to include the political, economic, societal, and environmental sectors (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1998: 1-2). In the societal sector, the referent object is collective identity, and insecurity arises when a community perceives certain developments as threats to the existence and continuity of that identity (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1998: 119-120). This perspective is useful because it shows that societies can become vulnerable even in the absence of a military attack.

The concept must nevertheless be used with care. If every cultural change is presented as an existential threat, the language of security can legitimise exclusion and intensify polarisation. Migration, confessional plurality, or differences in collective memory do not automatically produce insecurity; their effects depend on public interpretation, institutions, and the quality of intergroup relations. From this perspective, an important contribution to societal security consists in the 'desecuritisation' of difference: moving it from the register of fear and emergency into that of cooperation, negotiation, and ordinary coexistence (Wæver et al., 1993).

In Central and South-Eastern Europe, this issue is visible in border regions and multicultural spaces. Ethnic, confessional, linguistic, and cultural identities coexist, overlap, and are reshaped through mobility. Identity fragmentation, social polarisation, and declining trust among individuals, communities, and institutions can impair the

capacity for cooperation and the maintenance of a common framework. Increasingly fluid relationships and the weakening of stable reference points can heighten the need for belonging and recognition (Bauman, 2000). The democratic response lies not in eliminating differences, but in creating institutions and practices through which identities can communicate without perceiving one another as threats.

Societal security does not depend exclusively on state intervention. Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde show that societies may also respond to identity-related challenges through their own activities or by non-state means (1998: 122-123). Civic organisations, academic institutions, religious communities, and cultural actors can mobilise resources, mediate relationships, and create settings for participation. Kaldor (2003) describes civil society as a space of association, deliberation, and networks that sometimes extend beyond state borders. Such networks are not free of interests or tensions, but they can bring visibility to issues that formal institutions find more difficult to reach.

Social capital explains part of this contribution. Putnam defines it through networks and the norms of reciprocity and trust formed within them. He distinguishes between bonding ties, which strengthen solidarity within a relatively homogeneous group, and bridging ties, which create connections between different groups (Putnam, 2000: 22-23). Both are necessary, but they have distinct effects. An organisation requires internal cohesion to mobilise its members; if it remains exclusively inward-looking, however, it may become self-referential. For inclusion and societal security, the challenge is to convert part of this internal cohesion into external cooperation.

Non-state actors may therefore play a complementary role. They do not provide coercive security or replace the functions of the state, but they can strengthen relations between communities, support participation, and reduce isolation. Their value depends on the accessibility of their projects, the diversity of their partners, the transparency of their procedures, and their capacity to produce observable results. Neo-chivalric organisations can be analysed within this framework: not through their ranks or historical claims, but through their contributions to cooperation, trust, intercultural and interconfessional dialogue, and community inclusion.

3.2. Europe as 'a Culture of Cultures': Symbolic Capital, Soft Power, and Cultural Microdiplomacy

European identity is constructed in the tension between unity and diversity. For Delanty (1995), Europe is not a fixed cultural essence, but a historical construction resulting from boundaries, confrontations, and reinterpretations. This perspective draws attention to the fact that a common identity can become exclusionary if presented as homogeneous and definitive. At the same time, the absence of any common reference point may diminish the capacity for solidarity. Europe's challenge is not to choose between unity and diversity, but to construct a unity that remains open to difference.

The description of Europe as 'a culture of cultures', proposed by Mircea Brie, István Polgár, and Florentina Chirodea, captures this possibility. Common belonging does not require the disappearance of local, regional, national, or confessional identities, but their placement within a space of communication. Diversity and multiculturalism become constitutive features of European identity, while cultural borders can function as zones of contact and cooperation (Brie, Polgár, and Chirodea, 2012: 11-12). This approach is important to the EuroINCLUS theme because it links inclusion to the recognition of identities rather than to their homogenisation.

Cultural heritage participates in this process. The Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, known as the Faro Convention, links heritage to human rights, democracy, and community participation (Council of Europe, 2005). The emphasis falls on the meanings and uses that people attribute to heritage, not solely on the preservation of objects. A heritage community emerges when people and institutions recognise a legacy that they wish to preserve and transmit through public action. Heritage thus becomes a relational practice rather than merely a collection of symbols.

The UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators framework adds an evaluative dimension. Culture's contribution to development is assessed through access, participation, knowledge, prosperity, and resilience, using quantitative and qualitative indicators (UNESCO, 2019). The implication for civil-society cultural projects is clear: generic invocations of culture are insufficient. Information is needed on who participates, which groups are included, what partnerships are formed, and whether the results endure. Culture can generate prestige, but public relevance also requires accessibility, reciprocity, and evidence.

Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital helps explain the difference between symbol and recognition. Symbolic capital is not an intrinsic property of a title, ritual, or insignia; it is a form of capital perceived and recognised as legitimate by others (Bourdieu, 1991: 238). An organisation's prestige therefore depends on the relationship between the signs it uses and the credibility accorded to them by relevant publics. A distinction may confirm internal solidarity, but it acquires public relevance when its criteria are intelligible, the recognised individuals have verifiable contributions, and the procedure is accepted beyond the membership circle.

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power describes the capacity to secure cooperation through attraction, values, and credibility rather than through coercion or payment (Nye, 2004). The term was developed primarily for analysing states, and its application to civic organisations must be proportionate. A local actor does not possess a state's resources and does not project a foreign policy. It can, however, exercise modest cultural and relational influence through reputation, hospitality, credible projects, and sustained partnerships. In the case of a neo-chivalric organisation, soft power does not arise automatically from ceremonial; it comes from the capacity to transform symbols into a public experience recognised as useful.

Cultural diplomacy has traditionally been associated with states, cultural institutes, and diplomatic missions. Recent literature shows, however, that artists, universities, museums, non-governmental organisations, and other non-state networks are increasingly participating in international cultural exchanges (Gienow-Hecht and Donfried, 2010; La Porte Fernández-Alfaro, 2016; Lee and Ayhan, 2015). They can develop long-term relationships, facilitate mutual understanding, and cooperate with public institutions without becoming extensions of them. The legitimacy of their involvement derives from competence, representativeness, openness, and results rather than from an official diplomatic mandate.

In international-relations literature, microdiplomacy and paradiplomacy refer mainly to the external activities of subnational governments, regions, and cities (Duchacek, 1990; Aldecoa and Keating, 1999). The present study uses the notion in a narrower and explicit sense: cultural microdiplomacy denotes the local and transnational interactions through which a non-state actor builds cooperative relationships among individuals, communities, organisations, and institutions by drawing on culture, memory,

hospitality, education, and solidarity. The concept implies neither the exercise of diplomatic authority nor a mandate to represent the state. It describes a small-scale relational practice that complements institutional diplomacy.

This delimitation makes possible a concrete evaluation of initiatives. A festival, conference, ceremony, or philanthropic project acquires a microdiplomatic dimension when it creates relationships among different actors, facilitates cooperation, and produces continuity. The presence of foreign guests or the use of solemn language is not sufficient. What matters is reciprocity, the autonomy of partners, the quality of participation, and the capacity of encounters to generate subsequent ties. Through such practices, symbolic heritage can become a resource for rapprochement in a Europe defined by plurality.

3.3. Contemporary Neo-Chivalry and the Construction of Legitimacy

The history of chivalry encompasses ideals such as honour, loyalty, courage, charity, and service, as well as realities associated with hierarchy, warfare, and competition for prestige (Keen, 1984). Medieval and monarchical orders possessed legal forms and functions specific to the periods in which they emerged; a contemporary association cannot simply reproduce them (Boulton, 2000). The term neo-chivalry is used here descriptively to refer to modern organisations that reinterpret chivalric values, symbols, and practices within civil society.

The distinction between legal continuity and symbolic continuity is essential. A present-day organisation may draw inspiration from the spiritual, moral, and cultural heritage of chivalry without claiming to be the uninterrupted legal successor of a medieval order. Conflating these two levels creates confusion and shifts the debate from the organisation's present role to a genealogy that is difficult to demonstrate. Separating them allows the organisation to be analysed through its contemporary status, its own rules, its relationships with partners, and the results of its activities.

The relationship with the past can be examined through the concept of 'invented tradition'. Hobsbawm describes ritual and symbolic practices organised through accepted and repeated rules that convey values and norms and establish a selective relationship with the past (Hobsbawm, 1983: 1-2). The constructed character of a tradition does not automatically deprive it of value. Rather, it shows that the past is reinterpreted in response to contemporary needs for identity, continuity, and cohesion. The relevant questions become which values the tradition transmits, who may participate, and what effects it produces in the public sphere.

Anderson (1991) showed that shared narratives, calendars, and signs help people imagine themselves as members of the same community. The symbolic production of belonging does not in itself amount to falsification. The problem arises when a single narrative appropriates the past, eliminates competing interpretations, or attributes to an organisation authority that it does not possess. Heritage acquires a democratic function when it remains open to dialogue, is presented clearly, and supports relationships with people outside the group.

The theory of organisational legitimacy provides an additional criterion. Suchman defines legitimacy as a generalised perception that an entity's actions are appropriate within a social system of norms, values, and beliefs (Suchman, 1995: 574). He distinguishes pragmatic legitimacy, based on perceived usefulness; moral legitimacy, grounded in an assessment of goals and procedures; and cognitive legitimacy, which arises when the organisation's identity is clear and intelligible. For a neo-chivalric organisation, useful projects support pragmatic legitimacy, fair procedures and an

orientation towards the common good strengthen moral legitimacy, and clarification of the internal organisational nature of its titles contributes to cognitive legitimacy.

Ritual complements this process. Alexander analyses social performance as a relationship between actors, symbols, scripts, and audiences. Its credibility depends on its capacity to make visible the connection between meaning and action (Alexander, 2004). Ceremonial can generate belonging, continuity, and solidarity, but its public value becomes convincing when followed by community engagement. For neo-chivalric organisations, ritual functions as a mechanism for producing belonging, while social relevance constitutes the principal source of contemporary legitimacy.

Neo-chivalric heritage may follow two paths. In a predominantly internal form, symbols strengthen solidarity among members and confirm status within the group. In a relational form, the same resources support public activities, inter-institutional collaboration, and the recognition of civic contributions from outside the order. The former primarily produces bonding social capital; the latter enables bridge-building. The concept of symbolic civil society denotes precisely this possibility of using memory, ritual, and prestige for civic mobilisation, provided that internal identity is linked to responsibility and public benefit.

4. THE OSTSM CASE STUDY: PRACTICES OF CULTURAL MICRODIPLOMACY

Institutional documents present the OSTSM as a non-governmental, non-profit, and apolitical organisation inspired by the Christian values associated with Saint Martin. The organisation does not claim medieval legal continuity, but embraces a symbolic and moral lineage adapted to contemporary civil society. Its titles, ranks, rituals, and insignia have an internal, associative significance and confer neither public authority nor legal prerogatives outside the organisation. This institutional positioning and the distinction between legal continuity and symbolic lineage have previously been analysed from the perspective of the organisation's identity construction (Boîț, 2025: 150-155; OSTSM, n.d.).

The figure of Saint Martin provides the moral core of the institutional identity. The act of sharing his cloak with a vulnerable person is reinterpreted as a model of the transition from warrior to protector and as an expression of active charity. Human dignity, solidarity, education, culture, and support for people in difficulty are presented as contemporary forms of chivalric service. In this logic, neo-chivalric identity is not an end in itself, but a symbolic framework that encourages members' participation and assumption of community responsibilities.

The case's relevance is heightened by the coordination of part of the organisation's European activities from Arad. Located near the Romanian-Hungarian border, the city has a Central European heritage and a multi-ethnic, multicultural, and confessionally diverse profile. In such an environment, identities develop through contact, shared memory, and cooperation. The organisation's activities can be analysed according to their capacity to create ties among institutions and communities that do not necessarily share the same cultural or religious identity.

The analysis of documents and projects reveals a process through which symbolic capital is transformed into concrete social practices. The organisation draws on a recognisable repertoire - the figure of Saint Martin, heraldry, ceremonial, distinctions, and narratives of responsibility - and connects it to educational, cultural, and philanthropic projects. When initiatives extend beyond the membership circle and

include public institutions, academia, cultural organisations, religious communities, and beneficiaries, symbolic identity can become a resource for cooperation.

A. Public Recognition, Education, and Social Capital

The Arad Community Ball is one of the most significant projects through which this mechanism can be observed. Launched in 2015 as the 'Arad Community Supports Achievement' Gala and organised under its current name since 2019, the project brings together philanthropy, education, and the public recognition of merit. Together with the EUROPEANUL Association, the OSTSM performs an organisational role alongside educational and cultural institutions, public authorities, business representatives, and other community partners.

According to the institutional data analysed, more than 2,000 pupils received public awards between 2015 and 2025, and over RON 600,000 was directed towards supporting educational, cultural, and social achievement. The project gives visibility to pupils who excel in academic competitions, young people with outstanding results, teachers, and individuals involved in community life. Recognition includes prizes, diplomas, and connecting beneficiaries to a network of institutions and partners committed to education and achievement.

The selection procedure links the ceremonial dimension of public recognition to official data and institutional assessments. The Arad County School Inspectorate supplies the official records of results achieved in academic competitions, while specialist clubs are consulted in assessing sporting performance. Representatives of the EUROPEANUL Association and the OSTSM, together with representatives of the Arad County School Inspectorate and independent public figures, analyse the nominations and results in each field. This assessment forms the basis for selecting the recipients of prizes, diplomas, and distinctions and for the nomination submitted to the Embassy of France in Romania for the 'Prix d'Excellence de l'Ambassade de France en Roumanie'. Since 2018, the Embassy of France in Romania has granted its High Patronage to the event.

This mechanism gives recognition a community dimension. Schools provide data on educational achievement, sports clubs confirm results, civic organisations ensure the selection framework, the business community contributes resources, and cultural and public institutions provide visibility. Repeated cooperation around the same project can strengthen trust among actors and generate bridging social capital, because participants contribute to a common objective without being required to share the same organisational identity (Putnam, 2000: 22-23).

Within the Arad Community Ball, the *Cross of Merit* complements the mechanism of public recognition. Its regulations include professional merit, civic responsibility, and philanthropic involvement among the assessment criteria, while the council reviewing nominations also includes figures from outside the OSTSM (OSTSM, n.d.). The public conferment of the distinction helps translate declared values into concrete and visible community reference points. By recognising the merits of people active in education, culture, academia, and civil society, the organisation's symbolic capital is connected to achievements and contributions extending beyond its own membership.

From the perspective of cultural microdiplomacy, the Ball creates links among a local initiative, educational institutions, the cultural sector, economic actors, and the French diplomatic mission. This influence is not political and does not entail a

representative mandate. It is expressed through the capacity of a local network to circulate values such as merit, responsibility, and solidarity and to build lasting relationships around them. The ceremony becomes the visible component of a broader process of identification, selection, support, and recognition.

The project's continuity is relevant because it transforms a one-off gala into a community infrastructure of recognition. Repeated collaboration enables the accumulation of institutional experience and increases the predictability of relationships among partners. At the same time, the clear publication of criteria, explanations of selection decisions, and monitoring beneficiaries' subsequent trajectories could make the long-term impact more visible. On the basis of the available materials, the project illustrates the transition from ceremonial prestige to concrete support for achievement and the construction of social capital.

B. Cultural Dialogue and Transnational Cooperation

The Arad Religious Music Festival is a form of cultural microdiplomacy based on spiritual heritage and interconfessional dialogue. The participation of choirs, religious communities, and cultural institutions from different backgrounds transforms confessional diversity into a shared artistic experience. Each participant retains the identity of the tradition represented while simultaneously becoming part of a common audience.

The festival's sociological relevance is not limited to its artistic dimension. Encounter through music creates a space in which confessional differences are known through direct contact and are not presented as sources of separation. In Arad, characterised by religious and cultural plurality, such initiatives can contribute to mutual recognition and to a community climate in which diversity is experienced as a resource. This logic is compatible with understanding Europe as 'a culture of cultures', in which unity does not imply uniformity, but communication among distinct identities (Brie, Polgár, and Chirodea, 2012: 11-12).

The JAZZAR International Jazz Festival extends cooperation into the artistic and transnational sphere. The project brings together artists, students, cultural institutions, and audiences from different national contexts and draws on Arad's urban heritage. Through improvisation, listening, and artistic dialogue, jazz offers a language accessible beyond linguistic and institutional differences. The relationships formed among guests, organisers, and audiences transform the city into a space of cultural hospitality.

The festival's soft-power dimension belongs to the local network that makes it possible, not to any single organisation. Influence is built through the quality of the experience provided, the continuity of contacts, and a reputation as an open and reliable partner. In this sense, microdiplomacy operates on a small scale through personal and institutional relationships that can prepare the ground for subsequent artistic and educational collaborations. Hospitality is not merely protocol, but a means of reducing the distance inherent in a first encounter and creating the conditions for cooperation.

The international conference 'Saint Martin, Forerunner of the Christian Chivalric Orders' introduces chivalric heritage into an academic and interdisciplinary space. The event brings together researchers and representatives of cultural institutions, public administration, and civil society around the relationship between history, European identity, and community responsibility. Through the presentation and publication of research, tradition enters into dialogue with history, sociology, theology, and international relations.

This openness performs an important function for the organisation's legitimacy. The university environment contributes to analysing and contextualising its identity narrative. The participation of specialists from outside the OSTSM, the interdisciplinary nature of the contributions, and the publication of the papers can turn the conference into a space for European reflection. Heritage is not presented as an authority sufficient in itself, but as a starting point for knowledge, dialogue, and the critical exchange of arguments.

The Knight-Art Arad and Knight-Art Corfu events complement this dimension by integrating ceremonial, local heritage, art, pilgrimage, and transnational encounters. For members, rituals and symbols construct belonging and continuity. For guests, visits to heritage sites, cultural moments, and hospitality create settings for closer contact and mutual understanding. The OSTSM's role is that of partner, host, and intermediary in these relationships, without replacing diplomatic institutions or claiming religious or political authority.

Ritual performs a dual function here. Within the organisation, it helps strengthen *bonding social capital* and provides members with a shared language of commitment. Externally, this cohesion can support bridge-building towards other groups - *bridging social capital* - when events are open to partners and the community and heritage is harnessed through joint projects. The public relevance of a symbolic organisation depends on the balance between maintaining a recognisable identity and the capacity to work with outsiders without making their participation conditional on membership or full acceptance of the organisation's narrative.

Taken together, the projects embody complementary forms of cultural microdiplomacy. Religious music supports interconfessional dialogue, jazz encourages transnational artistic cooperation, the conference dedicated to Saint Martin connects heritage with academic research, and the Knight-Art events draw on hospitality and ceremonial to create community experiences. Their common element is the facilitation of relationships among people, communities, and institutions that can cooperate without relinquishing their own identities.

C. Solidarity, Protection, and Social Inclusion

The 'Together, We Give Smiles' programme directs the organisation's stated values towards children and young people in vulnerable situations. Educational, cultural, and support activities give beneficiaries access to community experiences and opportunities for participation. In this context, philanthropy is not merely a transfer of resources, but a mechanism through which people at risk of isolation can be included in social and community relationships.

From the perspective of societal security, exclusion undermines trust and the sense of belonging, while participation in educational and cultural activities can help restore these ties. The programme's relevance lies in the proximity it creates among volunteers, institutions, beneficiaries, and the community. Martinian charity is thus reinterpreted as active solidarity and responsibility for the dignity of the person receiving support.

The Spring Ball, organised by the OSTSM Arad Commandery together with Lions Club Arad, extends this logic to supporting people affected by domestic violence. The resources mobilised are directed to the AREIS Association in Arad, which assists victims. Partnership with a specialist organisation connects public solidarity to the

expertise of professionals who understand beneficiaries' needs and can provide appropriate forms of support.

The project also proposes a contemporary reinterpretation of the chivalric idea of protection. Protection is no longer associated with the exercise of force or a paternalistic relationship, but with mobilising the community to defend the dignity and safety of vulnerable people. The event brings a social problem to public attention, creates connections among donors, civic organisations, and professionals, and transforms solidarity into concrete intervention. In this configuration, the OSTSM does not replace specialist services, but contributes to mobilising resources and public attention.

These initiatives show that philanthropy can contribute to inclusion when it is oriented towards participation, autonomy, and continuity. In the case of children, young people, and victims of domestic violence, maintaining confidentiality, protecting beneficiaries' image, and working with specialist organisations are integral to the intended social outcome. A beneficiary is not merely the recipient of generosity, but a person with dignity, rights, and the capacity to participate in community life.

Cultural microdiplomacy is also visible in these projects, albeit in a register different from that of festivals. It operates by mediating among environments that use distinct languages and resources: donors, professionals, civic organisations, institutions, and the public. Culture and ceremonial assist mobilisation, while partnerships translate this mobilisation into support. The relational dimension consists in building shared responsibility around a community issue.

The analysed documents include information on the number of beneficiaries, the resources mobilised, the duration of interventions, and the continuity of the support provided. These data make it possible to highlight the scale and continuity of the projects and provide a documentary basis for assessing their community relevance. The periodic and structured presentation of results can increase their visibility and facilitate verification. For an organisation that uses powerful symbols, transparent and responsible communication of results strengthens the connection between symbolic capital and the common good.

5. DISCUSSION

The case study indicates that the OSTSM can be analysed as a form of symbolic civil society and as a complementary actor of societal security. The organisation does not provide security in a coercive sense and does not replace the responsibilities of the state. Its contribution lies in building ties among institutions, organisations, and communities, mobilising resources, and creating contexts for recognition, dialogue, and solidarity.

The analysis highlights three principal mechanisms. The first is public recognition, through which educational, professional, and civic merit gains visibility, while the people who embody it receive recognition and support. The second is cultural mediation, undertaken through festivals, conferences, and transnational encounters that bring confessional, artistic, and academic environments closer together. The third is community solidarity, through which symbolic and relational resources are directed towards education, participation, and support for vulnerable people. Ritual supports these mechanisms by providing a shared framework of identity and commitment.

Within the limits of the material analysed, the findings support the working hypothesis. The transformation of symbolic capital into public contribution becomes credible when projects are based on pluralistic networks, transparent procedures, and

results that can be documented. The Arad Community Ball provides the clearest example of the transition from symbol to procedure: official records of educational achievement, consultation with sports organisations, the work of the joint committee, the participation of independent public figures, and cooperation with the Embassy of France in Romania demonstrate that the ceremony is the visible dimension of a broader process of selection and recognition. The festivals and conference extend this mechanism towards cultural dialogue, while the social projects direct it towards solidarity and inclusion.

Within this framework, cultural microdiplomacy is neither a form of official diplomacy nor a source of diplomatic status for the actors involved. The concept denotes the local and transnational level at which a non-state actor facilitates relationships through culture, heritage, hospitality, education, and solidarity. Its relevance can be observed when encounters lead to cooperation, partnerships acquire continuity, and projects remain open to individuals and institutions outside the organisation. In this sense, cultural microdiplomacy becomes a relational practice based on proximity and the gradual accumulation of trust.

The study also contributes to understanding inclusion in border regions. The analysed activities do not seek to homogenise religious, historical, or local identities, but to integrate them within a framework of cooperation. The Religious Music Festival draws on confessional diversity, JAZZAR and Knight-Art create transnational contacts, and the philanthropic projects connect the resources of institutional and private actors with beneficiaries' needs. This model corresponds to an understanding of Europe as 'a culture of cultures': identities remain recognisable, but are oriented towards common values and actions (Brie, Polgár, and Chirodea, 2012).

The OSTSM's legitimacy can be understood as a process rather than an attribute acquired through the age of its symbols. In Suchman's terms, the usefulness of projects supports pragmatic legitimacy, an orientation towards dignity and inclusion contributes to moral legitimacy, and the clarity of the organisation's status as an association and the intelligibility of its public role strengthen cognitive legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Ritual can make the organisation's commitment visible, but its credibility depends on congruence with public activity. Social relevance thus becomes a central criterion of contemporary legitimacy.

Consistent with the qualitative character of the research, the findings provide a relevant documentary basis for understanding institutional mechanisms and how stated values are translated into activities of community relevance. The organisation's and its partners' documents reveal the structure of the projects, the relationships of cooperation, and the continuity of interventions. This perspective could be deepened through future research based on interviews with beneficiaries, partners, and participants from outside the organisation, direct observation, and comparisons with other European neo-chivalric organisations. Continued transparency in presenting criteria, the systematic and periodic publication of results, and monitoring project continuity can strengthen academic evaluation and make the congruence between declared values and undertaken actions more visible.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis shows that contemporary neo-chivalry cannot be reduced to the mere symbolic survival of the Middle Ages. It is a process of reinterpretation through which chivalric memory, values, and rituals are adapted to the conditions of European

civil society. In the case of the OSTSM, an identity inspired by Saint Martin provides a moral language of charity, dignity, and responsibility, while cultural, educational, and philanthropic projects constitute the means through which these values are translated into the public sphere. This identity foundation, previously examined in relation to the organisation's symbolic legitimacy (Boiț, 2025: 150-155), is analysed in the present study from the distinct perspective of societal security, inclusion, and cultural microdiplomacy.

The Arad Community Ball, at which the *Cross of Merit* is also conferred, the Religious Music Festival, the JAZZAR International Jazz Festival, the conference dedicated to Saint Martin, the Knight-Art events, and the solidarity projects illustrate different forms of the same process of transformation. Symbolic capital is harnessed to recognise merit, support intercultural and interconfessional dialogue, develop transnational cooperation, and assist vulnerable people. Through these mechanisms, ritual and tradition can move beyond the organisation's internal sphere and become resources for community participation.

The concept of cultural microdiplomacy makes it possible to understand the relationships constructed at this level. The OSTSM exercises no diplomatic authority and holds no official representative mandate, but as a non-state actor it can contribute to bringing people, communities, and institutions closer together. Its influence is cultural and relational, based on hospitality, trust, the continuity of partnerships, and the capacity to bring diverse actors together around shared values and projects.

The central conclusion is that tradition and ceremonial visibility are not in themselves sufficient to ensure the legitimacy of a neo-chivalric organisation. Contemporary legitimacy is constructed through transparency, congruence between declared values and concrete action, open cooperation with institutions and the community, and verifiable social outcomes. Under these conditions, neo-chivalry can function as a form of symbolic civil society and as a complementary means of supporting inclusion, cohesion, and societal security in a Europe defined by unity in diversity.

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REFRAMING BORDER SECURITY THROUGH FRONTEX FOCUSING ON IDENTITY DYNAMICS AND INCLUSIVITY IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

*Ioana BORDEIANU**
*Florentina CHIRODEA***
*Luminița ȘOPRONI****

Abstract. *This article reframes border security in southeast Europe by placing Frontex, identity dynamics and inclusivity at the centre of analysis. While dominant policy and institutional discourses continue to treat border security primarily as a technical and geopolitical matter of effectiveness and deterrence, the study argues that such a framing is analytically insufficient. Drawing on critical border studies, securitisation theory and scholarship on differential inclusion, the article develops an integrated theoretical framework that treats Frontex's operational practices, processes of identity formation and struggles over inclusivity as mutually constitutive. Empirically, it examines two key operational theatres, the Greek - Aegean border and the Western Balkans route, through a qualitative, interpretive analysis of official documents, secondary literature and civil society reports. The findings show that Frontex actively participates in the production of security knowledge and the categorisation of mobile subjects, contributes to racialised and gendered othering processes, and shapes the conditions of differential inclusion at the EU's external and externalised borders. Identity negotiations take distinct forms in Greece and in the Western Balkans. Inclusivity remains structurally constrained by operational pressures, blurred accountability and limited access to protection. The article concludes that a more comprehensive understanding of European border governance requires treating questions of belonging and rights as constitutive rather than residual dimensions of border security, with implications for both theory and policy.*

Keywords: *Frontex; border security; identity dynamics; inclusivity; differential inclusion; southeast Europe; Western Balkans; critical border studies; securitisation; externalisation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Southeast Europe occupies an important position in the European Union's external border architecture as both a geographical gateway and a strategic corridor for migration and security governance, with the Western Balkans route remaining one of the most significant entry pathways into the EU.

Frontex, as the agency responsible for coordinating external border management, provides joint operational support, risk analysis, surveillance, technical assistance and

* Lecturer Ph.D., Department of International Relations and European Studies, University of Oradea, Romania, E-mail: ioaborde@gmail.com.

** Senior lecturer Ph.D., Department of International Relations and European Studies, University of Oradea, Romania, E-mail: fchirodea@uoradea.ro.

*** Senior lecturer Ph.D., Department of International Relations and European Studies, University of Oradea, Romania, E-mail: lumiwoicu@yahoo.com.

training, thereby strengthening collective border resilience and institutional cooperation between Member States and partner countries in the region.

Beyond operational effectiveness, Frontex contributes to identity management through biometric registration systems and shared databases while integrating fundamental rights safeguards via its *Fundamental Rights Office*, reflecting an evolving approach in which security and inclusivity are increasingly interdependent.

This article critically examines how Frontex contributes to three interconnected dimensions of border governance in southeast Europe, security effectiveness, identity management and inclusive governance, positioning the agency as a central institutional actor in the development of a more coordinated and normatively structured European border regime.

1.1. Research context

Border security in the European Union has undergone a profound transformation over the past two decades. What was once primarily a national competence has evolved into a more integrated, supranational regime centred on the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex). Established in 2004 and significantly strengthened after the 2015 - 2016 migration crisis, Frontex has expanded both its operational capacity and its geographical reach, increasingly intervening beyond the formal external borders of the Schengen Area.

In southeast Europe, particularly along the Greek - Turkish border and the Western Balkans route, the Agency has become a central actor in the daily management of mobility, risk analysis, screening and joint operations with national authorities and third countries.

This expansion is not merely technical. Critical border studies have long demonstrated that border control practices produce and reproduce social, racialised and gendered hierarchies of belonging (Bigo, 2014; Vaughan-Williams, 2009). Frontex's risk analysis reports, operational guidelines and visual materials actively construct the figure of the "*migrant Other*" while simultaneously affirming a particular vision of European identity and security (Sachse, J., Stachowitsch, S., Binder, C. 2022; Pallister-Wilkins, 2015).

At the same time, the Agency's growing presence in the Western Balkans, through working arrangements, liaison officers, joint operations and capacity-building projects, diffuses an EU border-control culture into candidate and potential candidate countries, reshaping local practices and identities.

1.2. Motivation for choosing the topic

The decision to focus on Frontex's role in southeast Europe stems from the recognition that dominant policy narratives continue to frame border security primarily in terms of effectiveness, deterrence and the protection of the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice. But there are questions of identity dynamics:

- How borders produce inclusions and exclusions of national, regional and European belonging - and of inclusivity?
- How fundamental rights, vulnerability and differential access to protection are negotiated?

These types of questions remain secondary or are treated as residual concerns.

Southeast Europe offers a particularly revealing context for examining these issues. The region functions simultaneously as an EU external border zone, a transit space, a buffer area and a site of ongoing enlargement dynamics.

Practices of circular mobility, pushbacks, biometric registration and remote control have become routine. Local populations, national authorities, civil society actors and people on the move experience and contest these practices in ways that continually renegotiate meanings of security, belonging and rights. Studying this region therefore allows for a deeper understanding of how operational, identity-related and rights-based dimensions of border security intersect in practice.

1.3. Research problems

The central problem addressed in this article is that the prevailing framing of border security remains analytically and politically insufficient. Border security in southeast Europe cannot be adequately understood without examining the interplay between Frontex's operational logic, the identity processes it both reflects and generates, and the persistent challenges of inclusivity at the EU's external and externalised borders.

Current approaches tend to prioritise technical and geopolitical considerations while underplaying the ways in which security practices actively shape categories of belonging and conditions of inclusion or exclusion.

1.4. Research questions

Against this background, the article addresses the following central research question:

- How does Frontex contribute to the reframing of border security in southeast Europe when identity dynamics and inclusivity are placed at the centre of analysis?

This overarching question is operationalised through three interrelated secondary questions:

2) In what ways do Frontex's operational practices, risk analyses and cooperation arrangements in southeast Europe shape and are shaped by identity dynamics (national, regional, European and migrant subjectivities)?

3) How are claims to inclusivity, particularly access to asylum, protection of vulnerable persons and respect for fundamental rights, negotiated, constrained or enabled within Frontex-supported border regimes?

4) What theoretical and policy implications arise from reframing border security through the nexus of Frontex, identity dynamics and inclusivity?

1.5. Objectives of the research

The objectives of the article are threefold:

O1: to map the evolving role of Frontex in southeast Europe, moving beyond a purely institutional or legal description toward an analysis of practices and their social effects;

O2: to theorise the intersections between border security, identity formation and inclusivity, drawing on critical border studies, securitisation theory and scholarship on differential inclusion;

O3: to contribute to ongoing academic and policy debates by proposing a more comprehensive analytical framework that treats identity and inclusivity as integral rather than residual dimensions of border security.

1.6. Importance and originality of the research

The importance of this research lies in its potential to advance both scholarly understanding and policy-relevant insights.

Academically, it contributes to critical border studies by integrating three dimensions, Frontex as an operational actor, identity dynamics and inclusivity, that are often analysed separately. Empirically, the focus on southeast Europe highlights dynamics of externalisation, Europeanisation and multi-level governance that are less visible in studies confined to core EU Member States.

The originality of the article resides in its insistence that identity and inclusivity are not peripheral concerns but constitutive elements of contemporary border security. By placing these dimensions at the centre of analysis, the study challenges narrow, technocratic understandings of Frontex and offers a reframed perspective on European border governance, one that is more attentive to questions of belonging, rights and differential inclusion in one of the most complex border regions of the European Union.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Critical analysis of the specialised literature

The academic literature on European border security has grown considerably since the establishment of Frontex in 2004 and, more intensively, after the 2015 - 2016 migration crisis. Early contributions largely focused on the Agency's legal mandate, institutional design and coordinating role within the area of *Freedom, Security and Justice*. These studies tended to treat Frontex as a technical instrument of operational cooperation between Member States.

A more critical body of scholarship has subsequently emerged, examining Frontex not merely as a bureaucratic actor but as a producer of security knowledge and practice. Research has analysed the Agency's risk analysis reports, screening procedures, joint operations and cooperation arrangements with third countries as mechanisms that actively construct categories (Bigo, 2014; Sarantaki, 2024; Pollozek & Passoth, 2024). of risk, suspicion and mobility Particular attention has been paid to processes of externalisation, whereby EU border-control standards and operational cultures are diffused beyond the formal external borders of the Union, especially into the Western Balkans (Pavicevic, 2025; Sarantaki, 2024).

Parallel strands of literature have explored the representational and identity-related dimensions of border control. Studies of Frontex's discursive and visual regimes have shown how risk analysis materials and operational communications participate in the racialisation and gendering of migration, constructing the figure of the "*migrant Other*" while affirming particular images of European identity and security (Sachseder, Stachowitsch & Binder, 2022). Related work has examined the coexistence of humanitarian and security logics in Frontex-supported operations, particularly along the Greek-Turkish border (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015).

Scholarship on inclusivity and fundamental rights has documented persistent tensions between formal normative commitments and operational realities. Research highlights constrained access to asylum, inadequate vulnerability assessments, pushbacks and accountability gaps in multi-actor border regimes (Pollozek & Passoth, 2024; Sarantaki, 2024).

Civil society documentation and independent monitoring have further exposed the practical limits of rights protection in both the Aegean and Western Balkans contexts.

2.2. Main theories and approaches

We can say that three theoretical clusters dominate the specialised literature relevant to this study.

The first is rooted in critical security and border studies. Didier Bigo's (2014) concept of the "*(in)securitization*" of borders emphasises the professional practices and practical senses through which different universes of border control (military, police, database analysts) construct threats and hierarchies of mobility. Complementary work by Vaughan-Williams (2009, 2015) conceptualises borders as dynamic, performed and dispersed practices rather than fixed territorial lines, highlighting processes of remote control, anticipatory risk management and externalisation.

The second cluster focuses on identity dynamics and securitisation. Drawing on securitisation theory and critical discourse analysis, scholars examine how border practices produce and stabilise distinctions between a protected European self and externalised others. Research on racialised and gendered representations in Frontex materials (Sachse, Stachowitsch & Binder, 2022) illustrates how operational knowledge participates in the construction of belonging and exclusion.

The third cluster centres on differential inclusion and the politics of rights. Rather than framing border control solely in terms of absolute exclusion, this literature analyses the hierarchical and conditional forms of access to territory, asylum and protection that characterise contemporary mobility regimes. Inclusivity is understood as a contested field shaped by legal frameworks, operational cultures and the agency of migrants and civil society actors.

2.3. Gaps identified in previous research

Despite the richness of existing scholarship, several significant gaps remain.

First, studies of Frontex tend to prioritise either institutional and legal dimensions or specific operational practices. Fewer works systematically examine the interconnections between the Agency's activities, the identity processes they generate, and the conditions of inclusivity they enable or constrain.

Second, while identity and securitisation have been extensively theorised, their concrete articulation with inclusivity challenges in multi-actor and externalised border regimes is still underdeveloped. The relationship between othering practices and differential inclusion is often acknowledged but rarely analysed in an integrated manner.

Third, southeast Europe is frequently treated either as a case of externalisation or as a site of EU enlargement conditionality. Less attention has been paid to the region as a space in which operational security practices, identity negotiations and struggles over rights simultaneously unfold and mutually shape one another.

Finally, much of the critical literature remains focused on core EU Member States or the Mediterranean maritime routes. The specific dynamics of the Western Balkans, where Frontex operates through working arrangements and joint operations on the territory of non-EU countries, remain comparatively underexplored in integrated theoretical frameworks.

2.4. Positioning of the present research in relation to the existing literature

This article positions itself at the intersection of the three strands of literature outlined above. It builds on critical border studies, securitisation theory and scholarship on differential inclusion, while seeking to integrate them into a single analytical framework centred on the nexus of Frontex, identity dynamics and inclusivity.

Rather than treating these dimensions as separate or sequential, the study argues that they are mutually constitutive. Frontex's operational practices participate in the production of identity categories; these identity processes, in turn, shape the conditions

under which claims to inclusivity are negotiated; and struggles over inclusion feed back into the legitimisation and contestation of security practices.

Empirically, the article focuses on southeast Europe as a particularly revealing site for examining these interconnections. By analysing both the Greek - Aegean and Western Balkans contexts, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of externalised and multi-level border regimes. Theoretically, it advances an integrated perspective that reframes border security beyond technocratic or purely geopolitical logics, treating questions of belonging and rights as constitutive rather than residual elements of European border governance.

3. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Key theories and concepts

This article draws on three interrelated theoretical strands from critical border and security studies in order to analyse Frontex's role in southeast Europe.

The first strand is rooted in *critical approaches to border security*. Building on Didier Bigo's (2014) work on the "(in)securitization" of borders, borders are understood not as fixed territorial lines but as dynamic, performed and dispersed practices. Bigo distinguishes between different professional universes of border control (military/navy, border guards/police, and database analysts) and shows how these universes generate distinct practical senses of what "*controlling the border*" means. These practices actively construct threats, categories of suspicion and hierarchies of mobility. Complementary insights from Vaughan-Williams (2009, 2015) emphasise the spatial and temporal expansion of borders through remote control, anticipatory risk management and externalisation. In this perspective, Frontex does not simply implement a pre-given security mandate; it participates in the continuous production of border security knowledge and practice.

The second strand focuses on *identity dynamics and bordering processes*. Borders are conceptualised as intimately linked to processes of identity formation: they do not merely reflect pre-existing national or European identities but actively produce and stabilise them through practices of differentiation, othering and belonging. In the EU context, the construction of the "*migrant Other*" frequently relies on racialised, gendered and culturalised representations that contrast a threatened European self with external sources of risk (Sachseder, Stachowitsch & Binder, 2022). Securitisation theory further illuminates how mobility is framed as an existential security issue, justifying exceptional measures and the expansion of control apparatuses. In southeast Europe, these dynamics are complicated by the region's ambiguous position as both inside and outside formal EU borders, generating layered and sometimes contradictory forms of national, regional and European identification.

The third strand centres on the concept of *inclusivity*, approached through the lens of *differential inclusion*. Inclusivity is not understood as an ideal of open borders, but as the differentiated ways in which people on the move are granted, denied or conditionally afforded access to rights, protection and recognition within border regimes. Contemporary border control rarely operates through absolute exclusion; rather, it produces hierarchical forms of belonging in which some subjects are partially included under conditions of vulnerability, temporariness or surveillance (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; De Genova, 2013).

In the EU context, formal commitments to asylum, non-refoulement and the protection of vulnerable persons coexist with operational practices that generate tensions

between normative frameworks and practical outcomes. Inclusivity is therefore treated as a contested field shaped by legal frameworks, operational cultures, political priorities and the agency of migrants, civil society organisations and local communities.

3.2. Theoretical model

On the basis of these theoretical resources, the article proposes an integrated analytical model that treats *Frontex, identity dynamics and inclusivity as mutually constitutive dimensions* of border security.

In this model Frontex's operational practices (risk analysis, screening, joint operations and cooperation arrangements) actively participate in the production of identity categories and hierarchies of belonging;

These identity processes, in turn, shape the conditions under which claims to inclusivity are negotiated, constrained or enabled;

Struggles over inclusion and rights feed back into the legitimisation, contestation and reconfiguration of security practices.

Rather than viewing security, identity and inclusivity as sequential or hierarchical, the model posits them as interdependent and co-constitutive. Border security in southeast Europe is therefore understood as an assemblage in which operational logics, processes of othering and belonging, and contested forms of differential inclusion continuously interact and reshape one another (Bigo, 2014; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013).

This integrated framework allows the analysis to move beyond purely institutional or technocratic accounts of Frontex and beyond identity-focused studies that underplay the role of operational actors. It provides the conceptual tools for examining how the Agency contributes to the reframing of border security when questions of identity and inclusivity are placed at the centre of inquiry.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research paradigm

This study is situated within a *qualitative and interpretive research paradigm*, informed by critical social science. It adopts a constructivist orientation that understands border security, identity and inclusivity as socially produced and discursively mediated phenomena rather than as objective or purely technical realities. The analysis is guided by critical border studies and securitisation theory, which emphasise the productive power of practices, discourses and institutional arrangements in shaping categories of risk, belonging and rights.

4.2. Methods and techniques

The research employs a combination of the following qualitative methods and techniques:

- Critical document analysis of official Frontex reports, risk analyses, operational guidelines, working arrangements and EU policy documents;
- Systematic review and critical synthesis of secondary academic literature in the fields of critical border studies, security studies and migration governance;
- Discourse-oriented analysis of how identity categories, othering processes and claims to inclusivity are constructed in institutional and scholarly texts;

- Comparative case analysis of two key operational theatres in southeast Europe (the Greek/Aegean border and the Western Balkans route).

No primary data collection (interviews, ethnographic observation or surveys) was undertaken. The study relies on the triangulation of existing empirical research, policy documents and theoretical contributions.

4.3. Research design

The research follows a *qualitative, multi-case, interpretive design*. It combines a broad theoretical mapping of the Frontex – identity - inclusivity nexus with a focused comparative examination of two strategically selected operational contexts in southeast Europe. The design is both exploratory and analytical: it seeks to refine conceptual understanding while generating empirically grounded insights into the interplay of security practices, identity dynamics and inclusivity challenges.

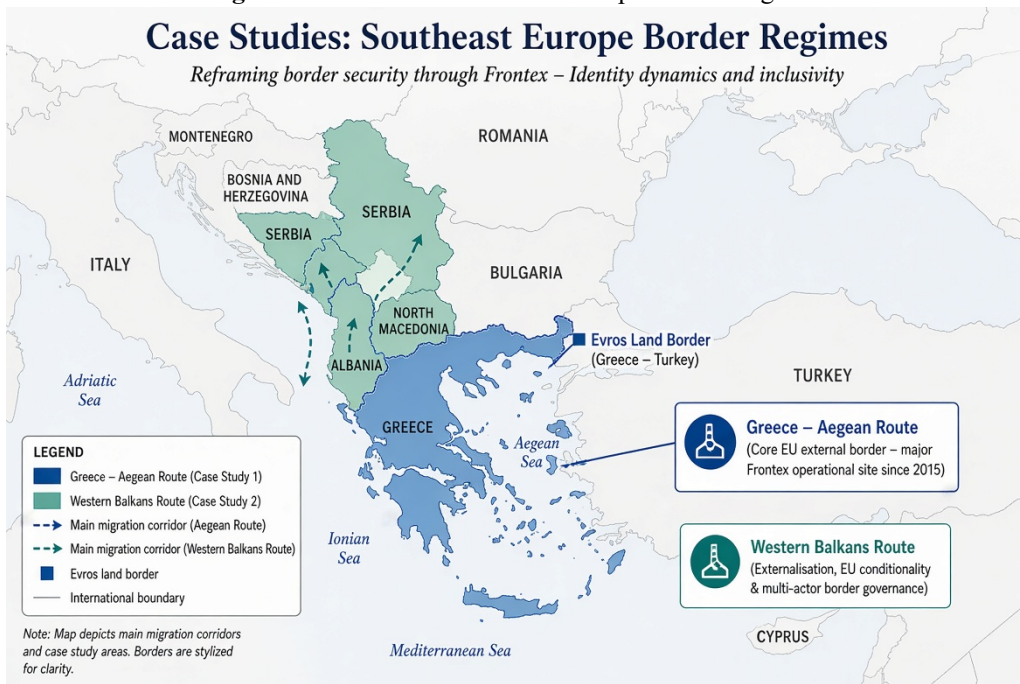
4.4. Case study

Two primary cases were selected on the basis of theoretical relevance and empirical significance:

1) *Greece – Aegean route* (including the islands and the Evros land border), representing a core EU external border and a major site of Frontex operational activity since 2015;

2) *The Western Balkans route* (with particular attention to Albania, Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina), representing a key space of externalisation, EU conditionality and multi-actor border governance beyond the formal external borders of the Union.

Figure 1. Case studies Southeast Europe Border Regimes



Source: Authors' creation

These cases were chosen because they illustrate different yet complementary configurations of Frontex engagement, identity negotiation and inclusivity challenges within the broader southeast European border regime.

4.5. Data collection and analysis

Data were collected primarily from:

- Official Frontex publications and risk analysis reports;
- EU legislative and policy documents related to the European Border and Coast Guard;
- Peer-reviewed academic literature on Frontex, critical border studies, securitisation and differential inclusion;
- Reports by civil society organisations, investigative journalists and fundamental rights bodies documenting operational practices and rights-related concerns.

Table 1. Data collection criteria

No.	Type of Source	Description	Purpose in the Research
1	Official Frontex publications and risk analysis reports	Risk Analysis Reports, operational guidelines, annual reports, situational assessments	Primary data on Frontex operational practices, risk construction and knowledge production
2	Regulations on the European Border and Coast Guard, Integrated Border Management policies, status agreements	Institutional and legal framework of Frontex mandate and external cooperation	EU legislative and policy documents
3	Critical border studies, securitisation theory, differential inclusion scholarship	Theoretical foundation and analytical lens	Peer-reviewed academic literature
4	Civil society, investigative and fundamental rights reports	Reports by NGOs, investigative journalists and fundamental rights bodies	Documentation of operational practices, rights violations and inclusivity challenges

Source: Authors' creation

The analysis proceeded through thematic coding and critical interpretation. Documents and secondary sources were examined for the ways in which they construct security, identity categories and conditions of inclusion or exclusion. Comparative

analysis across the two cases was used to identify both common patterns and context-specific variations in the interplay of the three central dimensions of the study.

4.6. Methodological limitations

The study has several important limitations. First, it relies exclusively on secondary literature, policy documents and existing empirical research rather than original fieldwork. As a result, it cannot fully capture the micro-level interactions, informal practices and subjective experiences of Frontex officers, national authorities, people on the move or local communities. Second, the availability and transparency of operational data remain limited, constraining the depth of insight into certain practices. Third, the focus on two operational theatres, while analytically productive, does not exhaust the diversity of Frontex activities across other borders. These limitations are acknowledged and are used to delimit the scope of the claims advanced.

4.7. Ethical considerations

As the research is based entirely on publicly available documents and secondary academic sources, it does not involve direct interaction with human participants and therefore raises no issues of informed consent or primary data protection. Nevertheless, ethical sensitivity has been maintained in the interpretation of materials concerning vulnerable populations and contested border practices. The analysis strives to avoid the reproduction of stigmatising or securitising representations and to treat questions of rights, vulnerability and differential inclusion with analytical care and critical reflexivity

5. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

5.1. Presentation and analysis of the empirical material

The analysis draws on a critical synthesis of Frontex official documents, EU policy texts, secondary academic literature and civil society reports. The material is examined through the integrated theoretical lens developed earlier, focusing on the interplay between operational practices, identity dynamics and inclusivity. Findings are organised around the three secondary research questions and illustrated through the two selected operational theatres: the Greek/Aegean border and the Western Balkans route.

5.2. Frontex operational practices and the production of border security knowledge

Frontex's activities in southeast Europe have evolved from limited coordination roles toward sustained operational engagement. In Greece, the Agency has been heavily involved in border surveillance, screening, debriefing, registration and situational awareness through EUROSUR, particularly on the Aegean islands and along the Evros land border. Screening materials and nationality determination practices supported by Frontex have become integral to the processing of mixed migration flows (Pollozek & Passoth, 2024).

In the Western Balkans, Frontex's role has expanded through working arrangements, status agreements, liaison officers, capacity-building projects and the deployment of joint operations on the territory of partner countries (Albania, Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina). These arrangements contribute to the diffusion of an EU border-control culture beyond the formal external borders of the Union (Sarantaki, 2024; Pavicevic, 2025).

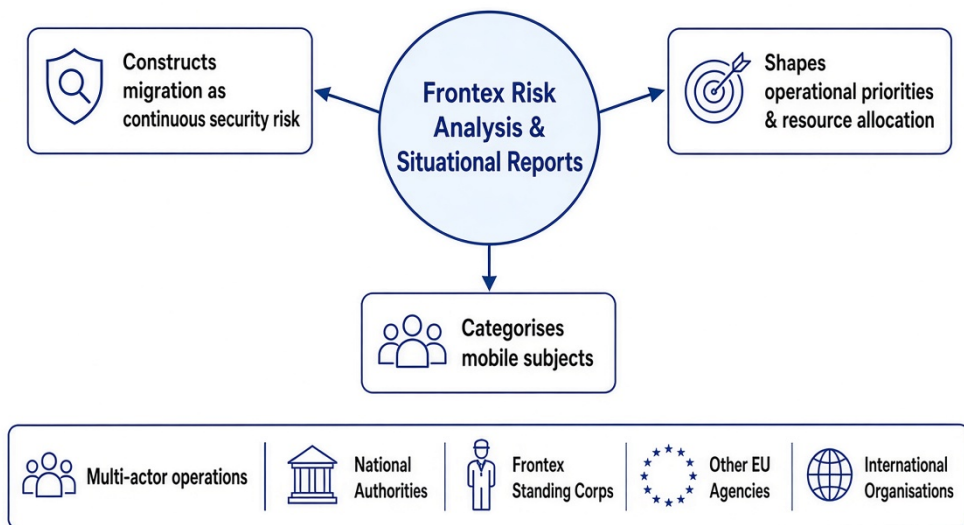
Sarantaki (2023) examines the emergence of a new European border control culture, highlighting the increasing role of Frontex in shaping border governance and securitisation practices across the EU.

Huysmans (2006) argues that migration and asylum have increasingly been framed as security issues within the European Union.

Across both contexts, risk analysis emerges as a central mechanism. Frontex risk assessments and situational reports actively construct migration as a continuous security risk requiring monitoring, anticipation and intervention. This knowledge production is not neutral: it shapes operational priorities, resource allocation and the categorisation of mobile subjects. The multi-actor nature of operations - involving national authorities, Frontex standing corps officers, other EU agencies and international organisations - creates overlapping mandates and frequently unclear lines of responsibility, complicating both effectiveness and accountability

Figure 2. Risk analysis situational reports

Risk Analysis as Central Mechanism in Frontex Operations



Overlapping mandates → unclear responsibility

Source: Authors' creation

5.3. Identity dynamics: securitisation, othering and layered belonging

The analysis confirms that Frontex-supported practices participate in processes of identity formation and othering. Risk analysis reports and operational communications frequently rely on racialised and gendered representations that differentiate a protected European self from externalised sources of risk (Sachseder, Stachowitsch & Binder, 2022). Migrants are alternatively framed as potential threats (linked to irregularity, criminality or terrorism) or as vulnerable objects of humanitarian concern, while European border guards are associated with professionalism and the defence of European space.

In Greece, these dynamics reinforce narratives of the country as a frontline Member State defending the external borders of the European Union. In the Western Balkans, identity negotiations are more complex. Cooperation with Frontex is often presented as evidence of Europeanisation and readiness for accession, yet it simultaneously raises questions of national sovereignty and local ownership. Borders in the region thus become sites where national, regional (Balkan) and European identities are performed, contested and renegotiated.

Local perceptions further complicate institutional discourses. Communities living near major migration routes experience borders not only as sites of control but also as spaces of economic opportunity, social encounter and moral negotiation. Belonging appears as a relational and contested outcome rather than a stable attribute, produced through the interaction of institutional regimes, security infrastructures and everyday practices.

5.4. Inclusivity challenges and differential inclusion

Formal commitments to asylum, non-refoulement and the protection of vulnerable persons coexist with significant practical constraints. In both the Aegean and Western Balkans contexts, civil society organisations and independent monitors have documented obstacles to effective access to asylum procedures, including physical barriers, deterrent practices, pushbacks and the rapid removal of persons before protection needs can be adequately assessed.

Vulnerability assessments are frequently constrained by time pressure, limited specialised staff and the prioritisation of security and identification tasks. The result is a regime of *differential inclusion*: rights are neither fully granted nor fully denied, but selectively distributed according to administrative categories, nationality, gender, age and perceived deservingness (Pollozek & Passoth, 2024). Screening and registration procedures supported by Frontex participate in this sorting process, even when final decisions rest with national authorities.

Civil society actors play a crucial counterbalancing role by documenting rights violations, providing legal assistance and advocating protection-sensitive approaches. However, they face increasing restrictions, including limited access to operational areas and, in some cases, the criminalisation of assistance. The interaction between Frontex, national authorities and civil society thus constitutes a key arena in which the meaning of inclusivity is continuously negotiated.

Table 2. The interaction between Frontex, national authorities and civil society

Aspect	Role / Contribution of Civil Society	Challenges Faced
Documentation	Documenting rights violations	Limited access to operational areas
Legal support	Providing legal assistance	Increasing restrictions
Advocacy	Advocating protection-sensitive approaches	Criminalisation of assistance (in some cases)
Overall interaction	Key arena for negotiating the meaning of inclusivity	Interaction with Frontex and national authorities

Source: Authors' creation

5.5. Comparative insights from the case studies

Comparing the Greek - Aegean and Western Balkans cases reveals both common patterns and important contextual differences.

In both settings, Frontex operates as a key node in a multi-level border regime that combines national, European and externalised elements. Risk analysis, screening and joint operational cultures travel across these spaces, contributing to a degree of standardisation in how mobility is categorised and managed.

Identity dynamics, however, take distinct forms. In Greece, the emphasis lies on the defence of the EU's external border and the country's role as a frontline state. In the Western Balkans, identity negotiations revolve more strongly around the tension between EU-oriented Europeanisation and national sovereignty, as well as around the region's ambiguous position as both inside and outside the European security space.

Inclusivity challenges are present in both contexts, yet the legal and institutional frameworks differ. Greece operates under full EU asylum and fundamental rights obligations, while Western Balkan partners are bound by a combination of national law, international obligations and EU conditionality linked to accession processes. Across both cases, the interplay of operational logic, identity processes and inclusivity deficits points to the need for a reframed understanding of border security—one that treats rights, belonging and differential inclusion as constitutive rather than secondary dimensions of border governance.

Figure 3. Comparative insights Greece – Aegean vs. Western Balkans

Comparative Insights: Greece–Aegean vs Western Balkans

	Greece – Aegean Route	Western Balkans Route
 1) Frontex Role	 Key node in multi-level border regime (national + European + externalised).	 Key node in multi-level border regime (national + European + externalised).
 2) Identity Dynamics	 Defence of EU external border Frontline Member State.	 Europeanisation vs national sovereignty / Ambiguous inside-outside position.
 3) Inclusivity Framework	 Full EU asylum & fundamental rights obligations.	 National law + international obligations + EU conditionality.



Common pattern: Standardisation of risk analysis, screening and operational cultures.

Source: Authors' creation

6. DISCUSSION

6.1. Interpretation of the results

The findings demonstrate that Frontex cannot be adequately understood solely as a technical or coordinating instrument of border control. In southeast Europe, the Agency operates at the intersection of three interdependent dimensions: operational security practices, identity dynamics, and struggles over inclusivity. These dimensions mutually shape one another.

Frontex's risk analysis, screening procedures, joint operations and cooperation arrangements actively participate in the production of identity categories. Through the classification of mobile subjects according to nationality, risk profiles and vulnerability assessments, the Agency contributes to processes of othering that reinforce distinctions between a protected European self and external sources of insecurity. At the same time, the diffusion of an EU border-control culture into the Western Balkans reshapes regional and national identity negotiations, linking Europeanisation with security alignment.

Inclusivity is not external to these processes. The same operational mechanisms that generate security knowledge and identity boundaries also determine the conditions under which people on the move can access asylum, protection and recognition. Differential inclusion emerges as the dominant mode of governing mobility: rights are neither fully granted nor fully denied, but selectively distributed according to administrative categories and operational priorities. The result is a border regime in which security, identity and inclusivity are co-constituted rather than sequential or hierarchical.

6.2. Comparison with the existing literature

The results both confirm and extend key insights from critical border studies. Consistent with Bigo's (2014) analysis of (in)securitization practices, the findings show that Frontex participates in the continuous production of border security knowledge rather than merely implementing a pre-given mandate. The observed role of risk analysis and screening in constructing categories of suspicion and mobility aligns with earlier work on the productive power of border control (Vaughan-Williams, 2015; Pollozek & Passoth, 2024).

The study also corroborates research on the racialised and gendered dimensions of Frontex's representational regimes (Sachse, Stachowitsch & Binder, 2022). However, it goes further by systematically linking these identity processes to the practical conditions of inclusivity. While previous literature has extensively analysed either securitisation and othering or rights deficits and differential inclusion, fewer studies have examined their mutual constitution within the same analytical framework.

In relation to the southeast European context, the findings support existing accounts of externalisation and the transformation of the Western Balkans into a buffer zone (Sarantaki, 2024; Pavicevic, 2025). At the same time, they highlight the additional complexity introduced by enlargement conditionality and layered identity negotiations, dimensions that remain less developed in studies focused primarily on core EU Member States or maritime routes.

6.3. Theoretical and practical implications

Theoretically, the analysis advances an integrated framework that treats Frontex, identity dynamics and inclusivity as mutually constitutive. This approach moves beyond institutionalist or purely legal analyses of the Agency and beyond identity-focused studies that underplay the role of operational actors. It underscores the value of combining insights from critical security studies, border studies and scholarship on differential inclusion.

Practically, the findings carry several implications for policy and operational practice. First, fundamental rights and inclusivity considerations need to be integrated into the design and evaluation of operations from the outset, rather than treated as subsequent compliance checks. This requires stronger independent monitoring, clearer lines of accountability in multi-actor operations, and the operational prioritisation of effective access to asylum procedures.

Second, cooperation with third countries in southeast Europe should move beyond a predominantly security-oriented logic. Capacity-building and joint operations need to be accompanied by robust safeguards for protection-sensitive migration management, including systematic vulnerability assessment, legal assistance and meaningful engagement with civil society.

Third, greater transparency regarding operational data, serious incident reporting and the practical implementation of fundamental rights obligations is essential. Without improved transparency, the gap between formal commitments and operational realities is likely to persist.

Finally, policy debates would benefit from recognising the identity effects of current practices. Securitising discourses and othering representations not only shape public perceptions but also influence the political feasibility of more inclusive approaches.

6.4. Answers to the research questions

In response to the central research question - how Frontex contributes to the reframing of border security in southeast Europe when identity dynamics and inclusivity are placed at the centre of analysis - the study shows that the Agency functions as a key site where security practices, identity processes and struggles over inclusion are continuously negotiated and reconfigured.

Regarding the first secondary question, Frontex's operational practices, risk analyses and cooperation arrangements both shape and are shaped by identity dynamics. They participate in the construction of the "*migrant Other*," reinforce distinctions between European and non-European subjectivities, and intersect with national and regional identity negotiations in the Western Balkans.

Regarding the second secondary question, claims to inclusivity are negotiated under significant constraints. While formal rights frameworks exist, operational realities—screening pressures, pushbacks, limited vulnerability assessment and blurred accountability—produce differential inclusion rather than consistent access to protection.

Regarding the third secondary question, the theoretical implication is the need for an integrated analytical framework that treats security, identity and inclusivity as co-constitutive. The policy implication is that a more comprehensive and rights-aware approach to border governance requires embedding protection considerations into operational design, strengthening accountability and transparency, and recognising the identity effects of current practices.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has examined the reframing of border security in southeast Europe through the interconnected lenses of Frontex, identity dynamics and inclusivity. The analysis yields three central findings.

First, Frontex functions as more than a coordinating or technical agency. Through its risk analysis, screening practices, joint operations and cooperation arrangements with third countries, it actively participates in the production of security knowledge, the

categorisation of mobile subjects and the diffusion of an EU border-control culture beyond the formal external borders of the Union. In both the Greek - Aegean and Western Balkans contexts, the Agency operates as a key node in a multi-level and increasingly externalised border regime.

Second, identity dynamics are constitutive of border security rather than secondary to it. Securitising discourses and operational practices generate and stabilise distinctions between a protected European self and racialised, gendered or culturally marked others. In southeast Europe these processes intersect with national and regional identity negotiations, particularly in candidate and potential candidate countries where cooperation with Frontex is linked to Europeanisation and accession prospects. Borders thereby become sites where multiple layers of belonging - national, regional and European - are performed and contested.

Third, inclusivity remains a persistent and structurally constrained challenge. Formal commitments to asylum access, fundamental rights and the protection of vulnerable persons coexist with operational practices that produce differential inclusion, limited access to procedures and accountability gaps. The multi-actor nature of border management in the region complicates responsibility and monitoring, leaving significant discrepancies between normative frameworks and lived outcomes at the border.

Collectively, these findings support the argument that an adequate understanding of contemporary border security requires the simultaneous analysis of operational actors such as Frontex, the identity processes they participate in, and the conditions of inclusion and exclusion they help to generate.

The article makes three main original contributions.

Theoretically, it advances an integrated analytical framework that treats Frontex, identity dynamics and inclusivity as mutually constitutive rather than analytically separate domains. This approach moves beyond institutionalist or purely legal analyses of the Agency and beyond identity-focused studies that underplay the role of operational actors.

Empirically, the focus on southeast Europe highlights the importance of examining border regimes in spaces that are simultaneously inside and outside formal EU membership. The region's position as an external border zone, a transit corridor and a site of enlargement conditionality reveals dynamics of externalisation, Europeanisation and identity negotiation that are less visible in analyses confined to core Member States.

Conceptually, the study underscores the value of combining insights from critical security studies, border studies and scholarship on differential inclusion. By tracing how security practices produce identity effects and shape the conditions of inclusion, it offers a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary European border governance.

The present study has several limitations. It relies primarily on secondary literature, policy documents and existing empirical research rather than original fieldwork. While this approach allows for a broad synthetic analysis, it cannot fully capture the micro-level interactions, informal practices and subjective experiences of the diverse actors involved in border management - Frontex officers, national border authorities, people on the move and local communities.

Additionally, the focus on southeast Europe, while analytically productive, leaves open the question of how comparable dynamics unfold in other operational theatres, such as the Central Mediterranean or the eastern land borders. The limited transparency of certain operational data further constrains the depth of insight into specific practices.

Future research would benefit from multi-sited ethnographic work that includes Frontex officers, national border authorities, people on the move and local communities. Such research could illuminate the informal practices and everyday negotiations that remain less visible in document-based analysis.

Comparative studies across different Frontex operational areas would further test and refine the integrated framework proposed here. Longitudinal research examining the evolving effects of status agreements and joint operations in the Western Balkans would also be valuable, particularly as the Agency's extraterritorial presence continues to expand.

Finally, greater attention to the perspectives and agency of people on the move themselves would enrich understandings of how identity and inclusivity are experienced and contested from below.

On the basis of the analysis, three broad policy orientations can be suggested.

First, fundamental rights and protection-sensitive approaches should be embedded more systematically into the design, implementation and evaluation of Frontex operations. This includes stronger independent monitoring, clearer accountability mechanisms in multi-actor settings, and the operational prioritisation of effective access to asylum procedures.

Second, cooperation with Western Balkan partners should balance security objectives with robust safeguards for inclusivity. Capacity-building and joint operations ought to be accompanied by measurable protection benchmarks, systematic vulnerability assessment and meaningful engagement with civil society organisations.

Third, greater transparency regarding operational practices, serious incident reporting and the practical application of fundamental rights standards is necessary to enable effective parliamentary, judicial and public scrutiny. Without improved transparency, the gap between formal commitments and operational realities is likely to persist.

In conclusion, reframing border security through the nexus of Frontex, identity dynamics and inclusivity offer both an analytical and a practical pathway toward a more comprehensive and rights-aware approach to European border governance in southeast Europe and beyond.

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II. SOCIETAL AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

Maria ENACHI ⇔ *AI-driven Political Communication and its Implications for Democratic Resilience in the Republic of Moldova: Consequences for EU Accession Conditionality*

Pavlo MOLOCHKO ⇔ *The Impact of Public Opinion on the EU Security Architecture: from Institutional Integration to Societal Resilience*

Natalia PUTINĂ ⇔ *Societal Cohesion as a Foundation of Societal Resilience: Evidence from the Republic of Moldova*

Cristian BENȚE ⇔ *Framing Societal Security in European Border Regions: Cohesion, Resilience and Multi-level Governance*

Victoria BEVZIUC ⇔ *The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine: Institutional Policies, Response Capacities and the Evolution of Information Resilience in the Regional Context*

AI-DRIVEN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: CONSEQUENCES FOR EU ACCESSION CONDITIONALITY

*Maria ENACHI**

Abstract. *This article examines how artificial intelligence is changing political communication in the Republic of Moldova and why these changes matter for the country's path towards the European Union. Rather than focusing on artificial intelligence as a technological innovation, the paper examines its effects on the information environment and on democratic resilience. Moldova offers an interesting case because its EU accession process is taking place amid rapid digital transformation and persistent foreign interference in information.*

The article argues that artificial intelligence does not create new democratic vulnerabilities on its own. Instead, it reinforces existing ones by making information manipulation easier to produce, distribute, and adapt to different audiences. As a result, democratic resilience becomes an important link between AI-driven political communication and EU accession. The paper suggests that artificial intelligence matters for the enlargement process not because it is assessed directly by the European Union, but because it can affect the democratic conditions on which accession depends.

Keywords: *Artificial intelligence, Political communication, Democratic resilience, EU enlargement, Hybrid threats, Algorithmic propaganda.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The way political information circulates today is not the same as it was even a decade ago. Digital platforms have changed who produces information, how fast it moves, and how easily it reaches different audiences. At first, digitalization was primarily associated with broader access to information and a more diverse public sphere. With the rapid development of artificial intelligence, however, political communication has entered a different stage (Castells, 2010).

One important change is that political information no longer reaches every user in the same way. What people see online increasingly depends on recommendation systems that select and prioritize content before it even appears on their screen. Artificial intelligence is becoming part of that process, helping platforms personalize information and increase the visibility of certain political messages. As a result, platforms influence not only how information spreads, but also what people are likely to see in the first place (Woolley & Howard, 2016).

This transformation has also changed the way political communication is studied. Recent research no longer focuses only on political messages or the communication strategies of political actors. Instead, increasing attention is paid to the algorithmic

* PhD candidate at the Doctoral School of International Relations and European Studies at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. E-mail: enachimarie@gmail.com.

systems that shape how information reaches the public and how citizens interact with it. In this context, the concept of computational propaganda explains how algorithms, automated systems, and large volumes of data can be used to influence public opinion systematically. Creating convincing political content has become much easier in recent years. Generative AI can produce large amounts of text, images, and other synthetic material in a matter of seconds, while also adapting that content to different audiences. As a result, distinguishing authentic information from AI-generated content is becoming increasingly difficult (Woolley & Howard, 2018).

Recent studies suggest that technology alone does not explain political change. The effects of algorithms vary depending on the information environment, the strength of democratic institutions, and the broader political context in which they operate (Guess et al., 2023; González-Bailón et al., 2023). Artificial intelligence therefore should not be viewed as the source of democratic vulnerabilities. Instead, it tends to reinforce existing weaknesses.

This is where the concept of democratic resilience becomes particularly useful. Recent research describes resilience as an ongoing process rather than a fixed feature of a democratic system. It reflects the ability of institutions and society to adapt, respond, and recover when democratic processes come under pressure (Boese et al., 2021; Merkel & Lührmann, 2021). Resilience depends not only on the strength of democratic institutions but also on the quality of the information environment in which they operate. In this context, limiting the effects of disinformation, preserving information pluralism, and maintaining public trust have become essential elements of democratic resilience in an increasingly AI-driven information environment (Humprecht, Esser & Van Aelst, 2020).

For countries seeking membership in the European Union, these developments go beyond technological change and have direct implications for the accession process. The literature on Europeanization and EU conditionality shows that enlargement is not limited to the formal adoption of the *acquis communautaire*. It also requires the development of institutions capable of adopting, protecting, and promoting the democratic values on which the European Union is founded (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004; Grabbe, 2006).

Today, this process is taking place in a rapidly changing digital environment. As digital transformation accelerates and information manipulation becomes more sophisticated, issues such as good governance, media pluralism, and the integrity of the information environment are becoming increasingly important in assessing the preparedness of candidate countries. In this context, AI-driven political communication should not be viewed only as a technological challenge. It should also be understood as a factor that may indirectly influence a country's ability to meet the political requirements of EU accession.

The Republic of Moldova offers a useful case for examining this relationship. The country obtained EU candidate status in 2022, and accession negotiations began amid rapid digital transformation, rising geopolitical tensions, and major developments in the European framework for regulating digital platforms and protecting the information environment. At the same time, reports from European institutions and international organizations continue to show that Moldova remains vulnerable to disinformation, foreign interference in information, and attempts to weaken public trust in democratic institutions (OSCE PA, 2025). These challenges have made information resilience an increasingly important part of the country's path towards European Union membership (European Commission, 2025; EEAS, 2025).

Against this background, the Republic of Moldova offers an opportunity to examine how emerging technologies interact with existing democratic vulnerabilities in a country that is simultaneously pursuing democratic consolidation and EU accession. Rather than viewing artificial intelligence as an isolated technological development, the Moldovan case illustrates how its effects depend on the political, institutional, and information environment in which these technologies are introduced.

Although the relationship between artificial intelligence and political communication, the impact of disinformation on democracy, and the mechanisms of EU conditionality have all been widely discussed in the literature, the links among these areas remain underexplored. In particular, limited attention has been paid to the way AI-driven political communication may indirectly affect the EU accession process by reshaping the information environment and influencing the democratic resilience of candidate countries.

Against this background, this article examines how AI-driven political communication exposes structural vulnerabilities in the Republic of Moldova's democratic resilience and why these developments matter for EU accession conditionality. It argues that the relationship between artificial intelligence and the accession process is not direct. Instead, AI influences the information environment, which in turn shapes democratic resilience and affects the ability of democratic institutions to respond to emerging digital challenges. By connecting these different strands of literature, the article brings together AI-driven political communication, the information environment, democratic resilience, and EU accession conditionality within a single analytical perspective.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The growing role of artificial intelligence in political communication has led to the development of several related areas of research. Some studies focus on the transformation of political communication through digital platforms, while others examine computational propaganda, algorithmic amplification, synthetic content, and the effects of disinformation on democratic systems. At the same time, a separate body of literature analyses democratic resilience and the ability of institutions and societies to respond to political and informational pressure. These discussions are also relevant to the literature on European Union enlargement, where democratic governance and institutional capacity remain important conditions for accession. However, the relationship between these areas has not yet been examined in a sufficiently integrated manner.

The transformation of political communication began before the recent development of generative artificial intelligence. Castells (2010) showed that digital communication changed the relationship between political actors, traditional media, and the public by creating a more decentralized information environment. Digital platforms expanded access to political information, but they also gained an increasingly important role in deciding how that information circulates. Gillespie (2014) explains that algorithms are not neutral systems because they influence what content becomes visible, how it is classified, and which messages are presented to users. Political communication therefore depends not only on the content produced by political actors, but also on the digital systems that organize and distribute it.

The concept of computational propaganda offers a more specific explanation of how these systems can be used for political influence. Woolley and Howard (2016; 2018)

describe computational propaganda as the use of algorithms, automation, and data to shape public opinion through digital platforms. Compared with traditional propaganda, this form of communication allows messages to be produced and distributed on a much larger scale. It also makes it possible to adapt content to different groups of users. As a result, political influence increasingly depends on the interaction between political messages, automated systems, user data, and the algorithms that determine the visibility of online content.

Artificial intelligence has expanded these possibilities. Generative AI can produce text, images, audio, and video within a short period of time, reducing the resources required to create political content. These tools can also adapt messages to different audiences and make influence operations easier to organize. In this context, AI-driven political communication should not be understood only as the use of artificial intelligence to create political messages. It also includes the role of algorithms in selecting, prioritizing, and amplifying that content.

Algorithmic amplification is particularly important because political messages do not need to reach every user to have an impact. Recommendation systems can increase the visibility of content that is more likely to attract attention and generate interaction. Gillespie (2018) shows that platforms have become important actors in the information environment because their decisions influence what users see and how political information is organized. Bennett and Livingston (2018) similarly argue that the contemporary information environment is increasingly fragmented, allowing misleading narratives to circulate alongside verified information. Under these conditions, artificial intelligence can accelerate the distribution of manipulative content and make it more difficult to distinguish between authentic and synthetic information.

However, the literature also warns against presenting algorithms or artificial intelligence as independent causes of political polarization or democratic decline. Guess et al. (2023) and González-Bailón et al. (2023) show that the relationship between digital platforms and political outcomes is more complex than it is sometimes presented. The effects of digital communication depend on existing political divisions, media structures, patterns of platform use, and the strength of democratic institutions. Artificial intelligence does not affect every society in the same way. Rather than creating entirely new political vulnerabilities, it often interacts with and reinforces weaknesses that already exist.

This perspective connects the literature on AI-driven political communication with research on democratic resilience. Democratic resilience generally refers to the ability of democratic institutions and societies to resist, respond to, and recover from internal or external pressure. Merkel and Lührmann (2021) describe resilience as a dynamic process rather than a permanent characteristic of democratic systems. Similarly, Boese et al. (2021) emphasize that democratic resilience depends both on the capacity to prevent democratic decline and on the ability to respond when democratic institutions come under pressure.

The information environment represents an important part of this process. Democratic institutions cannot function effectively when citizens have limited access to reliable information, when public trust is weakened, or when political communication is dominated by manipulative narratives. Humprecht, Esser, and Van Aelst (2020) demonstrate that resilience to disinformation depends on several factors, including the media environment, political polarization, public trust, and the capacity of citizens to evaluate information. This means that information resilience cannot be separated from

democratic resilience. The ability to identify and respond to manipulation has become increasingly important for the functioning of democratic systems.

A separate body of literature examines the role of conditionality in the European Union enlargement process. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004) explain EU conditionality as a mechanism through which candidate countries adopt European rules and institutional standards in exchange for the benefits associated with membership. Grabbe (2006) further shows that the influence of the European Union extends beyond formal legislative alignment. Candidate countries must also demonstrate that they have the institutional capacity to implement reforms and maintain democratic standards over time.

Traditionally, this literature has focused on the rule of law, institutional reform, administrative capacity, and the adoption of the *acquis communautaire*. Nevertheless, the conditions in which democratic institutions operate are changing. The Digital Services Act, the Digital Markets Act, the Artificial Intelligence Act, the European Democracy Action Plan, and the Code of Practice on Disinformation show that the European Union increasingly treats the protection of the information environment as part of democratic governance (European Commission, 2020; European Commission, 2022; European Union, 2024). These instruments are not separate accession criteria. However, they reflect the development of European standards concerning digital governance, platform responsibility, information integrity, and institutional resilience.

The literature on EU conditionality has not yet fully addressed the implications of AI-driven political communication for candidate countries. Similarly, research on artificial intelligence and democracy has focused mainly on established democracies, electoral communication, platform governance, and the spread of synthetic content. Less attention has been paid to countries where digital transformation, democratic consolidation, geopolitical pressure, and European integration are taking place simultaneously.

The Republic of Moldova is particularly relevant in this context. Existing reports show that the country continues to face foreign information interference, political polarization, limited public trust, and persistent disinformation campaigns (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, 2024; EEAS, 2024; Freedom House, 2024). Nevertheless, these vulnerabilities are usually examined as information-security or democratic-governance problems. Their relationship with artificial intelligence and EU accession conditionality remains insufficiently explored.

This article addresses this gap by connecting three bodies of literature that are generally analysed separately: AI-driven political communication, democratic resilience, and EU accession conditionality. It does not suggest that artificial intelligence represents a new or independent condition for EU membership. Instead, it examines how AI-driven political communication can reshape the information environment, reinforce existing democratic vulnerabilities, and influence the conditions in which accession-related reforms are implemented. Democratic resilience therefore serves as the analytical link between technological change and the political requirements of European integration.

3. METHODOLOGY

This article uses a qualitative research design based on a single-case study of the Republic of Moldova. The analysis is guided by the following research question: how does AI-driven political communication interact with existing vulnerabilities in Moldova's information environment, and why does this relationship matter for

democratic resilience and EU accession conditionality? The purpose is not to measure the direct effect of artificial intelligence on the accession process. Instead, the study seeks to identify and explain the mechanisms through which AI-driven political communication may indirectly influence the democratic conditions on which accession depends.

The Republic of Moldova was selected because it brings together several processes that are relevant to this research. The country is undergoing rapid digital transformation while also pursuing democratic consolidation and European Union membership. At the same time, it remains exposed to foreign information interference, political polarization, disinformation, and pressure on public trust in democratic institutions. Moldova therefore provides a relevant case for examining how emerging technologies interact with existing political and informational vulnerabilities in a candidate country.

The study is based on qualitative document analysis. Two main categories of sources are examined. The first category consists of academic literature on political communication, computational propaganda, algorithmic amplification, artificial intelligence, democratic resilience, Europeanization, and EU accession conditionality. This literature provides the conceptual basis for explaining the relationship between technological change, the information environment, and democratic governance.

The second category includes official reports, policy documents, strategies, and assessments published by the European Commission, the European External Action Service, the European Parliament, the OECD, UNESCO, the OSCE, Freedom House, and the authorities of the Republic of Moldova. These documents provide information about Moldova's democratic development, information environment, digital transformation, foreign information interference, and progress towards EU membership. The analysis gives priority to peer-reviewed academic research and official institutional documents. Sources were selected according to their relevance to the research question, their institutional or academic credibility, and their direct contribution to at least one of the main dimensions of the study.

The analysis follows a theory-guided thematic approach. The documents were examined according to four main themes. The first concerns the mechanisms of AI-driven political communication, including automated content production, synthetic media, personalization, and algorithmic amplification. The second concerns structural vulnerabilities within Moldova's information environment, such as political polarization, limited digital literacy, foreign information interference, and low public trust. The third theme examines the implications of these vulnerabilities for democratic and information resilience. The final theme concerns the relevance of these developments for EU accession conditionality and the capacity of Moldova to implement and sustain democratic reforms.

These themes are connected through a single analytical chain. Artificial intelligence changes how political content is created, distributed, and amplified. These changes influence the information environment by making manipulative content faster to produce, easier to adapt, and more difficult to identify. The characteristics of the information environment then affect democratic resilience, particularly public trust, information pluralism, and the capacity of institutions to respond to manipulation. Because these elements are relevant to democratic governance, they may also influence Moldova's ability to meet and maintain the political standards associated with EU accession.

The study does not treat this relationship as a direct causal link between artificial intelligence and the outcome of accession negotiations. EU institutions do not assess the existence or use of artificial intelligence as an independent accession criterion. The analysis instead focuses on the indirect relationship between AI-driven political communication and the democratic conditions evaluated during the accession process.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relies on academic literature and institutional documents and does not include interviews, surveys, or original quantitative data. Second, direct empirical evidence concerning the specific impact of generative artificial intelligence in the Republic of Moldova remains limited. Many available reports examine disinformation and foreign information interference more broadly without clearly separating AI-generated content from other forms of digital manipulation. Finally, artificial intelligence is developing rapidly, which means that both the technologies and the institutional responses to them continue to change. For these reasons, the article provides a mechanism-based interpretation of the relationship between AI-driven political communication, democratic resilience, and EU accession conditionality rather than a quantitative assessment of its effects.

4. AI-DRIVEN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

Political communication has changed considerably with the expansion of digital platforms and the growing use of artificial intelligence. In the past, political visibility depended mainly on traditional media and political actors. Today, digital platforms increasingly influence what information reaches users, how it is prioritized, and how widely it circulates online. Recommendation algorithms personalize content according to users' interests and online behaviour, giving platforms a much more active role in shaping political communication than in previous stages of digitalization (Smith & Doe, 2022). AI-driven political communication therefore reflects more than the adoption of new technologies. It represents a broader transformation of the information environment, where algorithms increasingly influence the visibility, distribution, and amplification of political messages (Castells, 2010; Gillespie, 2014; Woolley & Howard, 2016).

One of the concepts most often used to explain this transformation is computational propaganda. Woolley and Howard (2018) describe it as the use of algorithms, automation, and data analysis to influence public opinion through digital platforms. Unlike traditional propaganda, which generally seeks to reach the largest possible audience with the same message, computational propaganda allows political actors to adapt and distribute content to specific groups of users (Howard et al., 2023). Political influence therefore depends not only on the message itself but also on the digital systems that determine how visible that message becomes and how widely it spreads.

Generative artificial intelligence has further expanded these possibilities. AI systems can now produce large amounts of text, images, audio, and video within seconds, while recommendation algorithms continuously prioritize the content most likely to attract users' attention. Compared with earlier stages of digital communication, these technologies make influence campaigns faster, less expensive, and much easier to scale, allowing both state and non-state actors to reach different audiences with highly personalized content (Jungherr, 2023; Woolley & Howard, 2018; Gillespie, 2018).

Recent research suggests that the biggest challenge is not false information itself. The real issue is how algorithms decide what people see online. By promoting some messages over others, they shape the information people are exposed to every day. This

process, known as algorithmic amplification, can strengthen echo chambers, deepen political polarization, and contribute to a more fragmented information environment (Gillespie, 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

However, the literature also shows that these effects should not be overstated. Algorithms do not affect every society in the same way. Their impact depends on factors such as the political context, digital literacy, and the resilience of democratic institutions (Guess et al., 2023; González-Bailón et al., 2023). For this reason, it is more accurate to see algorithms as tools that reinforce existing vulnerabilities rather than create new ones.

This perspective is particularly important for understanding democratic resilience. Rather than seeing declining democratic resilience as a direct consequence of artificial intelligence, it should be understood as the result of the interaction between new technologies and existing vulnerabilities within the information environment. In societies where public trust in institutions is low, the media landscape is fragmented. Foreign information interference is already present, AI can accelerate the spread of manipulative content and make it more difficult for both institutions and citizens to respond effectively to disinformation campaigns (Humprecht, Esser & Van Aelst, 2020; Boese et al., 2021). In this sense, artificial intelligence is not the source of democratic vulnerabilities. Instead, it acts as a multiplier, reinforcing existing weaknesses in the information environment.

The Republic of Moldova is a particularly relevant case for examining these developments. The country's digital transformation has taken place alongside a broader process of democratic consolidation and closer integration with the European Union. (Freedom House, 2020) While digitalization has expanded access to information and created new opportunities for public engagement, it has also made it easier for manipulative content to spread online and for foreign actors to exploit existing weaknesses in the information environment. (Boțan et al., n.d.) Recent assessments by the European Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS), and Freedom House show that Moldova continues to face persistent disinformation campaigns, particularly online. These campaigns seek to weaken public trust in state institutions, deepen political polarization, and challenge the country's European path (European Commission, 2024; EEAS, 2024; Freedom House, 2024).

These vulnerabilities existed long before the rise of artificial intelligence. However, new technologies have made it much easier for both state and non-state actors to carry out information operations on a much larger scale. AI tools can quickly generate large amounts of content tailored to different audiences, automate the distribution of political messages, and create synthetic images, videos, and audio that appear credible. As a result, influence campaigns have become faster, cheaper, and more effective, making it easier to exploit existing weaknesses in the information environment (Howard, Woolley & Calo, 2018; OECD, 2024).

In the Republic of Moldova, the impact of these developments is shaped by the country's information environment. Political polarization, relatively low levels of digital literacy, the widespread use of social media as a source of information, and continued exposure to foreign information narratives create favorable conditions for the spread of manipulative content. In this context, artificial intelligence does not create entirely new vulnerabilities. Instead, it accelerates and reinforces existing ones by making influence operations faster, more targeted, and easier to scale. As a result, the main challenge for the Republic of Moldova is not the technology itself but its ability to strengthen both institutional and informational resilience to reduce the impact of AI-driven political communication.

These developments are also changing the way we think about the EU accession process. Traditionally, EU conditionality has been associated with the adoption of the *acquis communautaire*, the rule of law, and the administrative capacity of candidate countries (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004; Grabbe, 2006). However, recent developments in the digital environment show that democratic resilience can no longer be assessed only through legal or institutional reforms. A country's ability to protect its information environment, respond to information manipulation, and deal with digital threats is becoming an increasingly important part of democratic resilience and, consequently, of the EU accession process (European Commission, 2024; European Parliament, 2024).

This shift is also evident in the European Union's recent approach to digital governance and the fight against disinformation. The adoption of the Digital Services Act (DSA), the Digital Markets Act (DMA), and the Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act), together with initiatives such as the Code of Practice on Disinformation and the European Democracy Action Plan, shows that protecting the information environment is increasingly seen as essential for the functioning of democratic societies (European Commission, 2020; European Commission, 2022; European Union, 2024). Although these initiatives are not formal accession criteria, they reflect the direction in which European standards on democratic governance, digital governance, and democratic resilience are evolving, including for candidate countries.

From this perspective, the impact of AI-driven political communication on the EU accession process is indirect. The European Union does not assess artificial intelligence as a technology. Instead, it evaluates whether democratic institutions can manage the challenges that come with their use. The key issue is therefore not the existence of AI itself, but its potential to affect information pluralism, public trust in democratic institutions, society's resilience to information manipulation, and the ability of public authorities to respond effectively to these challenges. In other words, artificial intelligence matters for EU conditionality not because it is assessed directly, but because it can influence the democratic standards that the European Union expects candidate countries to meet during the accession process.

In the Republic of Moldova, this relationship is particularly evident as two processes unfold simultaneously: the country's EU accession and the rapid development of AI-driven political communication. On the one hand, the reforms linked to EU accession aim to strengthen democratic institutions, improve transparency, and align national legislation with European standards. On the other hand, artificial intelligence is creating new opportunities for influence operations and disinformation campaigns, placing additional pressure on an information environment that is already vulnerable. (Romanishyn et al., 2025) As a result, democratic resilience is no longer only a prerequisite for democratic development. It has also become an important factor shaping the credibility and long-term sustainability of Moldova's European integration process.

Taken together, these developments show that AI-driven political communication, democratic resilience, and EU conditionality cannot be analyzed separately. Artificial intelligence is changing the way political information is created and shared. These changes shape the information environment, influence public trust and information pluralism, and affect society's ability to respond to manipulation. At the same time, these are all areas that matter for the European Union when assessing the progress of candidate countries.

From this perspective, AI-driven political communication is more than a technological or cybersecurity challenge. It also has broader implications for democratic governance, as it can shape the conditions that support democratic resilience and, ultimately, a country's path towards EU membership.

5. AI-DRIVEN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: IMPLICATIONS FOR EU ACCESSION CONDITIONALITY

The Republic of Moldova is one of the most relevant cases for examining the relationship between AI-driven political communication, democratic resilience, and the country's path towards the European Union. In recent years, Moldova's EU accession process has coincided with rapid digital transformation and growing competition in the online information space. As a result, traditional challenges to democratic consolidation are now reinforced by the new opportunities that artificial intelligence offers to create, distribute, and adapt political content. This makes Moldova a useful case for understanding how new technologies interact with existing democratic vulnerabilities and influence democratic institutions' ability to respond to them (European Commission, 2024; Freedom House, 2024).

One of the main vulnerabilities highlighted in the literature is the nature of Moldova's information environment. Studies describe it as highly fragmented, marked by political polarization, varying levels of trust in news sources, and ongoing exposure to foreign information manipulation (Frătilă, 2024; EEAS, 2024). In this context, digital platforms have become the primary space for sharing and consuming political information. As a result, algorithms play an increasingly important role in determining which political messages people see and how widely they spread.

Artificial intelligence is changing this dynamic by making political communication more automated and more personalized. AI tools can quickly generate synthetic content, automate the distribution of political messages, and tailor them to different audiences. This allows influence operations to reach people more efficiently than was possible during earlier stages of digital communication. As a result, the goal is no longer to spread false information, but to take advantage of the algorithms that determine what content becomes visible and how it circulates online (Woolley & Howard, 2018; Jungherr, 2023).

For the Republic of Moldova, the main challenge is not artificial intelligence itself. The challenge lies in the ability of the country's information environment and democratic institutions to respond to the misuse of information. Where political polarization is already high, public trust in institutions is low, and foreign information interference is a persistent problem, AI can reinforce existing vulnerabilities. It makes manipulative narratives spread faster, reach more people, and become harder to identify and counter. In other words, the importance of artificial intelligence in Moldova does not lie in the technology itself, but in how it interacts with the country's political and information environment.

This is also reflected in recent assessments by European institutions. While the European Commission acknowledges Moldova's progress in areas such as judicial reform, institutional development, and alignment with the *acquis communautaire*, it continues to identify disinformation and foreign information interference as major challenges to democratic governance and societal resilience (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, 2024). Similar conclusions can be found in reports

published by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), which document coordinated efforts to use digital platforms to undermine public trust, deepen social polarization, and weaken support for Moldova's European integration (EEAS, 2024; EDMO, 2024).

The development of artificial intelligence is changing both the scale and the complexity of information operations. Generative AI can produce large amounts of realistic-looking content in a very short time, while automated distribution allows the same message to be adapted to different audiences. Compared to traditional forms of digital propaganda, these tools make influence campaigns faster, cheaper, and easier to organize. They also make it easier to create content that appears credible, even when it is entirely synthetic. Another challenge comes from the growing use of large language models and AI-generated images, videos, and audio. As this content becomes more convincing, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish authentic information from manipulated material. This places additional pressure on public institutions, fact-checking organizations, and other actors responsible for identifying and responding to disinformation (UNESCO, 2023; OECD, 2024).

For the Republic of Moldova, these developments are about more than information security. As a country negotiating EU membership, Moldova needs an information environment that supports democratic governance and the implementation of EU-related reforms. Persistent information manipulation can weaken public trust in public institutions, increase political polarization, and make it harder for the government to explain why these reforms matter. This means that the impact of AI-driven political communication is not limited to the digital sphere. It also affects the broader political environment in which the country's European integration process takes place.

From this perspective, democratic resilience connects technological change with EU conditionality. The literature on EU enlargement shows that successful accession is about more than adopting EU legislation. It also depends on whether democratic institutions can implement reforms and maintain public support for them over time (Grabbe, 2006; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). If artificial intelligence affects public trust, the quality of the information environment, and the resilience of democratic institutions, then it also becomes relevant to the accession process. This does not mean that the European Union evaluates artificial intelligence itself. Rather, AI matters because it can influence the democratic conditions that candidate countries are expected to meet.

In the case of the Republic of Moldova, this relationship reveals the need for a more integrated approach. Digital transformation, information security, and democratic governance should not be treated as separate policy areas, but as complementary parts of the country's European integration process. (Millard, n.d.) This means adapting the legal framework to the challenges presented by artificial intelligence, strengthening institutional capacities to detect and respond to information operations, and channeling funds into digital and media literacy. (Graux et al., n.d.) Together, these measures can strengthen democratic resilience while helping Moldova meet European standards in democratic governance and digital transformation. (Republic of Moldova Digital Transformation Strategy 2023–2030, n.d.)

The discussion also suggests that the relationship between AI-driven political communication and EU accession is more complex than it may first appear. Artificial intelligence does not directly influence the accession process, nor is it a separate criterion in the EU's assessment of candidate countries. (Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the

European Parliament and of the Council of June 13, 2024 laying down harmonized rules on artificial intelligence, 2024) Its importance lies in the way it reshapes the information environment. These changes influence how democratic institutions function, how public opinion is formed, and how accession-related reforms are understood and implemented. (Adam & Hocquard, n.d.) For this reason, the role of artificial intelligence in the accession process should be assessed through its impact on democratic resilience rather than through the technology itself.

These developments also change the way we understand the relationship between digital transformation and EU conditionality. Traditionally, the literature on EU enlargement has focused on institutional reforms, legislative alignment, and the rule of law as the main conditions for accession (Grabbe, 2006; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). Today, however, the effective functioning of democratic institutions also depends on the stability and resilience of the information environment in which they operate. Protecting that environment should therefore not be seen only as an issue of cybersecurity or platform regulation, but also as an important part of democratic consolidation.

This is particularly evident in the Republic of Moldova. The country's EU accession process is taking place amid rapid digital transformation, ongoing geopolitical pressure, and persistent information threats. Under these conditions, democratic resilience serves as the link between technological change and the state's capacity to implement the reforms required for EU membership. In other words, successful European integration is no longer only about adopting legislation. It also depends on maintaining an information environment that can resist manipulation and preserve public trust in democratic institutions.

Based on these findings, this article argues that AI-driven political communication can influence the EU accession process indirectly through three interconnected mechanisms. First, artificial intelligence changes the way political information is created, distributed, and amplified in the digital environment. Second, these changes affect democratic resilience by influencing information pluralism, public trust, and the ability of democratic institutions to respond to information manipulation. Finally, because democratic resilience is an important part of the EU's political assessment of candidate countries, these developments are also relevant to the accession process. In this sense, artificial intelligence does not create a new form of EU conditionality. Instead, it can either strengthen or weaken a country's ability to meet the democratic standards already required by the European Union.

This article does not argue that artificial intelligence directly affects the outcome of EU accession negotiations. Rather, its central argument is that the effects of AI depend on the characteristics of the information environment and the level of democratic resilience in each country. For this reason, the Republic of Moldova is not presented as an exceptional case, but as an example of how technological change interacts with democratic consolidation and European integration.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis presented in this article shows that the rapid development of artificial intelligence is changing the way political information is created, shared, and consumed. As a result, its impact extends beyond technology and increasingly affects the way democratic systems function. AI-driven political communication is therefore more than another stage of digital transformation. It is reshaping the information environment through recommendation algorithms, synthetic content, and automated systems that

influence how political messages reach the public. These changes are particularly important in countries where democratic and information vulnerabilities already exist, as artificial intelligence can reinforce existing weaknesses.

The Republic of Moldova illustrates this dynamic well. The relevance of artificial intelligence to the country's European integration does not lie in the technology itself, but in its impact on democratic resilience. A fragmented information environment, continued foreign information interference, and fluctuating public trust in democratic institutions create conditions in which AI can accelerate the spread of manipulative content and make democratic reforms more difficult to sustain. Rather than creating new vulnerabilities, artificial intelligence reinforces existing ones, making democratic resilience an increasingly important part of Moldova's European integration process.

The findings of this study also suggest that these developments have indirect implications for the EU accession process. Although the Copenhagen criteria and the EU's political conditionality do not assess artificial intelligence itself, they assess the strength of democratic institutions, the rule of law, and candidate countries' ability to uphold the European Union's fundamental values. If AI-driven political communication shapes the information environment and, in turn, affects democratic resilience, then it also becomes relevant for Moldova's ability to meet these expectations.

The main contribution of this article is to bring together three areas of research that are usually studied separately: AI-driven political communication, democratic resilience, and EU accession conditionality. It argues that artificial intelligence influences the information environment, that changes in the information environment affect democratic resilience, and that democratic resilience, in turn, matters for the EU's assessment of candidate countries. By connecting these three dimensions, the article delivers a broader perspective on how technological change could indirectly impact the European integration process.

This study also has some limitations. It is based on a qualitative analysis of a single case and does not attempt to quantitatively measure the impact of artificial intelligence on democratic resilience. Instead, it aims to explain the mechanisms through which AI-driven political communication can influence democratic resilience and, indirectly, the EU accession process.

Future research could test these arguments in other candidate countries, including Ukraine, Georgia, and the Western Balkans. Comparative and quantitative studies could also examine more closely how AI-driven political communication affects public trust, democratic resilience, and progress towards EU membership under different political and institutional conditions.

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THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC OPINION ON THE EU SECURITY ARCHITECTURE: FROM INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRATION TO SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

*Pavlo MOLOCHKO**

Abstract. *This article examines the role of public opinion in shaping the emerging security architecture of Europe. It investigates the relationship between perceived security threats, support for increased defence spending, and willingness to defend one's country. Drawing on comparative survey data from European countries, the study applies cluster and regression analysis to identify patterns in security-related attitudes and behaviour. The findings reveal that citizens who perceive higher security risks are generally more supportive of increased defence expenditure. However, support for defence policies does not necessarily translate into a willingness to participate personally in national defence. The analysis identifies a significant gap between political support for security measures and individual behavioural readiness. Distinct regional patterns further demonstrate that societal resilience is influenced by historical, cultural, and geopolitical factors in addition to threat perception. The results suggest that the sustainability of Europe's future security architecture depends not only on institutional integration and financial investment but also on strengthening societal preparedness and civic engagement. The study highlights the importance of societal resilience as an essential component of collective security and discusses the relevance of Ukraine's experience for future European defence development.*

Keywords: *public opinion, European security, societal resilience, defence policy, security architecture, Ukraine.*

1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

For decades, European security has been closely linked to the transatlantic partnership, with the United States acting as the principal guarantor of military protection and strategic stability on the continent. Following the end of the Cold War, many European states reduced defence expenditures and redirected resources toward economic and social development, relying on collective security arrangements and the continued commitment of the United States. However, recent geopolitical developments, including Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, growing uncertainty regarding the long-term reliability of external security guarantees, and renewed debates on European strategic autonomy, have fundamentally transformed the security environment of the European Union.

These developments have intensified discussions about the future of European defence and the need to strengthen the European Union's capacity to respond independently to security challenges. Public opinion surveys indicate broad support among European citizens for deeper defence cooperation, increased defence spending, and a more active security role for the European Union. At the same time, political leaders

* Associate Professor, Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University. Email: p.molochko@chnu.edu.ua.

increasingly emphasize the need to enhance the Union's resilience against both conventional and hybrid threats. As a result, the construction of a new European security architecture has become one of the central political priorities of the present decade.

Existing research has devoted considerable attention to European strategic autonomy, defence integration, and public attitudes toward common security policies. Previous studies demonstrate that citizens who perceive greater external threats are generally more likely to support stronger defence measures and deeper European cooperation. However, considerably less attention has been paid to the relationship between support for defence policies and citizens' willingness to participate personally in national defence efforts. Consequently, an important question remains insufficiently explored: does political support for defence automatically translate into societal readiness to contribute to security and defence?

This article argues that public opinion regarding security and defence should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon consisting of at least three distinct but interconnected elements: threat perception, support for defence policies, and behavioural readiness. While these dimensions may influence one another, they do not necessarily develop in parallel. Therefore, the effectiveness of a future European security architecture depends not only on institutional integration and military capabilities but also on the degree of societal resilience and citizens' willingness to assume responsibility for collective defence.

The aim of this article is to examine the relationship between perceived security threats, support for increased defence spending, and willingness to defend one's country within the European Union. To achieve this objective, the study addresses three research questions:

How does perceived security threat influence public support for increased defence spending?

To what extent does support for defence spending translate into willingness to defend one's country?

What do these relationships reveal about the societal foundations of the emerging European security architecture?

The empirical analysis is based on data from Eurobarometer 105 (European Commission, 2026), complemented by survey data on willingness to defend one's country collected by the Gallup International Association (Gallup International Association, 2023: 6-7) and the Center for Geopolitical Studies Riga (Andžāns, Pupčenoks and Ģermanis, 2026). Three key variables are analysed: perceived security threat resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, support for increased defence spending, and willingness to defend one's country. Additional variables related to support for Ukraine and military assistance to Ukraine are employed to explore broader patterns of security attitudes.

The study utilizes both cluster analysis and linear regression analysis. Cluster analysis is applied to identify groups of countries displaying similar configurations of threat perception, support for defence spending, and willingness to defend. Regression analysis is employed to assess the strength of the relationships among these variables and to identify the extent to which support for defence policy and threat perception explain behavioural readiness. The analysis is conducted at the country level and aims to identify broad patterns of public opinion rather than individual-level determinants of behaviour.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on European security has increasingly recognised public opinion as an important factor influencing defence and foreign policy. While security policy was traditionally viewed as a domain dominated by political elites and experts, contemporary scholarship demonstrates that democratic governments face growing pressure to align security policies with public preferences. As a result, public attitudes have become an important source of both legitimacy and constraint in the development of defence policy.

Existing studies indicate that European citizens generally support a stronger role for the European Union in security and foreign affairs. C. Wang and A. Moise (2023) demonstrate that support for greater European autonomy in security matters has increased alongside growing concerns regarding the reliability of external security guarantees. Their findings suggest that citizens increasingly favour stronger coordination of defence policies and a more independent European security role. Similarly, R. Borri et al. (2024) find broad public support for greater European involvement in defence cooperation, although significant variation remains between member states regarding the desired degree of integration.

At the same time, public opinion research consistently shows that support for security policies is closely connected to perceptions of external threats. Citizens who perceive a higher degree of geopolitical risk are generally more willing to support defence spending, military cooperation, and common security initiatives. Consequently, threat perception is frequently treated as one of the principal drivers of support for defence policy.

However, the focus of existing research remains largely concentrated on attitudes towards policy instruments rather than citizens' readiness to contribute directly to defence efforts. Support for increased defence spending or military cooperation is often interpreted as evidence of security commitment, while the behavioural implications of these attitudes remain comparatively underexplored.

Recent security research has expanded the understanding of security beyond military strength and institutional capacity. Increasingly, attention is being given to societal resilience, which emphasizes the role of citizens, social cohesion, and public preparedness in responding to crises and maintaining security under conditions of uncertainty. Studies of total defence and security culture in the Nordic-Baltic region further suggest that resilience should be understood not only as an institutional capability but also as a societal resource that contributes to national and collective security (Wrange, Bengtsson and Brommesson, 2024).

The growing interest in societal resilience reflects a broader shift in security studies from state-centred approaches toward more society-centred perspectives. Traditional security frameworks primarily assessed the ability of states to deter and respond to threats through military capabilities and institutional preparedness. More recent research argues that resilience depends equally on the capacity of societies to absorb shocks, adapt to crises, and maintain social and political cohesion under conditions of stress. Scholars emphasise that resilience is not merely a function of governmental resources but also of public trust, civic participation, and social solidarity. In this context, resilience is increasingly understood as a critical component of national and collective security. Arjen Boin et al. (2005) argue that resilient societies are characterised by their ability to anticipate, withstand, and recover from crises while preserving core societal functions. Similarly, David Chandler (2014) highlights that contemporary security governance places growing emphasis on the adaptive capacity of

communities and citizens rather than relying exclusively on hierarchical state institutions. These perspectives suggest that effective security depends not only on military capabilities and defence policy but also on the willingness of citizens to support and participate in collective responses to security threats. Within this framework, citizens are no longer viewed solely as recipients of security provided by the state but also as active participants in maintaining security. Public trust, civic engagement, social cohesion, and preparedness become important components of resilience alongside defence budgets and military capabilities. Consequently, the effectiveness of a security system depends not only on its institutional resources but also on the willingness of citizens to support and participate in collective responses to threats.

This perspective is particularly relevant in the European context, where contemporary security challenges increasingly involve hybrid threats, cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and long-term geopolitical competition. Such challenges require societal engagement that extends beyond professional military structures and government institutions.

From this perspective, willingness to defend one's country may be regarded as one of the most direct indicators of societal resilience. Unlike support for defence policies, willingness to defend reflects an individual's readiness to assume personal responsibility for security. It therefore represents the behavioural dimension of security attitudes.

Although support for defence policies and willingness to defend are frequently discussed within broader security debates, these concepts are rarely examined together. Much of the existing literature implicitly assumes that citizens who support stronger defence policies will also be more willing to contribute personally to national defence. In practice, however, these attitudes may not necessarily coincide.

This distinction reflects a broader theoretical problem frequently observed in studies of political behaviour. Individuals often express support for collective goals while remaining reluctant to bear the personal costs associated with achieving them. Applied to security policy, this means that citizens may favour increased defence spending, stronger armed forces, or deeper military cooperation without demonstrating a corresponding willingness to participate directly in defence efforts.

The available evidence suggests that support for defence policy and behavioural readiness may therefore represent distinct dimensions of public opinion rather than different expressions of the same phenomenon. Understanding the relationship between these dimensions is becoming increasingly important as European governments seek to strengthen defence capabilities while simultaneously enhancing societal resilience.

To address this issue, the present study adopts a three-dimensional framework of security-related public opinion.

The first dimension is threat perception, understood as an individual's assessment of external security risks.

The second dimension is support for defence policy, measured through attitudes towards increased defence spending and broader security initiatives.

The third dimension is behavioural readiness, operationalised as willingness to defend one's country.

Previous research has demonstrated that perceived security threats often increase support for defence spending, military cooperation, and broader security initiatives. However, considerably less attention has been devoted to the relationship between support for defence policies and citizens' willingness to contribute personally to national

defence. As a result, the extent to which political support translates into behavioural readiness remains insufficiently explored. To address this issue, this article introduces the concept of a policy-behaviour gap, defined as a discrepancy between support for defence-related policies and willingness to participate in defence efforts.

The policy-behaviour gap refers to a situation in which citizens support defence-related policies while displaying lower levels of willingness to participate personally in defence efforts. Such a gap suggests that political approval of security measures does not necessarily translate into societal preparedness. Consequently, defence policy support should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of societal resilience.

The proposed framework assumes that threat perception contributes to support for defence policies, while the relationship between policy support and behavioural readiness remains uncertain and must be tested empirically. Identifying the existence and magnitude of this gap constitutes the central objective of the present study. By examining these relationships, the article seeks to contribute to broader discussions on the societal foundations of European security and the role of public opinion in the development of a more resilient security architecture.

3. PUBLIC OPINION AND EUROPEAN DEFENCE INTEGRATION

Given this situation, the consolidation of European society around EU institutions and leaders emerges as a critical factor. The ability to protect citizens from hybrid threats requires, above all, an internal foundation and trust in the entire system. In recent years, despite all internal and external turbulence, survey evidence suggests that many Europeans associate the European Union with political and economic stability. Accordingly, there is a real institutional credit of trust for the implementation of changes and the strengthening of security.

Currently, it is known that: “The European Union enjoys a fairly positive attitude among its citizens, with 52% viewing it positively and 32% neutrally. Only 16% of respondents have a negative attitude toward the EU” (Štěpánek, 2025). These values are quite positive, especially considering that in its activities during times of greatest trials and changes, the European Union must account for the interests of 27 member states, coordinate common policies between governments, institutions, and organizations, and implement new approaches. Despite this, there remains a significant need to develop communication between EU citizens and its institutions and leaders, as populist political forces with their inherent euroskepticism have become strongly active and are gaining strength in recent years. These factors attempt to discredit the EU, its institutions, and its leaders before their citizens; therefore, it is necessary to find effective mechanisms to counter them, otherwise, the leadership of the European Union will be deprived of the foundation of its resilience, which could even lead to its disintegration. “Most Europeans believe that the EU should play a larger role in protecting its citizens from global crises and security risks (68%). Nine out of ten European citizens call for greater unity among EU member states (90%), and more than three-quarters believe that the EU needs more means to combat modern global challenges (77%)” (Štěpánek, 2025). These survey results demonstrate that European Union societies, taking an interest in the international situation and politics, perceive existing global challenges and threats as factors that could directly harm them. In an attempt to secure themselves, citizens demand further deepening of integration and strengthening of the partnership between member states. They also understand that the existing forces and resources of the EU are insufficient and require updating. Thus, we can affirmatively speak of the existence in European public

opinion of a foundation for developing closer and more capable forms of interaction, particularly the construction of a new security architecture for the European Union.

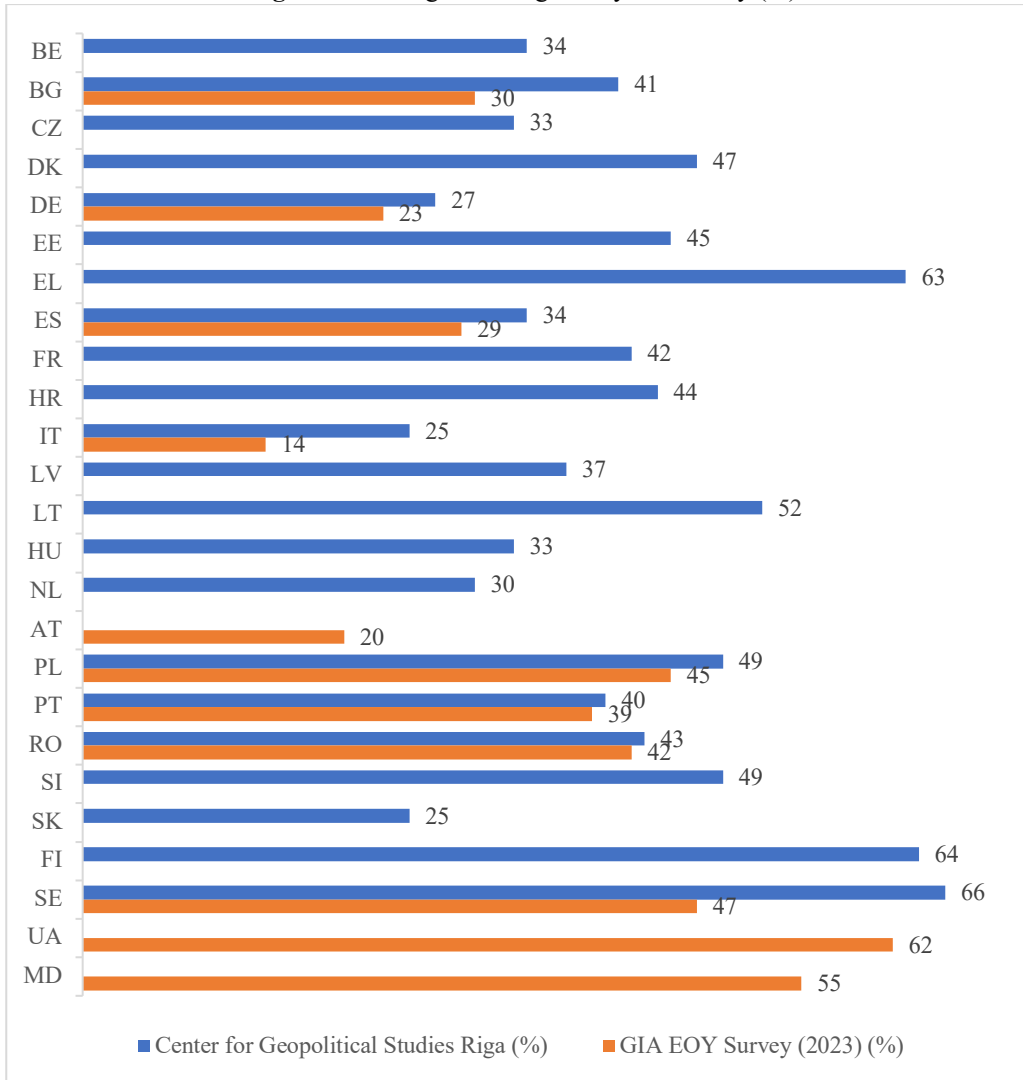
Building an effective national security and defense policy requires a significant amount of time, substantial financial investment, human resources, and a systemic approach, especially under the conditions of creating a new security architecture through cooperation among at least 27 states. A common security policy requires joint efforts and a shared understanding of the goals, tasks, and needs of this cooperation. When there is no single point of view among allies, or when their interests are incompatible or even opposite, achieving success becomes a major challenge. Fortunately, EU citizens do understand the necessity of cooperation among member states: “There is broad support for a range of specific proposals: strengthening defense cooperation (82% ‘in favor’, +4 points since autumn 2024); not a single score is lower than 68%. Increasing the defense budget in the EU (69%, +5 points); better coordination of military equipment procurement (81%, +2 points); strengthening the EU’s arms production capacities (73%, +4 points)” (Debomy, 2025).

Today, the majority of EU citizens support the idea of creating a unified European Union army, as indicated by research results: «56% of respondents chose a maximalist defense cooperation package with a high level of integration at the EU level. This would include real European armed forces the size of an army corps, decisions made by a majority vote of EU countries and in the European Parliament, joint procurement, and no possibility of national opt-outs» (Štěpánek, 2025). However, another source suggests a preference for a different, more compromise-oriented form: «There should be national armies coordinated at the European level: France 65%, Germany 60%, Greece 65%, Italy 55%, Poland 60%, Spain 64%, Total 61%» (Borri, Isernia and Mingardi, 2024:33).

4. WILLINGNESS TO DEFEND AND SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

Despite all of this, the readiness of political leaders and the public approval of them and their plans represent only one side of the coin. The security of the state and society can only be realistically achieved through the resilience and readiness of the society itself to be an active link in the security architecture. Empirical indicators of EU citizens’ readiness to participate in an armed response against a potential enemy demonstrate mental barriers and a lack of preparedness for such actions.

Risks of a direct military invasion of EU states are also significant in their influence on public opinion, as a substantial number of analysts, officials, and intelligence agencies share assumptions that Russia plans an attack in the coming years, especially in the event of a cessation of hostilities in Ukraine. A vital aspect in this regard is the readiness of the population to take up arms and defend the state. The «Gallup International» study (Gallup International, 2023) and survey data from Center for Geopolitical Studies Riga (Andžāns, Pupčenoks and Ģermanis, 2026) on this topic are quite useful and indicative. In the diagram (Figure 1), we have highlighted from the list of global states those EU members where the researches were conducted, as well as Ukraine and Moldova as candidate countries.

Figure 1. Willingness to fight for your country (%)

(Source: author's own preparations based on data collected from Gallup International Association, 2023: 6-7; Andžāns, Pupčenoks and Ģermanis, 2026)

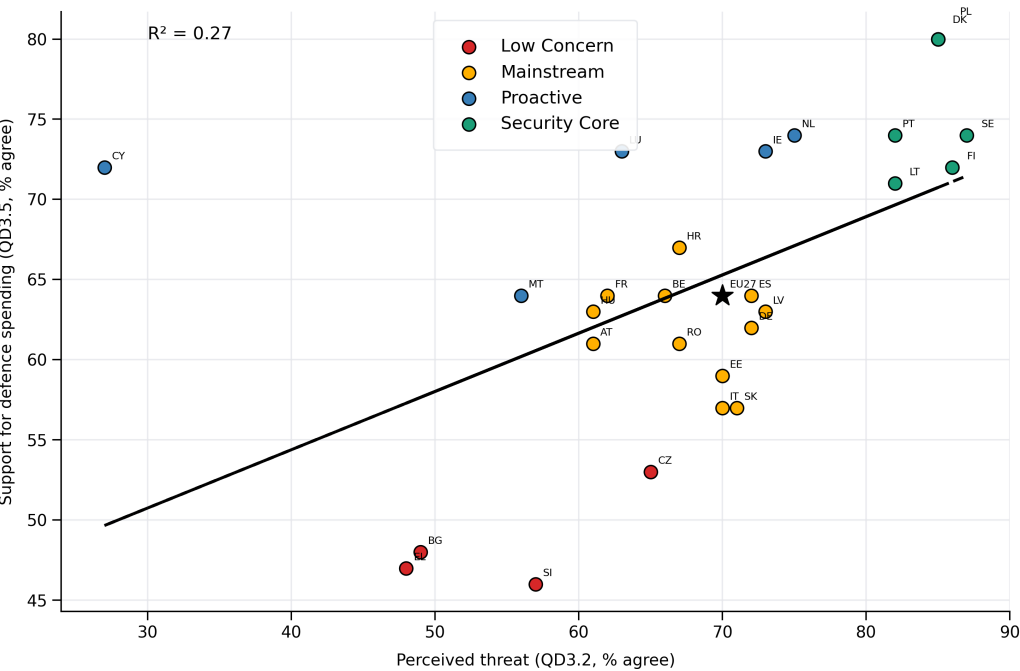
On average, the readiness of the populations of large states to defend themselves is 39.4%, with the highest indicators found in Greece (63%), Sweden (66% and 47%), and Poland (49% and 45%), while Italy (25% and 14%) and Germany (27% and 23%) emerged as the primary outliers with lower readiness. Citizens of small states are, on average, less ready to defend their state in the event of an attack. Among them, the greatest readiness is demonstrated by Finland (64%), Lithuania (52%), Slovenia (49%), Estonia (45%), Croatia (44%), and Portugal (40% and 39%), while Austria (20%) proved to be the primary outlier. These results confirm the influence of the geographical factor on the readiness to fight. States located closer to Ukraine, the conflict territory, or to a potential aggressor – such as Finland (64%), Estonia (45%), Moldova (55%), and Ukraine itself (62%) – show a clear correlation with higher readiness. The difference between the size of the states does not have a significant impact.

The inclusion of Ukraine and Moldova significantly increases the overall average level of willingness to defend observed across the sample. This finding highlights the importance of candidate countries for the broader European security environment.

5. PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS SECURITY AND DEFENCE: EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

The cluster analysis conducted on the basis of Eurobarometer 105 (European Commission, 2026) data reveals distinct patterns in public attitudes toward European Union security and defence policy. The analysis relies on two key variables: the perceived threat posed by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (QD3.2) and the level of support for increased defence spending in the European Union (QD3.5). By jointly examining these variables, it is possible to identify groups of countries that exhibit similar relationships between threat perception and policy support, thereby uncovering broader structural patterns within European public opinion.

Figure 2. Relationship between public support for increased defence spending (QD3.5) and perceived security threat (QD3.2)
EU Public Opinion on Defence: Threat vs Support



(Source: author’s own preparations based on data collected from European Commission, 2026)

The results indicate the existence of four main clusters, each reflecting a specific model of interaction between perceived security threats and support for defence spending. The first cluster, labelled the “security core,” includes Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Poland, Lithuania and Portugal. These countries demonstrate both high levels of threat perception and high levels of support for increased defence spending, typically exceeding 80% and 70% respectively. This cluster exhibits the strongest positive relationship between the two variables, suggesting a reactive model in which heightened awareness of external threats directly translates into support for defence policy measures.

The composition of this cluster is also geographically significant, as it consists primarily of Northern and Eastern European countries that are either geographically closer to the conflict zone or historically more sensitive to security risks.

The second cluster, referred to as the “proactive defence” group, includes Ireland, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Malta and Cyprus. In contrast to the security core, these countries display relatively high levels of support for defence spending despite moderate or, in some cases, very low levels of perceived threat. Cyprus stands out as a particularly striking outlier within this group, with one of the lowest recorded levels of threat perception alongside a high level of support for defence expenditure. This pattern indicates that support for defence policy can be driven by factors other than direct threat perception, such as a strong commitment to European integration, institutional trust, or a broader strategic understanding of the EU’s role in global security.

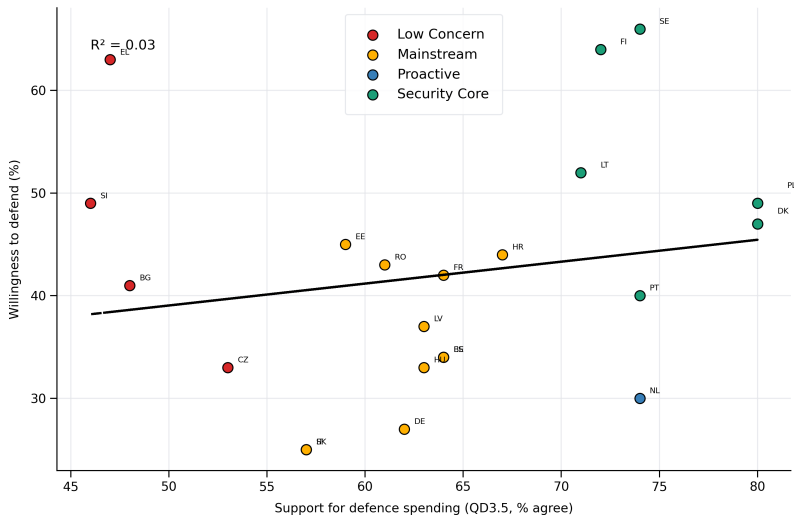
The third and largest cluster represents the “mainstream” position within the European Union and includes countries such as Germany, France, Spain, Italy and Belgium, along with many others. These countries exhibit moderate levels of both perceived threat and support for defence spending, generally falling within the range of 60% to 70%. This cluster reflects a balanced relationship between the two variables and can be interpreted as representing the dominant or average position within the EU. In this case, support for defence policy appears to be shaped by a combination of security concerns and broader political or economic considerations, rather than by immediate threat perception alone.

Finally, the fourth cluster, labelled “low concern,” consists of Bulgaria, Greece, Slovenia and The Czech Republic. Countries in this group report relatively low levels of both perceived threat and support for increased defence spending. This cluster can be interpreted as reflecting a context in which security and defence issues are not central priorities within public opinion. Such a pattern may be influenced by geographical distance from the conflict, differing national policy agendas, or lower levels of political focus on external security threats.

Overall, the analysis confirms the presence of a positive relationship between perceived security threats and support for defence spending in the European Union, but it also demonstrates that this relationship is neither uniform nor deterministic. Instead, it is mediated by regional, political and socio-economic factors that produce distinct configurations of public opinion. The coexistence of reactive and proactive patterns of support highlights the complexity of attitudes toward European defence policy and suggests that public support for deeper security integration cannot be explained solely by threat perception.

The inclusion of an additional behavioural dimension, measured as the percentage of respondents willing to defend their country, allows for a more comprehensive analysis of public attitudes towards security and defence in the European Union. While previous analysis focused on the relationship between perceived threat and support for increased defence spending, the addition of willingness to defend introduces a critical distinction between political support and personal readiness to act.

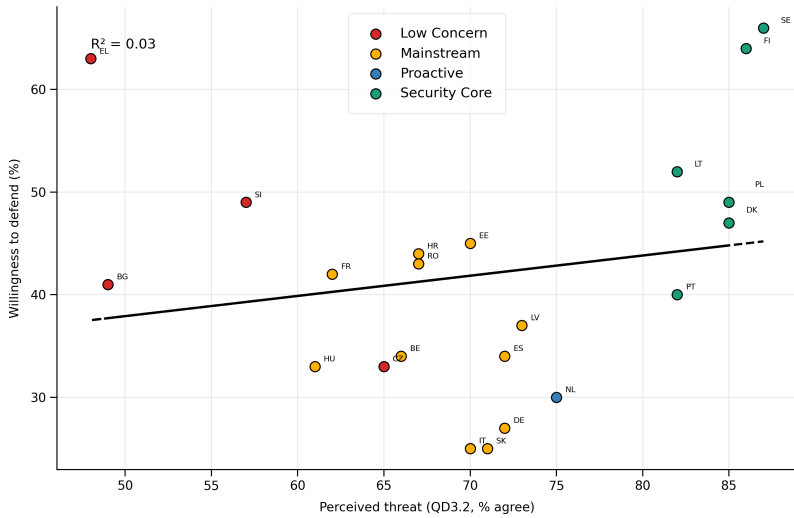
Figure 3. Relationship between public support for increased defence spending (QD3.5) and willingness to defend one's country
EU Public Opinion: Spending vs Willingness



(Source: author's own preparations based on data collected from European Commission, 2026 and Andžāns, Pupčēnoks and Ģermanis, 2026)

The results demonstrate that the relationship between these dimensions is complex and cannot be reduced to a simple linear correlation. Although a positive association between perceived threat and support for defence spending can be observed, this pattern does not consistently extend to willingness to defend. In other words, public endorsement of defence policy does not necessarily translate into individual readiness for active participation in national defence.

Figure 4. Relationship between perceived security threat (QD3.2) and willingness to defend one's country
EU Public Opinion: Threat vs Willingness



(Source: author's own preparations based on data collected from European Commission, 2026 and Andžāns, Pupčēnoks and Ģermanis, 2026)

The comparison across clusters further highlights this divergence. The “security core” countries, characterised by high levels of perceived threat and strong support for increased defence spending, do not uniformly exhibit the highest willingness to defend. While Finland and Sweden display both high support and high willingness, other countries within the same cluster, such as Denmark and Portugal, show significantly lower levels of personal readiness. This suggests that even in highly security-oriented contexts, willingness to defend is shaped by additional societal and cultural factors beyond immediate threat perception.

The “proactive” group presents an even more pronounced disconnect. Countries in this cluster demonstrate strong support for defence spending despite comparatively moderate or low perceived threat. However, available data indicate that willingness to defend remains relatively limited in these cases, as illustrated by the Netherlands. This reinforces the interpretation that support for defence policy in this cluster is driven more by strategic or institutional considerations than by direct security concerns or individual preparedness.

The largest group, representing the “mainstream” position, exhibits moderate levels across all three variables but also reveals substantial internal variation. In many cases, willingness to defend remains considerably lower than both perceived threat and policy support. This is particularly evident in countries such as Germany and Italy, where willingness to defend remains among the lowest despite moderate or relatively high support for defence measures. This pattern points to a growing gap between public discourse on security and individual behavioural commitments.

The “low concern” cluster provides an additional perspective by illustrating that lower levels of perceived threat and defence support do not necessarily imply low willingness to defend. The case of Greece is especially noteworthy, as it combines relatively low levels of perceived threat and policy support with one of the highest levels of willingness to defend among all countries included in the analysis. This indicates that willingness to defend may be influenced by country-specific historical, cultural or geopolitical factors that are not fully captured by general perceptions of the current security environment.

Overall, the analysis reveals a three-dimensional structure of public attitudes towards security and defence in the European Union, in which threat perception, policy support and behavioural readiness are only partially aligned. While perceived threat remains an important driver of political support for defence measures, the transition from support to personal willingness to act is neither automatic nor uniform across countries. This finding underscores the importance of distinguishing between different levels of public engagement when assessing the societal foundations of European defence policy.

A regression analysis further clarifies the strength of relationships between the key variables. The relationship between perceived threat and support for defence spending can be described by the equation:

$$\text{Spending} = 0.36 \times \text{Threat} + 37.48, \text{ with } R^2 = 0.271.$$

This indicates that perceived threat explains approximately 27.1% of the variation in support for defence spending, suggesting a moderate explanatory relationship.

In contrast, the relationship between support for defence spending and willingness to defend is given by:

$$\text{Willingness} = 0.29 \times \text{Spending} + 20.83, \text{ with } R^2 = 0.031.$$

This demonstrates that support for defence spending explains only about 3.1% of the variation in willingness to defend, indicating a very weak relationship.

Similarly, the relationship between perceived threat and willingness to defend is described by:

$$\text{Willingness} = 0.21 \times \text{Threat} + 22.11, \text{ with } R^2 = 0.034.$$

This confirms that perceived threat has only minimal explanatory power for behavioural readiness.

Overall, while all regression coefficients are positive, their explanatory power varies significantly, indicating that the link between perception, policy support, and behaviour is limited and non-linear.

The findings raise a fundamental question regarding the sustainability of European security arrangements. While public support for increased defence spending remains relatively high, the consistently low levels of willingness to defend one's country suggest a structural imbalance between financial commitment and societal capacity for defence. This indicates that citizens may conceptualise defence primarily as a function of institutions rather than as a shared civic responsibility. In this sense, public opinion appears to support the "outsourcing" of security to professional armed forces, technological capabilities, and collective defence structures such as NATO. However, this model may face limitations in the context of large-scale or prolonged conflict, where societal mobilisation becomes necessary. The observed gap between policy support and behavioural readiness therefore raises important concerns about the robustness of societal resilience in the European Union and highlights a potential vulnerability within its broader security architecture.

6. UKRAINE'S ROLE IN THE EMERGING EUROPEAN SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

The empirical findings of this study raise an important question regarding the future of European security: if public support for increased defence spending is not accompanied by a corresponding level of societal willingness to defend, how can this gap be addressed in practice? The observed discrepancy between financial commitment and behavioural readiness suggests a structural limitation in the current model of European security, where defence is supported politically but remains weakly internalised at the societal level.

In this context, an alternative perspective has been articulated in the political discourse of Ukrainian leadership. President Volodymyr Zelensky has repeatedly argued that the foundation of a future European defence structure could be built upon Ukraine's military capabilities, particularly the Armed Forces of Ukraine (Stezhensky, 2026). His statements emphasize that Ukraine possesses not only one of the largest and most experienced armies in Europe, but also a level of societal mobilisation and combat readiness that is largely absent in many EU member states.

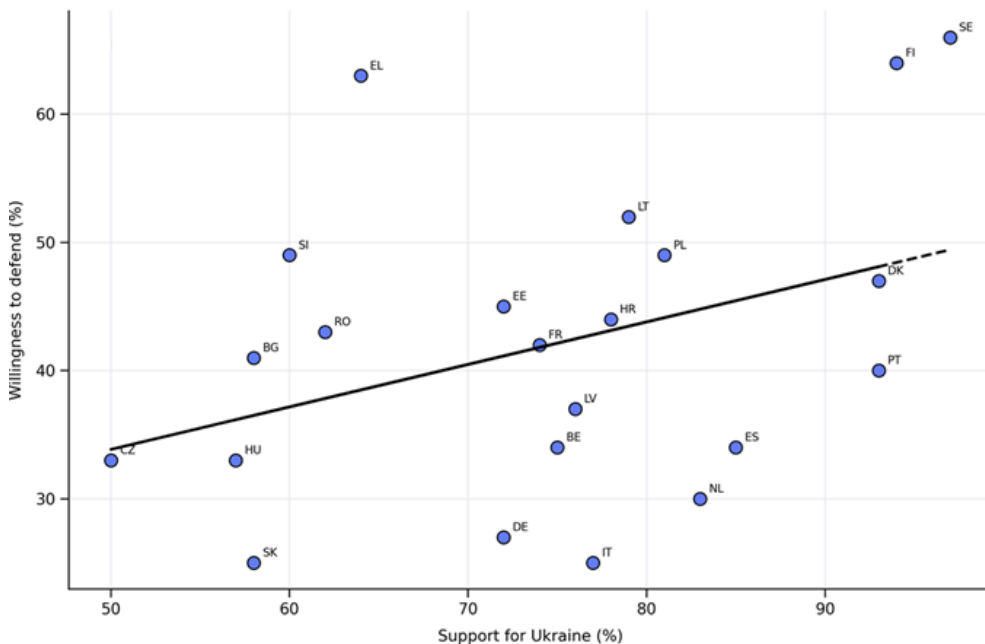
This argument is directly relevant to the findings of this study. While many European societies demonstrate high levels of support for defence spending, their relatively low willingness to defend suggests a reliance on professional or external providers of security. In this sense, Ukraine represents a fundamentally different model – one in which societal resilience and military capability are closely aligned. The Ukrainian case demonstrates that under conditions of existential threat, public opinion can translate into high levels of behavioural readiness, thereby providing the human foundation necessary for effective defence.

From a structural perspective, this creates a potential complementarity within the emerging European security architecture. While EU member states may provide financial resources, technological capabilities, and institutional frameworks, Ukraine represents a case characterized by comparatively high levels of societal mobilisation and military readiness.

However, this model also raises important normative and strategic questions. Relying on a single country to provide a disproportionate share of military readiness may create new forms of dependency and asymmetry within the European defence system. Moreover, it does not fully resolve the underlying issue identified in this study, namely the limited willingness of EU citizens to personally engage in defence efforts. Therefore, while the integration of Ukraine into European security structures may offer a short- to medium-term solution, it should be accompanied by broader efforts to strengthen societal resilience within EU member states themselves.

Ultimately, the findings of this study suggest that the future of European security will depend not only on institutional integration and financial coordination, but also on the ability to reconcile the gap between political support and societal readiness. In this regard, the Ukrainian experience provides both a practical resource and a conceptual challenge, highlighting the importance of rebuilding the link between public opinion and collective defence.

Figure 5. Relationship between willingness to defend one's country and support for Ukraine(QD3.3)
Willingness vs Support for Ukraine



(Source: author's own preparations based on data collected from European Commission, 2026 and Andžāns, Pupčēnoks and Ģērmanis, 2026)

The inclusion of additional variables related to support for Ukraine significantly refines the analysis of the determinants of willingness to defend. Correlation results show that support for Ukraine ($r = 0.37$) and support for military aid to Ukraine ($r = 0.37$) are more strongly associated with willingness to defend than either perceived threat ($r = 0.18$)

or support for defence spending ($r = 0.18$). This indicates that behavioural readiness is more closely linked to attitudes toward the ongoing conflict in Ukraine than to general perceptions of security or abstract policy preferences.

A multiple regression model further confirms this pattern. While the explanatory power of the model increases to $R^2 = 0.26$ when all variables are included, only support for Ukraine and support for military aid display positive relationships with willingness to defend. In contrast, perceived threat and support for defence spending exhibit negative coefficients when controlling for other variables. These results suggest that willingness to defend is not primarily driven by threat perception or general support for defence policy, but rather by a more specific form of political and moral engagement with the conflict.

However, a closer examination of cross-country patterns reveals that this relationship is not uniform across the European Union. In several Western European countries, including Germany and the Netherlands, high levels of support for Ukraine and military aid coexist with low willingness to defend. This pattern may indicate a form of “externalised” or “delegated” defence, in which individuals endorse military action and financial support while relying on external actors – such as professional armed forces or allied countries – to carry out defence tasks in practice.

At the same time, other countries, most notably Finland and Sweden, display a markedly different configuration, combining high support for Ukraine and military aid with high willingness to defend. In these cases, political support and behavioural readiness are aligned, suggesting a more deeply internalised model of defence in which security is understood as a shared civic responsibility.

Taken together, these contrasting patterns indicate that support for Ukraine does not uniformly substitute for willingness to defend. Instead, it reveals a structural divide between two models of societal response to security threats: one in which defence is externalised and supported indirectly, and another in which it is internalised and accompanied by personal readiness to act. This distinction highlights that willingness to defend is not determined solely by attitudes toward external threats or policy choices, but by broader social, cultural, and institutional factors that shape how defence is perceived and enacted within different European societies.

Ukraine's significance for European security extends beyond its military capabilities. The findings of this study suggest that the Ukrainian experience illustrates a closer alignment between public support, societal mobilisation, and behavioural readiness than is observed in many European Union member states. As a result, Ukraine provides an important case for understanding how societal resilience can contribute to national and collective defence.

Recent European policy documents increasingly emphasize Ukraine's role within the evolving European security environment (European Commission, 2025). The practical experience gained through crisis management, large-scale mobilisation, and sustained resistance to external aggression has generated valuable expertise relevant to contemporary security challenges. In this regard, Ukraine's importance lies not only in its military capabilities but also in the lessons it offers regarding preparedness, civic engagement, and the societal foundations of security.

The findings presented in this article suggest that the future effectiveness of European security arrangements will depend not only on institutional integration, defence spending, and military capabilities, but also on the capacity of societies to translate support for security policies into behavioural readiness. Ukraine therefore represents not

only a security partner but also a useful reference point for understanding how societal resilience can strengthen collective defence within Europe.

7. CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between threat perception, support for defence spending, and willingness to defend one's country in the context of the evolving European security architecture. The findings demonstrate that while public support for stronger defence policies is widespread across the European Union, this support does not necessarily translate into individual readiness to participate in national defence.

The analysis identified a moderate relationship between perceived security threats and support for increased defence spending but only a weak relationship between support for defence policies and willingness to defend. These results reveal a significant policy-behaviour gap, suggesting that political support for defence measures often exceeds citizens' personal preparedness for security responsibilities. Moreover, cross-country differences indicate that behavioural readiness is shaped not only by threat perception but also by historical experience, political culture, and national security traditions.

These findings have important implications for the future of European security. The development of a robust security architecture cannot rely solely on institutional integration, military capabilities, or increased defence budgets. Long-term security also depends on societal resilience, civic engagement, and the willingness of citizens to contribute to collective defence.

The study further highlights the relevance of Ukraine's experience for Europe. Beyond its military capabilities, Ukraine demonstrates the importance of societal mobilisation and resilience in responding to large-scale security threats. As Europe seeks to strengthen its security framework, the Ukrainian experience offers valuable lessons for enhancing the societal foundations of defence.

Overall, the article argues that effective European security requires balancing institutional capacity with societal preparedness. Bridging the gap between policy support and behavioural readiness should become an important objective for both policymakers and researchers seeking to strengthen the resilience of European societies in an increasingly uncertain security environment.

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SOCIETAL COHESION AS A FOUNDATION OF SOCIETAL RESILIENCE: EVIDENCE FROM THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

Natalia PUTINĂ*

Abstract. *This paper examines societal cohesion as a structural determinant of societal resilience in the Republic of Moldova, drawing on theoretical frameworks from the literature on social capital, governance, and resilience. The analysis focuses on how dimensions such as institutional trust, social solidarity, and inclusion shape the capacity of societies to absorb, adapt to, and transform in response to internal and external shocks. Methodologically, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining empirical data from recent sociological surveys, policy documents, and academic literature. The findings highlight a set of structural vulnerabilities, including low levels of institutional trust, identity-based polarization, and social fragmentation, which undermine societal cohesion and resilience. At the same time, the paper identifies emerging resilience mechanisms, such as community-level social capital and processes of Europeanization. The paper argues that societal cohesion functions as a key mediating variable between governance and resilience, influencing social stability and the effectiveness of crisis responses.*

Keywords: *Societal cohesion; societal resilience; social capital; governance; Europeanization; Republic of Moldova.*

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, the Republic of Moldova has been exposed to an unusually dense and overlapping set of domestic vulnerabilities and external pressures. Long-standing structural challenges, political polarisation, persistent socioeconomic inequalities, demographic decline, and large-scale emigration, have coincided with comparatively low levels of interpersonal and institutional trust. These internal fragilities have been further compounded by Moldova's geopolitical position between the European Union and Russia, which has sustained enduring divisions over identity, language, and strategic orientation (Putină, 2011, 2014; Negură, Mocanu, & Potorocă, 2019). In recent years, these pressures have been intensified by the proliferation of information insecurity, cyber risks, and hybrid threats, which increasingly exploit existing societal cleavages and institutional weaknesses (Putină, 2022, 2024; Costea, Putină, & Brie, 2024). Since 2020, this already fragile context has been subjected to a sequence of major exogenous shocks. The COVID-19 pandemic placed significant strain on public health systems, governance capacity, and social protection mechanisms. This was followed by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which generated immediate security concerns, a substantial influx of refugees relative to Moldova's population size, and heightened regional instability. Concurrently, disruptions in energy supply chains contributed to a severe energy crisis and a sharp increase in the cost of living. These crises unfolded alongside intensified disinformation campaigns, electoral interference, and broader

* Associate Professor, Moldova State University. E-mail: natalia.putina@usm.md.

forms of hybrid pressure. At the same time, Moldova entered a period of accelerated European integration, obtaining EU candidate status in 2022 and formally opening accession negotiations in 2024.

Within this context, the Moldovan case reveals an important empirical paradox. Conditions typically associated with societal fragility, low institutional trust, political polarisation, socioeconomic vulnerability, demographic decline, identity cleavages, and sustained external pressure are simultaneously present and, in some cases, deepening. However, these structural vulnerabilities have not translated into systemic breakdown or institutional collapse. On the contrary, Moldova has maintained the continuity of its democratic institutions, demonstrated a capacity to absorb and manage multiple external shocks, mobilised both state and societal responses under crisis conditions, provided significant support to displaced Ukrainian populations, and sustained its strategic trajectory towards European integration. The coexistence of persistent vulnerability and observable adaptive capacity therefore requires systematic explanation.

This puzzle is particularly salient because Moldova cannot be adequately understood through institutional capacity alone. Public institutions operate under chronic resource constraints and uneven administrative capacity, while empirical evidence suggests that trust and social cohesion are highly fragmented across institutional domains, territorial units, and social groups (Negură, Mocanu, & Potoroacă, 2019; Negură, Gaşper, & Potoroacă, 2021; Ivaşcu, Covrig, & Bătrînescu, 2021). At the same time, periods of acute crisis have revealed significant—albeit uneven—forms of civic mobilisation, community-level cooperation, and interaction between public authorities, civil society organisations, and citizens. This duality raises a broader analytical question: how can societies characterised by structural vulnerability and fragmented trust nonetheless generate sufficient collective capacity to respond to, absorb, and adapt under conditions of sustained disruption?

This article examines the relationship between societal cohesion and societal resilience in this context. It argues that explaining Moldova's adaptive capacity requires moving beyond aggregate indicators of institutional performance or generalized measures of social trust, and instead focusing on the relational and institutional configurations that enable collective action under conditions of stress. Accordingly, the article investigates how different dimensions of societal cohesion contribute to resilience, and under what conditions these resources become operationally significant during periods of disruption.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study employs a theory-guided single-case research design to investigate the relationship between societal cohesion and societal resilience in the Republic of Moldova. The empirical analysis addresses the following research question:

RQ: How and under what conditions does societal cohesion contribute to societal resilience in the Republic of Moldova?

The single-case design is appropriate to the explanatory purpose of the study, which is to examine this relationship within a specific political, social, and institutional setting rather than to estimate its statistical effect across a large number of countries. Case-study research allows theoretically relevant relationships to be investigated in depth while preserving the contextual conditions within which they operate (George & Bennett, 2005; Gerring, 2007). Accordingly, the study seeks analytical generalisation, assessing the extent to which evidence from Moldova supports theoretically derived expectations that may

subsequently be examined in comparative research. Case selection is theory-driven. The Republic of Moldova constitutes an analytically informative case because persistent structural constraints coexist with observable adaptive capacity. This combination provides a particularly useful setting for examining the relationship addressed by the research question. Moldova is therefore not selected as statistically representative of a broader population of countries, but for its capacity to illuminate a theoretically relevant problem.

The empirical analysis focuses primarily on the *2021–2025 period*, with earlier evidence incorporated selectively where required to establish longer-term tendencies. This temporal delimitation provides a sufficiently concentrated period for examining both continuity and change in the indicators relevant to the study, while also capturing a context marked by recurrent political, socioeconomic, and security pressures.

The study relies on *secondary quantitative and qualitative evidence* drawn from multiple independent sources. The principal survey sources are the *Public Opinion Barometer (BOP)* and the *Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Index Moldova 2022*. BOP provides repeated observations that permit a longitudinal examination of public confidence in major political and social institutions between 2021 and 2025. SCORE provides complementary cross-sectional evidence concerning active citizenship, community coherence and cooperation, civic optimism, and territorial variation. Survey evidence is examined alongside official statistics, policy documents, institutional assessments, and reports produced by national and international organisations, including the European Commission, OECD, World Bank, United Nations agencies, UNDP, UNHCR, and IOM. Peer-reviewed academic studies are used where necessary to contextualise empirical patterns and to situate observed developments within longer-term political and societal processes.

The different categories of evidence perform complementary analytical functions. Survey data establish patterns in attitudes and perceptions, longitudinal observations identify continuity and change over time, while documentary and institutional sources provide contextual evidence for interpreting these patterns. Rather than treating any individual indicator as independently conclusive, the analysis considers the degree of convergence across independent sources. Findings are regarded as more robust when comparable patterns are supported by evidence originating from different datasets or institutional sources, while inconsistencies are retained as analytically relevant rather than resolved through assumption.

The empirical analysis combines two procedures. *First*, descriptive longitudinal analysis is applied where comparable observations are available across time. This is particularly relevant to BOP data and permits the identification of institutional patterns, fluctuations, and longer-term tendencies during 2021–2025. *Second*, qualitative documentary analysis is used to interpret these developments within their institutional and societal context. SCORE data are analysed as cross-sectional evidence and are not used to infer temporal change. This distinction is important because the datasets differ in design, temporal coverage, and measurement objectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on societal resilience has evolved from its ecological origins towards a broader understanding of how communities, institutions, and societies respond to disruption. While Holling (1973) initially conceptualised resilience as the capacity of systems to absorb disturbance while maintaining essential functions, subsequent scholarship has emphasised adaptation, reorganisation, and transformation in response to

changing conditions (Norris et al., 2008; Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013; Chandler, 2014). Resilience therefore extends beyond resistance or recovery: it concerns the capacity to sustain collective functioning while adapting to uncertainty and recurrent shocks.

An important development within this literature has been the recognition that resilience cannot be explained solely by institutional capacity or material resources. Societies facing comparable disruptions often display different adaptive trajectories, directing attention towards the relational foundations of resilience—the networks, norms, institutional relationships, and forms of cooperation through which resources are mobilised under stress (Norris et al., 2008; Aldrich, 2012; Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013). Social capital provides a particularly important explanation of these relational capacities. Coleman (1988), Putnam (1993, 2000), and Woolcock and Narayan (2000) emphasise networks, reciprocity, and trust as resources that facilitate cooperation, information exchange, and collective action. Research on post-disaster recovery similarly demonstrates that social networks can substantially influence communities' capacity to mobilise resources and recover from disruption (Aldrich, 2012).

However, the relationship between social capital and resilience is not uniformly positive. Strong bonding ties may reinforce solidarity within particular groups while simultaneously reproducing exclusion or distrust towards outsiders. The distinction between bonding, bridging, and linking social capital is therefore important: resilience depends not simply on the density of relationships but also on their capacity to connect communities across social boundaries and with institutions possessing authority and resources (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000; OECD, 2021).

These insights connect resilience scholarship with research on social cohesion. Contemporary approaches conceptualise cohesion as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing interpersonal relations, belonging, solidarity, participation, institutional trust, and orientation towards the common good (Chan, To, & Chan, 2006; Langer et al., 2017; UNDP, 2023). Particularly relevant is the distinction between horizontal cohesion, referring to relationships among individuals and social groups, and vertical cohesion, concerning relationships between citizens and institutions. The former includes reciprocity, interpersonal trust, civic participation, and cooperation, whereas the latter encompasses institutional trust, legitimacy, responsiveness, and recognition of public authority (Chan, To, & Chan, 2006; Langer et al., 2017).

Institutional trust occupies an important but ambiguous position within this relationship. Trust can facilitate compliance, reduce uncertainty, and support collective coordination, particularly during crises (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2003; Rothstein, 2011; OECD, 2017). Yet resilience does not necessarily require uniformly high confidence across all institutions. Citizens may distrust representative institutions while retaining confidence in local authorities, executive institutions, or socially embedded organisations. Similarly, low generalised interpersonal trust does not necessarily preclude community cooperation or crisis-specific mobilisation. The relevant question is therefore not simply how much trust exists, but whether existing institutional and social relationships can support collective action when required (Aldrich, 2012; Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013).

This distinction separates societal cohesion analytically from societal resilience. Cohesion concerns the quality and configuration of relationships connecting individuals, communities, and institutions; resilience concerns their capacity to sustain and adapt collective functioning under disruption. Cohesion should consequently be understood as a potential relational resource for resilience rather than as resilience itself. Its significance

becomes visible when networks, trust, institutional relationships, and civic capacities are mobilised under stress.

This relationship is particularly relevant in structurally vulnerable democracies, where crises are recurrent rather than exceptional. Much resilience research has focused on natural disasters, post-disaster recovery, or comparatively consolidated institutional settings (Norris et al., 2008; Aldrich, 2012). Less attention has been devoted to societies where socioeconomic vulnerability intersects with demographic decline, political polarisation, geopolitical competition, and information manipulation. Moldova represents an instructive case in this respect. Research documents persistent inequalities, migration, identity divisions, uneven institutional trust, and differentiated patterns of belonging and solidarity (Negură, Mocanu, & Potoroacă, 2019; Ivaşcu, Covrig, & Bătrînescu, 2021). Evidence from the COVID-19 period further demonstrates that institutional trust and social solidarity do not necessarily evolve together (Negură, Gaşper, & Potoroacă, 2021), while research on identity and security highlights the continuing importance of linguistic, geopolitical, and information-related cleavages (Putină, 2011, 2014, 2022, 2024; Costea, Putină, & Brie, 2024).

The literature therefore leaves an important question insufficiently addressed: how can structurally vulnerable societies characterised by fragmented trust nevertheless generate collective adaptive capacity? Addressing this question requires moving beyond static measures of cohesion towards the conditions under which social and institutional relationships become operational during disruption. The Moldovan case provides an opportunity to examine precisely this relationship.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIETAL COHESION AS A RELATIONAL FOUNDATION OF SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

This study conceptualises *societal cohesion* and *societal resilience* as analytically distinct but functionally interconnected phenomena. Following Chan, To, and Chan (2006), social cohesion concerns “both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society,” including trust, belonging, participation, mutual assistance, and their behavioural manifestations. Building on this multidimensional approach (Langer et al., 2017; UNDP, 2023), societal cohesion is defined here as the configuration of relationships connecting citizens, communities, social groups, and institutions in ways that permit cooperation and collective orientation despite social and political differences. Cohesion therefore does not imply homogeneity, consensus, or the absence of conflict.

The framework distinguishes between *vertical* and *horizontal cohesion*. Vertical cohesion concerns citizen–institution relations and encompasses institutional trust, perceived legitimacy, responsiveness, and willingness to cooperate with public authority. Institutional trust is treated as an indicator of this relationship rather than as synonymous with legitimacy. What matters for resilience is not necessarily uniformly high confidence in the entire political system, but whether institutions relevant to coordination retain sufficient credibility and authority to sustain collective action (Rothstein, 2011; OECD, 2017).

Horizontal cohesion concerns relationships among citizens, communities, and social groups and is expressed through social networks, reciprocity, solidarity, civic participation, and community cooperation. Drawing on social-capital theory, these relationships constitute resources capable of facilitating information exchange, mutual assistance, and collective action (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993, 2000; Woolcock &

Narayan, 2000; Aldrich, 2012). Their contribution to resilience depends, however, on whether they extend beyond closed networks and can be mobilised across social and institutional boundaries.

Societal resilience constitutes the outcome of this relational configuration. Norris et al. (2008, p. 127) define community resilience as “a process linking a set of networked adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation.” Similarly, Keck and Sakdapolrak (2013) distinguish coping, adaptive, and transformative capacities. Drawing on these approaches, societal resilience is understood here as the capacity to absorb disruption, preserve essential collective functions, adapt to changing circumstances, and, where necessary, transform existing arrangements.

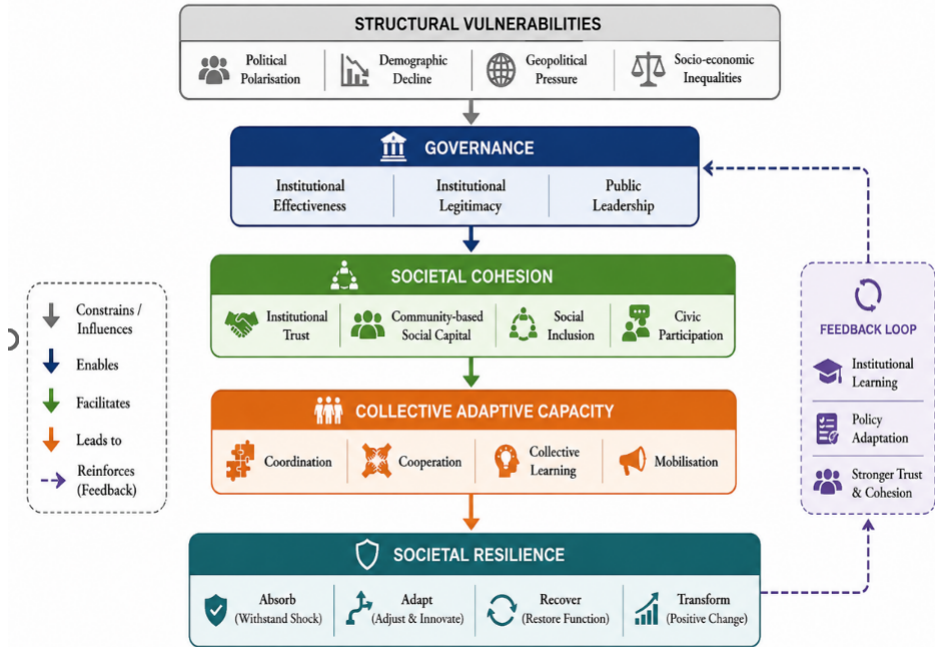
The central conceptual distinction is therefore straightforward: *cohesion represents a relational capacity*, whereas *resilience concerns the ability to convert available societal and institutional resources into effective adaptation under stress*. This distinction avoids assuming that high cohesion automatically produces resilience. Networks may remain socially segmented, institutional confidence may coexist with weak coordination, and strong bonding relationships may generate exclusion rather than society-wide cooperation. Conversely, comparatively modest levels of generalised trust may coexist with significant adaptive capacity where institutional and community relationships remain mobilisable.

To capture this dynamic dimension, the article introduces the concept of *adaptive social cohesion*, defined as the *capacity to mobilise and connect horizontal and vertical relational resources under conditions of disruption*. The concept shifts attention from cohesion understood as a static societal condition towards its operational capacity. Institutional trust, social networks, reciprocity, civic participation, and community cooperation constitute potential resources; their relevance to resilience emerges through their capacity to support coordination, cooperation, collective learning, and mobilisation.

The framework consequently places collective adaptive capacity between societal cohesion and resilience, as represented in *Figure 1*. Governance conditions shape the institutional environment in which cohesion develops, while structural vulnerabilities, including political polarisation, demographic decline, socioeconomic inequalities, and geopolitical pressure, constrain the broader context. Societal cohesion, through its vertical and horizontal dimensions, contributes to collective adaptive capacity, expressed through coordination, cooperation, mobilisation, and learning. These capacities, in turn, support the ability of society to absorb shocks, adapt, recover, and potentially transform (Norris et al., 2008; Aldrich, 2012; Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013).

The framework is not strictly linear. Resilience outcomes may also influence subsequent institutional and societal relationships through institutional learning, policy adaptation, and changes in public trust. The feedback relationship represented in *Figure 1* therefore recognises that cohesion and resilience can evolve iteratively rather than through a one-directional causal sequence.

Applied to Moldova, the framework directs attention to whether vertical institutional relationships and horizontal societal resources remain sufficiently functional and mobilisable despite structural vulnerability. The analytical expectation is therefore not that resilient societies must exhibit uniformly high levels of trust or cohesion. Rather, resilience should be associated with the capacity to connect and activate complementary institutional and societal resources when collective adaptation becomes necessary. This proposition provides the conceptual basis for the empirical analysis that follows.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework – how societal cohesion enables societal resilience

Source: elaborated by the author based on Norris et al. (2008), Rothstein (2011), Aldrich (2012), Keck and Sakdapolrak (2013), OECD (2017), and UNDP (2023).

STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITIES AS CONSTRAINTS ON SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

Existing theories of societal resilience would not predict the Republic of Moldova to emerge as a particularly resilient democracy. Across the resilience literature, the capacity of societies to absorb shocks, adapt to rapidly changing circumstances and preserve democratic continuity is understood to depend not only on institutional effectiveness but also on the broader structural conditions within which institutions and communities operate (Norris et al., 2008; Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013; OECD, 2017). Political fragmentation, demographic decline, socio-economic inequality and external security pressures are generally regarded as factors that constrain collective action by increasing coordination costs, weakening institutional legitimacy and reducing the social and material resources available for adaptation (Aldrich, 2012; Folke, 2006; Chandler, 2014). While individual vulnerabilities may not necessarily undermine resilience, their cumulative interaction substantially increases the likelihood that crises will generate institutional paralysis, social fragmentation and declining public confidence. From this theoretical perspective, societies simultaneously exposed to multiple structural constraints would be expected to display comparatively low levels of resilience.

The Republic of Moldova closely corresponds to this theoretical expectation. Since independence in 1991, the country has accumulated a combination of structural vulnerabilities that few European democracies experience simultaneously (Bolkvadze et al., 2024; Costea et al., 2024; Putină, 2022; (Putină, 2024). Democratic consolidation has evolved in parallel with persistent political polarisation, extensive labour migration, severe demographic decline, recurrent economic crises, chronic energy insecurity and

continuous geopolitical pressure arising from the unresolved Transnistrian conflict and Russia's broader regional strategy. Moldova's structural vulnerabilities are further reinforced by the intersection of religious affiliation, national identity and geopolitical orientation.

Although the constitutional framework is based on religious neutrality, dominant confessional institutions continue to play an important role in shaping political narratives and collective identities, thereby contributing both to social integration and to societal fragmentation depending on the political context (Putină, 2025). These challenges have not developed independently but have interacted over time, reinforcing one another and creating a complex environment in which state institutions have repeatedly been required to respond under conditions of limited resources, contested legitimacy and sustained external pressure (Way, 2015; Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2017; Putină, 2014). From the standpoint of existing resilience theories, Moldova therefore represents a particularly demanding case in which successful collective adaptation would appear unlikely.

Political fragmentation constitutes the *first major structural constraint*. Unlike many consolidated democracies, political competition in Moldova has historically reflected not only ideological differences but also competing geopolitical orientations, contested national identities and divergent strategic visions concerning the country's future. Electoral competition has therefore frequently extended beyond ordinary policy disagreements to encompass fundamental questions regarding European integration, relations with Romania, cooperation with the Russian Federation and the broader geopolitical orientation of the state. Such overlapping cleavages have periodically generated governmental instability, hindered policy continuity and complicated consensus-building during periods of crisis. Resilience research consistently suggests that institutional coordination becomes substantially more difficult when political contestation undermines the legitimacy of public authorities or transforms crisis management into an extension of partisan conflict (Rothstein, 2011; Norris et al., 2008). Under these conditions, resilience theory would predict a reduced capacity for coordinated societal responses.

A *second structural constraint* derives from Moldova's long-term *demographic transformation*. Over the past three decades, the country has experienced one of the highest rates of labour migration in Europe, accompanied by sustained population decline, low fertility and accelerated population ageing. Beyond their demographic significance, these developments have reduced the availability of human capital, weakened local community networks and increased territorial disparities between urban and rural areas (World Bank, 2023; United Nations, 2024). Existing scholarship identifies demographic decline as a critical challenge for societal resilience because adaptive capacity depends not only on institutional resources but also on the density of social relationships through which information, mutual assistance and collective mobilisation are organised (Aldrich, 2012; Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013). Prolonged migration therefore affects resilience not simply by reducing population size but by diminishing the social infrastructure necessary for coordinated community responses.

These demographic pressures are compounded by *persistent socio-economic vulnerabilities*. Despite important progress in macroeconomic stabilisation and public sector reform, Moldova continues to face significant regional inequalities, relatively low income levels and recurring energy insecurity. The energy crisis following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine illustrated how rapidly external shocks can translate into domestic economic pressures affecting both households and public institutions. Socio-

economic vulnerability constrains resilience because it limits the capacity of both governments and citizens to absorb prolonged crises without generating wider social or political instability (OECD, 2022; World Bank, 2023). Consequently, adaptation becomes increasingly dependent upon effective institutional coordination and collective solidarity rather than material resources alone.

Perhaps the defining structural characteristic of contemporary Moldova, however, is its prolonged exposure to *geopolitical competition and hybrid threats*. The unresolved status of Transnistria, sustained foreign disinformation campaigns, cyber operations, economic coercion and the regional consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine have produced an environment characterised by persistent rather than episodic insecurity. Unlike conventional crises, hybrid threats gradually erode institutional legitimacy, amplify existing societal divisions and seek to undermine public trust over extended periods. They therefore challenge not only state capacity but also the societal cohesion necessary for effective collective action (European External Action Service, 2023; NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2023; Putină, 2024). Rather than representing isolated episodes of instability, these pressures have become enduring features of Moldova's political and security environment.

INSTITUTIONAL LEGITIMACY AS A RESOURCE OF SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

Institutional legitimacy represents a fundamental dimension of societal cohesion because it shapes the relationship between citizens and public authorities and determines the willingness of individuals to cooperate with collective decisions during periods of uncertainty. Within the UNDP framework, this corresponds to the vertical dimension of social cohesion, while resilience scholarship consistently demonstrates that legitimate institutions reduce uncertainty, facilitate compliance with public policies and strengthen collective adaptive capacity (Norris et al., 2008; Rothstein, 2011; OECD, 2017; UNDP, 2023). Importantly, resilience does not require uniformly high levels of trust across all public institutions. Rather, it depends on the existence of sufficient institutional legitimacy to enable coordinated collective action when societies are confronted with crises.

Longitudinal evidence from the Public Opinion Barometer (BOP, 2021-2025) indicates that the Republic of Moldova does not exhibit either a generalized crisis of institutional legitimacy or uniformly high levels of institutional trust. Instead, citizens display a differentiated pattern of confidence across public institutions, suggesting that legitimacy is selectively distributed according to institutional roles rather than equally shared across the governance system (Table 1). This distinction is theoretically important because it challenges the assumption that resilience necessarily depends on generalized institutional trust. Instead, the Moldovan case suggests that selective legitimacy may provide a sufficient institutional foundation for collective action despite persistent structural vulnerabilities.

The *first notable pattern* concerns the gradual strengthening of legitimacy within the central executive institutions following a prolonged period of political instability. Public trust in the Government increased from 19% in 2021 to 33.8% in 2025, while confidence in Parliament rose from 15% to 32% during the same period. Although these levels remain below those commonly observed in consolidated democracies, they represent the highest values recorded during the last decade and coincide with a period characterised by accelerated European integration, institutional reforms and greater

policy consistency. The granting of European Union candidate status in 2022 and the opening of accession negotiations in 2024 provided an important external anchor for domestic reforms and may have reinforced citizens' perceptions of governmental effectiveness and policy credibility (European Commission, 2024; Institute for Public Policy, 2021–2025). Rather than demonstrating the emergence of high institutional trust, these developments indicate a gradual strengthening of institutional legitimacy sufficient to facilitate coordinated public action.

A *second pattern* concerns the remarkable stability of institutions associated with continuity, security and proximity to citizens. Throughout the observation period, the Presidency consistently enjoyed substantially higher levels of public confidence than Parliament or political parties, despite fluctuations associated with changes in political leadership. Trust reached 50.5% during Vladimir Voronin's presidency in 2006, 43.1% under Igor Dodon in 2017, 52.5% during Maia Sandu's first year in office in 2021 and remained comparatively high at 44.4% in 2025. Similarly, local public administration maintained the highest and most stable levels of confidence, fluctuating between 55% and nearly 60%, while the Church remained the most trusted institution despite a gradual decline from approximately 73% to 65.6%. Although operating within different institutional domains, these actors share an important characteristic: their legitimacy is derived less from partisan political competition than from their perceived capacity to provide continuity, stability and direct engagement with citizens. This suggests that institutional proximity and sustained social interaction constitute important sources of legitimacy within Moldovan society. The prominent position of religious institutions within Moldovan society also illustrates that institutional legitimacy extends beyond formal state institutions. High public trust in the Church reflects its continuing role as a source of social authority and symbolic legitimacy, even though its political involvement may also reinforce identity-based divisions (Putină, 2025).

By contrast, institutions directly associated with political competition continue to experience persistent legitimacy deficits. Political parties remained the least trusted democratic institutions throughout the entire observation period, while the judiciary continued to display comparatively low levels of public confidence despite the extensive justice reform agenda initiated after 2021. These findings reinforce a well-established distinction in governance research between formal institutional reforms and perceived institutional effectiveness. Institutional transformation alone does not automatically generate legitimacy unless citizens perceive that reforms translate into more effective, transparent and accountable governance (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2003; Rothstein, 2011).

Beyond aggregate levels of trust, the evolution of public attitudes reveals another important characteristic of institutional legitimacy in Moldova. Historical BOP data indicate that improvements in confidence have occurred primarily through a gradual decline in strong distrust rather than through a substantial increase in unconditional trust. In other words, institutional legitimacy has evolved through the moderation of negative public attitudes rather than through the emergence of widespread institutional enthusiasm. This distinction is analytically important because resilience depends less on unconditional political support than on citizens' willingness to recognise the authority and credibility of institutions responsible for managing collective challenges.

From the perspective of societal resilience, these findings offer several important theoretical implications. *First*, the Moldovan case demonstrates that resilience does not necessarily require uniformly high levels of institutional trust. Instead, resilience may

emerge from a differentiated configuration of legitimacy in which institutions responsible for ensuring continuity, crisis coordination, and everyday public administration retain substantially higher levels of public confidence than institutions primarily associated with partisan political competition. *Second*, the gradual strengthening of executive legitimacy after 2021 appears to have expanded the state's capacity to coordinate collective responses during successive crises, including the refugee emergency triggered by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the energy crisis and the intensification of hybrid threats. *Finally*, the evidence suggests that institutional legitimacy should be understood not merely as an indicator of democratic performance but as a strategic resilience resource that mediates the relationship between societal cohesion and collective adaptive capacity. However, vertical cohesion alone cannot fully explain Moldova's resilience. Institutional legitimacy created favourable conditions for coordinated action, but the effectiveness of crisis responses also depended upon horizontal forms of societal cooperation, including social capital, civic engagement and community solidarity. It is to these complementary dimensions of societal cohesion that the analysis now turns.

Table 1. Public Trust in key political and social institutions in the Republic of Moldova according to the Public Opinion Barometer (2021–2025, %)

Institution	Jun. 2021	Oct. 2022	Aug. 2023	Oct. 2024	Sep. 2025
Government	19	28	28.4	24	33.8
Parliament	15	24	26.7	20	32.0
Presidency	47	34	35.8	35	44.4
Justice System	19	18	22.5	15	27.5
Army	42	27	32.6	30	35.8
City Hall / Local Administration	55	56	55.4	55	59.9
Church	73	63	58.0	63	65.6
Political Parties	19	17	17.3	9	22.5

Note: Values are cumulative percentages of “very much confident” + “some confidence” responses. For June 2021 and October 2022, values come from historical BOP series published in the annexes and historical tables of subsequent reports; for 2023–2025, they are also confirmed in the respective wave reports. Some historical values are rounded to the nearest whole number

Source: Public Opinion Barometer, IPP, 2021–2025

HORIZONTAL COHESION AS A RESOURCE OF SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

The previous sections argued that the Republic of Moldova represents a particularly demanding case for the study of societal resilience. Persistent demographic decline, large-scale labour migration, socioeconomic disparities, political polarization and sustained geopolitical pressure constitute structural vulnerabilities that, according to resilience scholarship, would normally reduce both institutional effectiveness and society's capacity for coordinated collective action (Norris et al., 2008; Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013; OECD, 2021). The analysis also demonstrated that these constraints have been partially offset by a differentiated pattern of institutional legitimacy, whereby citizens maintain comparatively higher levels of confidence in institutions associated with continuity, public administration and crisis management than in representative political actors. Religious communities may also constitute important reservoirs of social capital by facilitating

solidarity, mutual assistance and collective mobilisation, although their contribution to societal cohesion depends on the extent to which they foster inclusive rather than exclusionary identities (Putină, 2025). This vertical dimension of societal cohesion contributes to explaining how public institutions preserve sufficient legitimacy to coordinate collective responses during periods of uncertainty. However, institutional legitimacy alone cannot fully explain the country's repeated capacity to cope with successive crises. Understanding Moldova's resilience also requires examining the horizontal relationships linking citizens to one another and the ways in which these relationships facilitate collective action beyond formal state structures.

Within contemporary political science and sociology, these horizontal relationships are commonly conceptualised through the notion of social capital. Although definitions differ, most converge around the idea that social capital consists of networks, norms of reciprocity and social relationships that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993; Putnam, 2000). Unlike material or financial resources, social capital resides in patterns of interaction between individuals and communities and becomes politically relevant because it reduces coordination costs, facilitates information exchange and enables cooperation under conditions of uncertainty (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). These characteristics have made social capital one of the principal explanatory frameworks for understanding why societies facing comparable external shocks frequently display markedly different levels of adaptive capacity (Aldrich, 2012).

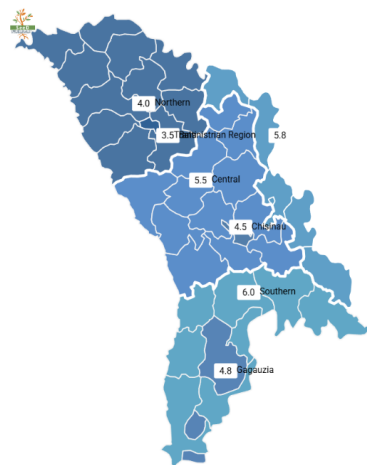
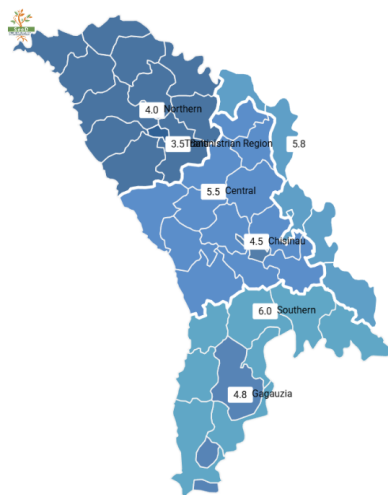
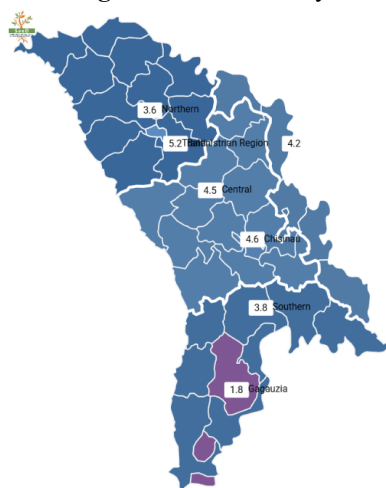
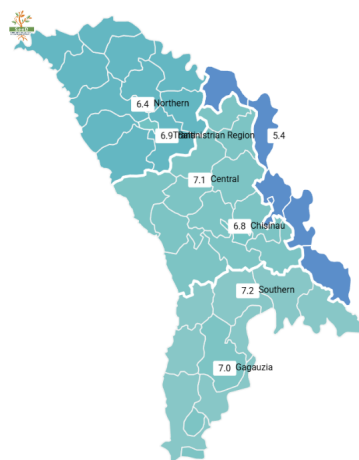
The relationship between social capital and resilience has, however, evolved considerably within the literature. Early approaches frequently relied on generalised interpersonal trust as the principal indicator of social capital and implicitly assumed that societies characterised by higher levels of trust would also demonstrate greater resilience (Putnam, 2000). More recent scholarship has adopted a broader perspective by arguing that resilience depends less on the absolute level of trust than on the capacity of social networks to generate collective action when confronted with external stress (Aldrich, 2012; Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013). Similarly, Langer et al. (2017) conceptualise social cohesion as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing social relations, connectedness, civic participation and orientation towards the common good, while the OECD (2021) distinguishes between bonding, bridging and linking forms of social capital, emphasising that resilient societies depend not only on close interpersonal ties but also on cooperation across social groups and effective relationships between citizens and institutions. From this perspective, resilience emerges not simply from the existence of interpersonal trust but from society's ability to transform existing social relationships into coordinated collective action.

This distinction is particularly relevant for the Republic of Moldova. Classical expectations derived from social capital theory would not predict especially favourable conditions for the development of horizontal cohesion. During the last three decades, Moldova has experienced one of the highest emigration rates in Europe, sustained demographic decline, rapid population ageing, significant regional disparities and repeated episodes of political instability. These processes have reduced the density of local social networks, weakened intergenerational continuity and limited opportunities for long-term civic participation, particularly within rural communities. In parallel, empirical studies consistently report comparatively modest levels of generalised interpersonal trust, with confidence remaining concentrated primarily within family networks and close acquaintances rather than extending towards wider society (Negură, Mocanu, & Potoroacă, 2019; Ivaşcu, Covrig, & Bătrînescu, 2021).

Considered independently, these structural characteristics would suggest comparatively weak social capital and limited societal capacity for collective mobilisation. Recent empirical evidence nevertheless presents a considerably more nuanced picture. Rather than exhibiting uniformly low levels of horizontal cohesion, Moldova appears to combine relatively modest levels of generalised interpersonal trust with comparatively strong capacities for civic participation, community cooperation and collective mobilisation during periods of crisis. This apparent paradox constitutes one of the central empirical observations emerging from recent assessments of social cohesion in the country. Rather than contradicting existing theories of social capital, the Moldovan experience suggests that adaptive capacity depends not exclusively on the stock of trust accumulated during periods of normality but also on society's ability to activate latent social resources when confronted with external shocks. In this sense, social capital should be understood less as a static societal characteristic than as a dynamic resource whose practical significance becomes visible when communities face situations requiring rapid coordination, mutual assistance and collective problem-solving (Aldrich, 2012).

To examine these mechanisms empirically, this article draws on the *Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Index Moldova 2022*, one of the most comprehensive assessments of social cohesion available for the Republic of Moldova. Unlike conventional public opinion surveys centred on institutional trust or interpersonal attitudes, the SCORE framework captures behavioural and relational dimensions of cohesion that are directly relevant for societal resilience. Three indicators are particularly informative: *Active Citizenship*, *Community Coherence* and *Cooperation*, and *Civic Optimism*. Together, they assess society's capacity to mobilise collective action, sustain cooperation and maintain confidence in addressing common challenges under conditions of uncertainty (SCORE Moldova, 2022).

Before examining these dimensions individually, it is useful to consider their territorial distribution. Despite marked regional differences in socioeconomic development, demographic dynamics and electoral behaviour, the *SCORE Index* reveals a relatively consistent pattern of social cohesion across most of the country. Southern (7.2), Central (7.1), Gagauzia (7.0), the Security Zone (6.9), Chişinău (6.8) and Northern Moldova (6.4) all record comparatively similar levels, while the territory outside the constitutional control of the Republic of Moldova scores substantially lower (5.4). Although these values should not be interpreted as direct measures of resilience, they suggest that the social foundations of cooperation are geographically widespread rather than confined to the country's most prosperous regions.

Figure 2. Active Citizenship**Figure 3. Civic optimism****Figure 4. Civic identity****Figure 5. Community Coherence and Cooperation**

Source: Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Index Moldova 2022

This territorial consistency carries important theoretical implications. First, it indicates that everyday cooperation has remained considerably more stable than Moldova's highly polarised political landscape, suggesting that political and geopolitical divisions have not translated into an equivalent fragmentation of local social relations. Second, the weaker cohesion observed in territories beyond effective governmental control reinforces broader theoretical expectations that prolonged political separation can erode shared civic ties. Overall, the SCORE evidence supports the argument that horizontal cohesion constitutes a relatively robust societal resource despite persistent structural vulnerabilities.

The three SCORE dimensions illuminate complementary mechanisms linking cohesion to resilience. Active citizenship reflects citizens' willingness to participate in volunteer initiatives and community problem-solving beyond formal political institutions. Such participation expands adaptive capacity by facilitating rapid

mobilisation, strengthening reciprocity and creating networks that can be activated during crises (Aldrich, 2012; Langer et al., 2017). Importantly, the Moldovan evidence suggests that civic engagement persists despite comparatively modest confidence in representative political institutions, indicating that political distrust does not necessarily translate into civic disengagement.

Community coherence and cooperation capture the quality of everyday social relations, including mutual assistance, solidarity and collective problem-solving. SCORE findings show that practical cooperation at the local level remains comparatively strong despite enduring political and geopolitical cleavages. Rather than fragmenting communities, these divisions appear largely confined to the political sphere, while local cooperation continues to revolve around shared practical concerns. This reinforces the argument that resilient societies are distinguished less by the absence of political conflict than by their capacity to preserve cooperation despite disagreement (Aldrich, 2012; Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013).

Civic optimism reflects citizens' expectations regarding their communities' ability to overcome future challenges. The SCORE results indicate that optimism is associated more closely with perceptions of local cooperation than with evaluations of governmental performance. This finding suggests that confidence in collective efficacy emerges primarily from previous experiences of successful cooperation rather than from favourable structural conditions alone (Bandura, 1997; Aldrich, 2012).

These three dimensions support a broader theoretical argument. Moldova's resilience cannot be explained solely by institutional performance or generalised interpersonal trust. Instead, it emerges from the interaction of civic participation, community cooperation and shared expectations of collective efficacy, which together enable society to transform latent social resources into coordinated action during periods of crisis.

The practical significance of these mechanisms became particularly evident following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Beyond its immediate humanitarian implications, the resulting displacement of civilians constitutes a critical empirical test of the theoretical expectations developed above. If horizontal cohesion genuinely contributes to societal resilience, its effects should become visible precisely during an external shock requiring rapid mobilisation, extensive coordination and sustained cooperation among governmental institutions, civil society organisations and local communities (International Organization for Migration, 2023).

The scale of the humanitarian challenge was unprecedented for the Republic of Moldova. During the first year of the war, approximately 750,000 people crossed the Moldovan border from Ukraine. Although many subsequently continued towards other European countries, more than 100,000 refugees remained in Moldova by the end of 2022, making the country one of the largest refugee-hosting states in Europe relative to its resident population (UNHCR, 2023). Around 60% of registered refugees were women, approximately 40% were children, while older persons and individuals with disabilities required particularly intensive forms of humanitarian assistance (UNHCR, 2023).

From a purely structural perspective, Moldova appeared poorly positioned to respond effectively to a crisis of this magnitude. Limited fiscal resources, comparatively modest administrative capacity and existing demographic pressures would normally be expected to constrain emergency response. Yet the humanitarian mobilisation that followed proved considerably more extensive than these structural characteristics alone

would have predicted. Rather than relying exclusively on governmental institutions, the response emerged through the rapid interaction of central authorities, local governments, civil society organisations, religious institutions, international organisations and thousands of individual volunteers. Families opened their homes to displaced persons, volunteers organised transportation from border crossing points, local communities collected food, clothing and medicines, while municipalities, schools and universities rapidly adapted existing infrastructure to accommodate emergency needs. Organisations such as Diaconia, Concordia Moldova, Keystone Moldova, Moldova pentru Pace and numerous local volunteer initiatives complemented the activities of public authorities and international organisations, including UNHCR, IOM, UNICEF and UNDP, thereby substantially expanding the country's operational response capacity.

The refugee response illustrates an important characteristic of societal resilience. Adaptive capacity did not emerge solely from governmental preparedness or institutional resources. Instead, it resulted from the interaction between formal institutions and pre-existing networks of civic engagement and community cooperation. Existing social relationships were activated rapidly, new volunteer initiatives emerged spontaneously, and collaboration between state and non-state actors intensified within a remarkably short period. These observations are consistent with Aldrich's (2012) argument that social capital functions as an operational resource that expands societies' capacity to respond to crises beyond what formal institutional resources alone would permit.

Importantly, the effects of this mobilisation extended beyond the immediate humanitarian emergency. Numerous volunteer initiatives evolved into permanent civic organisations, cooperation between local administrations and civil society became more institutionalised, and communities accumulated practical experience in emergency coordination, humanitarian logistics and crisis management. Although the long-term durability of these developments remains to be assessed, they suggest that crisis-induced cooperation may itself contribute to strengthening future adaptive capacity by reinforcing relationships of trust, organisational learning and inter-institutional collaboration.

These findings should not, however, be interpreted as evidence that Moldova has overcome its structural constraints. Labour migration continues to reduce the density of local community networks, particularly in rural areas; demographic ageing limits opportunities for civic renewal; regional socioeconomic disparities create unequal conditions for participation; and generalised interpersonal trust remains comparatively modest beyond immediate family circles (Negură, Mocanu, & Potoroacă, 2019; Ivaşcu, Covrig, & Bătrînescu, 2021). These factors remain significant challenges for the long-term development of social capital and should caution against overly optimistic interpretations of Moldova's resilience.

Nevertheless, the evidence presented in this section suggests that these structural vulnerabilities do not necessarily preclude the emergence of substantial societal resilience. Rather than depending exclusively on consistently high levels of interpersonal trust, resilience appears to derive from society's capacity to activate existing networks of cooperation, civic engagement and institutional collaboration when confronted with external shocks. The Moldovan case is therefore consistent with what may be conceptualised as a form of adaptive social cohesion—a dynamic configuration in which latent social resources become operational during periods of crisis, enabling public institutions, civil society organisations and local communities to coordinate effective collective responses despite persistent structural vulnerabilities. Although further comparative research is required to assess the broader applicability of this concept, the

Moldovan experience suggests that adaptive capacity may depend as much on the mobilisation of existing social resources as on their underlying level during periods of normality.

Conclusions

This article examined how and under what conditions societal cohesion contributes to societal resilience in the Republic of Moldova. The Moldovan case presents an important empirical puzzle: persistent demographic decline, extensive migration, socioeconomic inequalities, political polarisation, uneven institutional trust, and sustained geopolitical pressure coexist with a demonstrated capacity to maintain collective functioning and adapt to successive periods of disruption. The analysis therefore suggests that structural vulnerability, while constraining resilience, does not in itself determine societal responses to crisis.

The findings point to the importance of the configuration and mobilisation of vertical and horizontal dimensions of societal cohesion. On the vertical dimension, institutional trust is uneven rather than uniformly high, with substantial differences across political, administrative, and socially embedded institutions. This differentiated pattern suggests that resilience does not require comprehensive confidence in the political system. Rather, the persistence of trust in institutions associated with continuity, proximity, and coordination can provide an important institutional basis for collective action. On the horizontal dimension, evidence of active citizenship, community cooperation, social networks, and civic engagement indicates the presence of relational resources capable of extending adaptive capacity beyond the formal resources of the state. These dimensions are best understood as complementary: institutional capacity provides coordination and authority, while societal networks expand the reach, flexibility, and mobilisational capacity of collective responses.

The Moldovan case consequently qualifies a common assumption linking resilience to uniformly high levels of generalised trust. Comparatively modest interpersonal trust does not necessarily imply weak societal resilience when existing institutional and community relationships remain capable of supporting cooperation under stress. This distinction shifts analytical attention from the level of cohesion as a static societal attribute to its capacity for activation. The findings therefore support the concept of adaptive social cohesion developed in this article: the capacity to mobilise and connect vertical and horizontal relational resources in response to disruption. From this perspective, cohesion becomes consequential for resilience when institutional relationships, civic networks, reciprocity, and community cooperation can be translated into coordination, mobilisation, and collective adaptation.

This interpretation contributes to resilience scholarship in two respects. *First*, it reinforces the need to distinguish societal cohesion from societal resilience: cohesion represents a relational foundation, whereas resilience concerns what societies are able to do with available institutional and social resources when confronted with disruption. *Second*, it suggests that the relationship between the two is dynamic rather than linear. Structural vulnerabilities constrain adaptive capacity, governance shapes the institutional conditions for collective action, and cohesion provides relational resources whose mobilisation can strengthen societal responses. Resilience outcomes may, in turn, influence subsequent trust, institutional learning, and patterns of cooperation, making the relationship potentially iterative rather than unidirectional.

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FRAMING SOCIETAL SECURITY IN EUROPEAN BORDER REGIONS: COHESION, RESILIENCE AND MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE

Cristian BENTE*

Abstract. *This article examines how societal security is framed in European border-region policy and how resilience priorities are reflected in Romania's disaster-risk governance. It applies qualitative, theory-guided document analysis to a corpus of four European Union border-region documents and one Romanian national strategy published from 2017 to 2025, comparing developments across time and governance levels. The framework combines framing, societal security, securitisation, translations of security and multi-level governance. The findings show that border-region policy did not shift linearly from cohesion to security. Preparedness and resilience were instead layered onto continuing commitments to territorial cohesion, mobility, public services and the removal of legal and administrative obstacles. Referent objects broadened from citizens, businesses and regional development to essential services, healthcare, infrastructure, institutional capacity, vulnerable groups and community welfare. This pattern reflects functional societal security and resilience-oriented governance rather than successful securitisation. Romania's strategy aligns directly with the European disaster-resilience framework, especially the Union Disaster Resilience Goals. Its relationship with border-region policy, however, indicates conceptual convergence and functional compatibility rather than demonstrated policy transfer. The article concludes that cross-border resilience depends on coordinated, inclusive multi-level governance.*

Keywords: *European border regions; societal security; resilience; securitisation; translations of security; multi-level governance.*

1. INTRODUCTION

European border regions occupy a distinctive position within European integration. Internal land border regions cover approximately 40 per cent of European Union (EU) territory and account for around 30 per cent of its population and gross domestic product (European Commission, 2017: 2-3). Their dependence on cross-border employment, healthcare, transport, education and public services means that legal and administrative discontinuities can generate social and institutional vulnerability.

EU border-region policy initially addressed these vulnerabilities predominantly through cohesion, territorial development and administrative cooperation. The Commission's 2017 Communication identified legal and administrative differences, limited interoperability and unequal access to public services as obstacles preventing citizens and businesses from benefiting fully from European integration. It therefore promoted institutional cooperation, information exchange, mutual recognition and the joint provision of services (European Commission, 2017: 2-6).

* PhD, "Vasile Goldiș" Western University of Arad, Romania, E-mail: bente.cristian@uvvg.ro.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of these arrangements when internal border controls and crossing-point closures disrupted employment, healthcare, essential supplies and mobility. The Commission's 2021 report consequently placed greater emphasis on crisis coordination, preparedness and resilient cross-border services while retaining cohesion and obstacle removal (European Commission, 2021: 1-2, 5-9). A 2024 expert study commissioned by the European Commission subsequently developed the cross-border resilience agenda through analysis of shared risks, institutional capacity and disaster-management arrangements (Technopolis Group et al., 2024: xvii-xxiv, 44-66). Regulation (EU) 2025/925, however, continued to address border-region problems principally through procedures for resolving legal and administrative obstacles affecting infrastructure, services and territorial development (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2025, recitals 3-9 and Articles 1-4). This sequence suggests policy layering, understood here as the addition of preparedness and resilience priorities to an enduring cohesion framework.

Existing research has examined cross-border cooperation, territorial integration and the effects of crises on border mobility (Perkmann, 2003; Medeiros, 2018; Medeiros et al., 2021). Less attention has been given to the diachronic movement from cohesion to resilience in EU border-region policy and to the translation of these priorities across European and national governance levels. The article addresses this gap from an International Relations and Security Studies perspective.

This development raises a Security Studies question concerning what is protected and how. The Copenhagen School associated societal security with the preservation of collective identity under changing conditions (Wæver et al., 1993; Buzan et al., 1998: 119-140), while a functional interpretation emphasises vital societal functions, essential services, critical infrastructure and institutional capacity during disruption (Rhinard, 2020: 22-42). Although border regions may connect identity and belonging with cross-border interdependence, the selected corpus foregrounds the functional dimension.

The translations-of-security framework helps examine how referent objects, unwanted futures and security priorities are reformulated across EU, national, regional and operational settings (Villumsen Berling et al., 2022). Multi-level governance complements this perspective by locating those processes within a system of functionally interconnected territories and territorially differentiated competences (Piattoni, 2010: 1-14). Translation therefore concerns institutional and conceptual reformulation, not linguistic transfer. The increasing prominence of risk and resilience is also not assumed to demonstrate securitisation. The analysis distinguishes ordinary policy and risk management from resilience-oriented security governance and from securitising logic based on existential threat construction and exceptional justification (Buzan et al., 1998: 21-26).

Against this background, the study examines how policy documents published between 2017 and 2025 construct problems affecting European border regions, identify societal functions and communities requiring protection, and allocate responsibility for future disruption. Romania's National Disaster Risk Reduction Strategy 2024-2035 provides a national governance perspective on the relationship between European resilience objectives and national disaster-risk governance (Government of Romania, 2024: 17-18, 26-27). It is not treated as a border-region case study or as evidence of direct policy transfer.

The article argues that resilience and preparedness have been added to, rather than substituted for, cohesion, integration and obstacle removal. Border regions are increasingly represented as functionally interdependent spaces in which disruption may affect services,

infrastructure, mobility and institutional capacity across jurisdictions. This increases their relevance to societal-security analysis without demonstrating successful securitisation. The relationship between European resilience objectives and Romanian disaster-risk governance is similarly selective, combining direct alignment with the broader disaster-resilience framework and conceptual convergence with the border-region agenda.

The article first presents the research design and literature, then develops the analytical framework, examines the documentary findings, and discusses their implications for societal security, resilience and multi-level governance.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Research design and research questions

The study employs qualitative, theory-guided document analysis and structured comparison of EU and Romanian policy documents published between 2017 and 2025. Documents are treated as institutional texts that define and legitimise policy problems, responsibilities and responses (Bowen, 2009: 27-40). Situated in International Relations and Security Studies, the design uses framing to identify problem construction, referent objects and recommended responses (Entman, 1993: 52), together with societal-security, securitisation and translations-of-security perspectives (Buzan et al., 1998: 21-26, 119-140; Williams, 2003: 511-531; Villumsen Berling et al., 2022). It does not undertake linguistic, translation or communication research.

The analysis addresses three research questions. RQ1 asks how EU framing of problems affecting European border regions evolved from cohesion and obstacle removal towards preparedness and resilience between 2017 and 2025. RQ2 examines how the selected documents construct referent objects, unwanted futures, responsible actors and policy responses. RQ3 asks how security and resilience priorities are translated between EU border-region policy and Romanian disaster-risk governance, and whether the resulting configurations reflect ordinary risk governance, resilience-oriented security governance or securitising logic. These questions support diachronic comparison of EU policy and vertical comparison across governance levels; they concern institutional constructions of risk rather than the objective severity of risk in particular territories.

2.2. Document selection and composition of the corpus

The corpus was selected purposively to compare institutionally significant stages rather than exhaustively collect documents mentioning borders, crises or resilience. Inclusion required publication by an EU institution, the Romanian Government or an organisation commissioned by an EU institution; relevance to border regions, cross-border cooperation, resilience or disaster-risk management; publication between 2017 and 2025; availability in English or Romanian; and a complete, final institutional version. Press releases, media and party-political texts, project publicity, non-final proposals and documents outside the author's working languages were excluded.

Table 1. Composition and analytical role of the central document corpus

Code	Document	Institutional status	Function in the analysis
D1	European Commission, Boosting Growth and Cohesion in EU Border Regions, COM(2017) 534 final	Official European Commission communication	Establishes the cohesion, integration and border-obstacle framework

Code	Document	Institutional status	Function in the analysis
D2	European Commission, EU Border Regions: Living Labs of European Integration, COM(2021) 393 final	Official European Commission report	Examines the effects of the COVID-19 crisis and introduces institutional resilience and preparedness more explicitly
D3	Technopolis Group, CMCC and Nordregio, Strengthening the Resilience of EU Border Regions, 2024	Expert study commissioned by the European Commission	Provides a systematic analysis of cross-border risks, institutional capacities and disaster-management arrangements
D4	Regulation (EU) 2025/925 on a Border Regions' Instrument for Development and Growth, BRIDGEforEU	Binding EU legislative instrument	Tests whether cohesion and obstacle removal remain central after the increased policy emphasis on resilience
D5	Government of Romania, National Disaster Risk Reduction Strategy 2024-2035	National strategy approved by Government Decision No. 791/2024	Provides a national perspective on disaster-risk governance, societal resilience and the institutional distribution of responsibilities

Source: Author’s compilation based on the documents included in the central corpus.

D1 to D4 form the diachronic EU sequence, while D5 provides a national governance perspective. D3 is treated as commissioned expert analysis, not as an adopted Commission position. D5 is neither representative of all Member States nor a Romanian border-region case study. Its relevance derives from its relationship with the Union Civil Protection Mechanism and the Union Disaster Resilience Goals, and from Romania’s combination of internal EU borders and borders on the Union’s external frontier.

Additional instruments concerning civil protection, Interreg and critical-entity resilience clarify the institutional context but were not fully coded. The Commission Recommendation on Union Disaster Resilience Goals, designated C1, supports the vertical comparison because D5 refers explicitly to those goals. It is not a sixth central document because it does not specifically concern border-region policy (European Commission, 2023: 1-11).

2.3. Unit of analysis and coding framework

The unit of analysis is a meaning-bearing policy passage, such as a paragraph, legislative recital, article, recommendation or bounded table entry. A passage was coded when it connected a policy problem with a referent object, unwanted future, responsible actor or proposed response. The initial framework was deductive, drawing on framing, societal security, securitisation and translations of security, with limited inductive refinement for recurrent themes not captured by the initial categories.

Table 2. Coding categories and operational indicators

Code	Coding Category	Operational indicator
PC	Problem construction	The obstacle, disruption, vulnerability, hazard or institutional deficiency presented as requiring intervention
RO	Referent object	The community, societal function, institution, infrastructure or value presented as requiring protection
UF	Unwanted future	The harmful development or condition that the document seeks to prevent, reduce or manage
RA	Responsible actors	The public, private or societal actors assigned responsibility for intervention, coordination or implementation
PR	Policy response	The legal, administrative, financial, institutional or operational response proposed by the document
TO	Temporal orientation	The emphasis placed on existing obstacles, lessons from previous crises, preparation for future disruption or long-term resilience
SI	Security intensity	Classification as developmental and cohesion-oriented governance, ordinary risk governance, resilience-oriented security governance or securitising logic
TP	Translation process	Preservation, broadening, narrowing, recontextualisation or functional reformulation across documents or governance levels

Source: Author's analytical framework based on Entman (1993), Buzan et al. (1998), Williams (2003) and Villumsen Berling et al. (2022).

Security intensity distinguishes developmental and cohesion-oriented governance, ordinary risk governance, resilience-oriented security governance and securitising logic. The last category requires existential threat construction and urgent or exceptional justification; isolated references to risk, crisis, security or threat are insufficient. Because the corpus does not provide evidence of audience response, it cannot demonstrate successful securitisation. The five translation processes are study-specific operational categories informed by Villumsen Berling et al. (2022), not a typology reproduced directly from that work. Similar terminology is not treated automatically as direct transfer, while different terms may perform comparable institutional functions.

2.4. Analytical procedure

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, each central document was read in full and coded using Table 2, with the matrix recording the document code, source location, evidence summary, applied codes and analytical classification. Second, D1 to D4 were compared diachronically to trace the development from the 2017 cohesion baseline through the crisis and resilience emphasis of 2021 and 2024 to BRIDGEforEU in 2025. Third, passages were compared across referent objects, unwanted futures, responsible actors and responses. Fourth, EU findings were compared with D5 to identify preservation, broadening, narrowing, recontextualisation or functional reformulation. Direct translation required an explicit institutional relationship; otherwise, compatibility

was classified as conceptual convergence or functional compatibility rather than causal policy transfer.

Coding was manual because word frequencies cannot establish meaning across documents of different lengths, legal statuses and purposes. Consistency was supported by explicit decision rules, source locations, evidence summaries and attention to contrary passages. The complete coding matrix is retained by the author and is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. As one researcher conducted the coding, the study does not claim inter-coder reliability, and the framework does not eliminate the interpretative character of qualitative analysis.

2.5. Scope and limitations

The study examines institutional constructions of border-region security, not the objective incidence of risk or policy implementation. It does not include interviews with policymakers, border authorities, emergency professionals or communities and therefore cannot assess local practice, audience acceptance or residents' experiences. The corpus also combines documents with different authorship, legal authority and institutional purposes; D5 supplies one national perspective and is not representative of the EU as a whole.

English and Romanian are the study's working languages. No claims are made about linguistic translation, language change or communication effectiveness. The documents are publicly available institutional sources, and the research involves neither human participants nor personal data.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature relevant to this study connects three fields: European border regions and cross-border governance; societal security and securitisation; and resilience, crisis governance and unwanted futures. Each explains part of the policy environment, but their intersection within EU border-region governance remains comparatively underexplored.

3.1. European border regions and cross-border governance

European border-region research has developed principally through studies of European integration, territorial cooperation and multi-level governance. Perkmann (2003: 153-171) demonstrates that cross-border regions are not naturally given territorial units but institutional constructs created through cooperation among public authorities operating within different national legal and administrative systems. Their development is closely connected to European regional policy, while their effectiveness depends on coordinating actors with unequal competences, resources and institutional traditions.

Medeiros (2018) situates cross-border cooperation within EU Cohesion Policy and Interreg, which have supported territorial integration, cross-border institutions and joint responses to shared problems. These processes have transformed rather than eliminated borders. Legal incompatibilities, administrative fragmentation, unequal capacity and divergent national implementation continue to reproduce border effects. Consequently, a region may be economically integrated yet institutionally vulnerable when transport, healthcare, employment, public services or emergency coordination depend on cooperation across jurisdictions.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed this dependence. Medeiros et al. (2021: 962-982) use "covidfencing" to describe the reintroduction of national restrictions that

interrupted mobility and territorial cooperation, often affecting cross-border workers, services and communities without adequate coordination between neighbouring states. This literature explains cross-border interdependence and disruption effectively, but crises are frequently analysed primarily as problems of mobility, integration and development. Less attention has been devoted to their role in reconstructing border regions as spaces of preparedness, institutional resilience and security-related governance.

3.2. Societal security and securitisation

The post-Cold War broadening of Security Studies created space for analysis beyond military threats to the state. The Copenhagen School placed collective identity at the centre of societal security, understood as a society's capacity to preserve its essential character under changing conditions (Wæver et al., 1993; Buzan et al., 1998: 119-140). Securitisation theory complemented this perspective by examining how actors construct existential threats to valued referent objects and seek to legitimise urgent or exceptional responses.

Later scholarship cautions against identifying securitisation through security vocabulary alone. Williams (2003: 511-531) locates security meaning within broader political and representational contexts, while Bigo (2002: 63-92) shows how insecurity may be generated through professional routines, classifications and administrative practices. The latter perspective is relevant to border governance because security may develop through routine institutional activity without a formal declaration of emergency.

Societal security has also acquired a functional interpretation concerned with vital societal functions, essential services, critical infrastructure and institutional continuity (Rhinard, 2020: 22-42). Larsson and Rhinard (2021) demonstrate that this approach varies across national histories, institutions and distributions of responsibility rather than constituting a uniform model. Identity-centred and functional perspectives are both relevant to border regions, where questions of belonging coexist with dependence on cross-border services and infrastructure. The selected corpus foregrounds the functional dimension, but references to vulnerability, resilience or essential services cannot by themselves establish securitisation.

3.3. Resilience, crisis governance and unwanted futures

Resilience has become prominent in security studies and public policy, although it has no single or politically neutral meaning. Dunn Cavelty et al. (2015: 3-14) show that resilience practices can redefine relations between security and insecurity, create new responsible subjects and connect lessons from past disruption to anticipated crises. Unlike approaches promising complete prevention, resilience generally assumes that some disruption is unavoidable and emphasises preparedness, adaptation, continuity and recovery. These objectives are commonly pursued through risk assessment, planning, exercises and institutional coordination, allowing security-related practices to expand without necessarily producing exceptional politics.

The literature on transboundary crisis management explains the institutional importance of resilience within the EU. Boin et al. (2013: 100-143) show that epidemics, disasters and infrastructure failures may cross territorial, jurisdictional and sectoral boundaries, exceed national response capacities and exploit interdependencies produced by European integration. Rhinard's concept of "crisisification" describes how anticipation, urgency and crisis-management instruments become embedded in ordinary

EU policymaking rather than remaining confined to declared emergencies (Rhinar, 2019: 616-633). Border regions make these dynamics particularly visible because disruptions may involve multiple legal systems, administrative hierarchies, emergency services and infrastructure operators.

Villumsen Berling et al. (2022) provide a framework for examining how understandings of security, risk and unwanted futures interact across professional fields, institutional cultures and governance scales. Translation here is conceptual and institutional, not linguistic: security priorities and responsibilities may be reformulated as they move between EU institutions, national governments, regional authorities and operational organisations. This perspective enables comparison between EU and Romanian policy without presuming uniform convergence or direct transfer. Its application to the diachronic development of EU border-region policy and national disaster-risk governance, however, remains limited.

3.4. Research gap and contribution of the study

The reviewed scholarship presents border regions as institutionally constructed spaces of interdependence, security as politically and administratively produced, and resilience as increasingly embedded in European crisis governance. Yet these fields have often developed along separate analytical paths. Border studies have emphasised cohesion, development and administrative obstacles; societal-security research has concentrated on identity and threat construction; and resilience scholarship has focused on preparedness, institutional capacity and uncertain futures.

The article addresses their intersection by examining whether preparedness and resilience displaced the earlier cohesion framework or became layered onto it, and how this development affected referent objects, unwanted futures, responsible actors and responses. It combines a diachronic comparison of EU border-region documents from 2017 to 2025 with a vertical comparison involving Romania's National Disaster Risk Reduction Strategy 2024-2035. The strategy supplies a national governance perspective, not a specific border-region case.

The comparison does not presume direct policy transfer. It examines how priorities are preserved or reformulated across governance levels and distinguishes ordinary risk governance, resilience-oriented security governance and securitising logic. In doing so, the study connects European border research with International Relations, Security Studies and EU crisis-governance scholarship.

4. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The framework combines policy framing, societal security, risk governance and securitisation, translations of security and multi-level governance. These perspectives identify how border-region problems are constructed, what is presented as requiring protection, how responses are classified and how meanings and responsibilities move across governance levels.

4.1. Framing as policy problem construction

Framing is used as a policy-analysis tool, not as a theory of language or communication. Entman (1993: 52) defines framing as selecting and making salient aspects of perceived reality in ways that promote a problem definition, causal interpretation, evaluation and treatment recommendation. Applied here, framing

identifies what a document constructs as the problem, why intervention is considered necessary, who or what is affected and which response is proposed.

Material events remain important, but their policy significance depends on institutional interpretation. A disruption to cross-border healthcare, for example, may be constructed as an administrative obstacle, cohesion failure, social vulnerability, essential-service risk or security concern. Documents may also combine frames: cohesion, preparedness and continuity can coexist rather than indicate analytical inconsistency. Frames are therefore identified through relationships among problem construction, referent objects, unwanted futures, responsible actors and responses, not through frequencies of isolated words. Cohesion-oriented framing connects mobility, services and integration to legal, administrative or developmental measures; resilience framing connects disruption and uncertainty to preparedness, continuity, adaptation and recovery. This comparison addresses RQ1 and supports RQ2.

4.2. Societal security and referent objects

A referent object is the entity presented as requiring protection from existential threat or serious harmful transformation (Buzan et al., 1998). The Copenhagen School's societal sector shifted attention from state survival to the continuity of collective identity. Wæver (1993: 23) conceptualises societal security as a society's ability to persist in its essential character under changing conditions and possible or actual threats. This identity-centred perspective is relevant to borders, which structure relationships among territorial authority, national identity, regional belonging and European integration. The analysis nevertheless does not infer a unified cross-border identity from institutional terminology.

Functional societal security concerns the continuity of essential services, critical infrastructure, public administration and other functions necessary for social life during disruption (Rhinar, 2020: 22-42). Identity-centred security protects the continuity of a collective "we", while functional security protects the systems on which social life depends. The dimensions may intersect but are not interchangeable. In border regions, relevant functions include transport, healthcare, energy, emergency response, labour mobility and administrative coordination.

The analysis considers four possible groups of referent objects: citizens and border communities; collective identity, cohesion and European integration; essential services, infrastructure and mobility systems; and institutions, governance arrangements and the internal market. These are analytical starting points, not predetermined findings. They operationalise RQ2 by clarifying what each document presents as vulnerable and worthy of protection.

4.3. Risk governance, resilience and securitising logic

Ordinary risk governance, resilience-oriented security governance and securitising logic are treated as analytical ideal types rather than mutually exclusive or normatively ranked categories. Ordinary risk governance addresses recognised hazards through established legal, administrative and policy procedures, including assessment, cooperation, information exchange, standards and civil-protection planning.

Resilience-oriented governance assumes that not every disruption can be prevented and emphasises anticipation, preparedness, resistance, continuity, adaptation and recovery. Such practices connect previous crises with unwanted futures and may redistribute responsibility among public authorities, organisations and citizens (Dunn

Cavelty et al., 2015: 3-14). Directive (EU) 2022/2557 similarly defines resilience through the capacities to prevent, protect against, respond to, resist, mitigate, absorb, accommodate and recover from incidents. It defines essential services by their importance to vital societal functions, economic activity, public health and safety or the environment (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022, Articles 2(2) and 2(5)). These definitions connect EU resilience policy with functional societal security.

Securitising logic has a higher threshold. It requires construction of an existential threat to a valued referent object together with urgent or exceptional justification (Buzan et al., 1998: 24-25). Terms such as risk, crisis, security or threat are insufficient when responses remain within ordinary procedures. Successful securitisation additionally requires audience acceptance. Because the corpus does not establish institutional, political or public reception, the analysis can identify possible securitising moves or logic but cannot demonstrate successful securitisation. This distinction permits recognition of the security relevance of routine governance without classifying every resilience measure as exceptional politics.

4.4. Translations of security across governance levels

The translations-of-security approach examines encounters among institutional understandings of security, risk, danger and unwanted futures (Villumsen Berling et al., 2022). Translation is conceptual and institutional, not linguistic. It occurs when priorities, referent objects or responsibilities are reformulated among EU institutions, national governments, regional authorities and operational organisations. Priorities rarely move unchanged: concern with critical infrastructure may become continuity of essential services, while an administrative obstacle may acquire resilience significance when disruption exposes its consequences.

The study operationalises translation through five processes. Preservation occurs when a category retains a comparable meaning across settings. Broadening adds referent objects, risks or responsible actors. Narrowing adapts a broad priority to a specific competence or responsibility. Recontextualisation places a priority within another policy field or governance setting. Functional reformulation uses different terminology to perform a comparable security function. These study-specific categories are informed by Villumsen Berling et al. (2022), not reproduced as a fixed typology from that work.

Translation is not inferred from terminology alone and does not by itself establish causal policy transfer. Similar terms may carry different institutional meanings, while different terms may perform equivalent functions. Translation may enable coordination but also create tension where European priorities do not correspond to national competences or local capacity. Security measures adopted at one territorial level may also generate insecurity at another, as border restrictions intended to provide protection may disrupt healthcare, employment, mobility or family life.

4.5. Multi-level governance and cross-border resilience

Translations of security occur within a differentiated system of EU institutions, Member States, regional and local authorities, cross-border bodies, civil society and private actors. Piattoni (2010: 1-14) defines multi-level governance through the simultaneous mobilisation of public authorities at different jurisdictional levels and the participation of non-governmental actors. The perspective highlights interaction among

supranational, national and subnational institutions rather than treating the state as the sole site of policy formation.

This is particularly relevant where services, infrastructure, labour markets, environmental processes and risks cross borders while legal competences remain territorially divided. Multi-level governance does not mean decentralisation or equal authority: actors possess different competences, resources and capacities. The analysis uses it as an institutional lens, not an independent causal theory, to identify where a resilience concern is formulated, who is responsible and whether coordination reveals adaptation, tension or gaps between objectives and capacity. It complements security translation by mapping the levels and relationships through which meanings change.

4.6. Integrated analytical framework

The integrated framework follows a common sequence. It identifies the policy problem, referent object and unwanted future; maps responsible actors and instruments; classifies the response as cohesion-oriented governance, ordinary risk governance, resilience-oriented security governance or securitising logic; and evaluates how meanings and responsibilities are preserved or reformulated across governance levels.

Framing and temporal comparison principally address RQ1. Referent objects, unwanted futures and distributed responsibility address RQ2. Translations of security, multi-level governance and security intensity address RQ3. The framework does not assume that one paradigm replaces another: cohesion, ordinary risk management, resilience and security may coexist. The empirical question is whether post-pandemic resilience displaced, modified or became layered onto the earlier cohesion framework.

5. RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The comparison produced three principal findings. First, EU border-region policy did not shift linearly from cohesion to security; preparedness and resilience were incorporated into a continuing framework of integration and obstacle removal. Second, referent objects broadened from citizens, businesses and regional development to services, infrastructure, institutional capacity, vulnerable groups and community welfare. Third, Romania's strategy aligns directly with the wider EU disaster-resilience framework, while its relationship with EU border-region policy indicates conceptual convergence and recontextualisation rather than direct transfer. These findings are interpreted according to the documents' unequal authority, particularly the distinction between the 2024 commissioned expert study and adopted EU policy or legislation.

5.1. From cohesion to layered resilience

The 2017 Communication constructs border-region problems primarily as legal and administrative obstacles to integration and development. Referent objects include citizens, workers, businesses, public services and regional potential, while unwanted futures involve underperformance and unequal access to the benefits of integration (European Commission, 2017: 2-6). Delays affecting firefighters, ambulances and cross-border healthcare have public-safety implications, but the document treats them as administrative discontinuities addressed through cooperation, interoperability, information and shared services. It is therefore classified predominantly as developmental and cohesion-oriented governance with elements of ordinary risk management.

The 2021 report adds the institutional lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic. Border restrictions disrupted employment, healthcare, essential supplies and mobility, revealing border regions as interconnected yet vulnerable to nationally determined crisis measures (European Commission, 2021: 1-2). The report nevertheless retains the description of border regions as “living labs” of integration and continues to prioritise obstacle removal. Preparedness, crisis coordination and service continuity are layered onto cohesion, with no justification for permanently displacing ordinary procedures (European Commission, 2021: 5-9, 14).

The 2024 study places disaster resilience at the centre of expert analysis. Covering 53 borders and 12 hazard categories, it examines agreements, institutional arrangements, response capacities, stakeholder evidence and ten case studies. It broadens the referent objects to communities, services, healthcare, infrastructure, ecosystems and response institutions, and recommends shared risk assessment, early warning, data exchange, interoperability, exercises and coordinated response (Technopolis Group et al., 2024: xvii-xxiv, 44-66). Although serious and cascading consequences are considered, the responses remain within established risk-management and capacity-building practices. The document is therefore classified as explicit disaster-resilience governance at the level of commissioned expert analysis.

Regulation (EU) 2025/925 confirms the continuing legal importance of cohesion. It recognises the disproportionate effects of crises on border regions but principally establishes procedures for identifying and resolving obstacles affecting infrastructure, public services and territorial development (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2025, recitals 3-9). Cross-border coordination points, competent authorities and an optional procedure for cross-border files operate within Member States’ legal structures (Articles 1-5). Crisis experience is thus incorporated into ordinary multi-level governance rather than exceptional security governance.

The diachronic finding is policy layering: the 2017 cohesion frame persists, while the pandemic strengthens preparedness and continuity, the 2024 study develops an expert resilience agenda, and the 2025 Regulation integrates crisis experience into an obstacle-removal instrument.

Table 3. Comparison of the dominant frames across the five-document corpus

Document and institutional status	Dominant problem construction	Principal referent objects and unwanted futures	Main response and analytical classification
European Commission Communication, 2017, official policy document	Legal and administrative obstacles restrict integration and regional development	Citizens, businesses, public services and regional potential; continuing underperformance and unequal access	Removal of obstacles, institutional cooperation and shared services; developmental and cohesion-oriented governance
European Commission report, 2021,	Pandemic restrictions expose cross-	Mobility, healthcare, essential supplies,	Preparedness, coordination and continuity of services;

official policy document	border interdependence and institutional vulnerability	public services and border communities; disruption of societal functions	resilience-oriented governance layered onto cohesion
Technopolis Group, CMCC and Nordregio study, 2024, Commission-commissioned expert study	Multi-hazard risks cross borders while assessments, responsibilities and response systems remain fragmented	Communities, infrastructure, services, ecosystems and response capacities; cascading disruption and ineffective response	Shared assessments, early warning, interoperability and coordination; explicit disaster-resilience governance at the level of expert analysis
Regulation (EU) 2025/925, binding EU legislation	Legal and administrative obstacles weaken cross-border services, infrastructure and development, including during crises	Cross-border infrastructure, public services and territorial cohesion; continuing obstacles and disproportionate crisis effects	Coordination points and procedures for resolving obstacles; cohesion governance informed by crisis experience
Romanian National Disaster Risk Reduction Strategy, official national policy	Multi-hazard exposure, vulnerability and fragmented capacities may produce human, social, economic and environmental losses	Population, communities, essential services, infrastructure and institutional capacity; human, social, economic and environmental losses	Risk knowledge, governance reform, investment, preparedness, response and recovery; resilience-oriented governance within ordinary risk-management procedures

Source: Author's analysis based on European Commission (2017, 2021), Technopolis Group et al. (2024), European Parliament and Council of the European Union (2025), and Government of Romania (2024).

5.2. Referent objects, unwanted futures and responsible actors

The coding shows gradual broadening. In 2017, protection concerns citizens' and businesses' access to integration, mobility and development. By 2021, healthcare, employment, supplies and public services are constructed as interconnected functions whose disruption affects border communities. The 2024 study adds infrastructure, ecosystems, emergency systems and institutional capacity; unwanted futures expand from unrealised development to cascading disruption, incompatible warning systems, fragmented information and ineffective cross-border coordination (Technopolis Group et al., 2024: 44-66). BRIDGEforEU reconnects these concerns to cohesion by treating

fragmentation as a problem addressable through ordinary legislative and administrative mechanisms.

Responsibility also broadens. Earlier documents foreground the Commission, Member States and regional or local authorities; later documents include cross-border bodies, healthcare providers, civil-protection and emergency services, scientific organisations, private operators, civil society and citizens. Across the corpus, societal functions, services, infrastructure, institutions and communities are more prominent referent objects than collective identity.

5.3. Convergence and recontextualisation in Romanian disaster-risk governance

Romania's National Disaster Risk Reduction Strategy 2024-2035 is a national framework implemented through national, regional, county and local responsibilities, not a border-region strategy. It nevertheless aligns explicitly with the Union Civil Protection Mechanism and the Union Disaster Resilience Goals, which emphasise anticipation, public preparedness, early warning, response capacity, continuity and cross-border cooperation (European Commission, 2023: 1-5).

The strategy recontextualises these priorities within proactive, multisectoral, multi-hazard and whole-of-society disaster-risk governance. Its objectives cover risk knowledge, stronger governance, investment in risk reduction and improved preparedness, response, recovery and reconstruction (Government of Romania, 2024: 17-18, 65-70). Preservation is visible in the continued emphasis on anticipation, preparedness, assessment, coordination and resilience. Recontextualisation places these priorities within Romania's legal and institutional system, assigning responsibilities to central authorities, the Department for Emergency Situations, the General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations, the National Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction and risk-specific authorities across governance levels (Government of Romania, 2024: 65-82).

Functional reformulation converts broad European objectives into programmes, indicators and implementation responsibilities involving early warning, continuity planning, investment, public preparedness, civil society, universities, research organisations, communities and private actors. Broadening extends resilience across social, economic, health, environmental, technological and institutional fields. Narrowing is weak because transboundary risks are acknowledged, but border regions are not the strategy's principal territorial category.

The evidence therefore supports direct alignment with the broader EU disaster-resilience framework. Its relationship with EU border-region policy remains indirect: shared priorities concerning coordination, capacity, preparedness and essential services demonstrate conceptual convergence and recontextualisation, not causal transfer from the border-region documents.

5.4. Security intensity across the corpus

Security intensity was assessed qualitatively rather than numerically. Crises, hazards and societal vulnerability become more prominent after 2020, but responses remain centred on assessment, prevention, preparedness, investment, interoperability and coordination. The 2021 report draws institutional lessons from the pandemic, the 2024 study places cascading hazards within multi-hazard management, and Regulation (EU) 2025/925 responds through established legal and administrative procedures.

No document sustains a construction of existential threat requiring suspension of ordinary procedures. The corpus therefore does not establish successful securitisation or a general movement towards exceptional politics. Its predominant development is resilience-oriented security governance layered onto an enduring cohesion framework.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings show a qualified evolution in EU border-region governance. Cohesion, territorial development and obstacle removal remain central, but preparedness, continuity and resilience have become more prominent. The development is therefore cumulative rather than a replacement of cohesion by security policy. Its significance is interpreted through policy layering, securitisation, functional societal security, security translation and multi-level governance.

6.1. From cohesion to resilience through policy layering

Framing analysis indicates that the cohesion rationale established in 2017 persisted throughout the corpus, while cross-border disruption widened the range of recognised problems and responses. The pandemic demonstrated that healthcare, employment, supplies and public services may depend on institutions in more than one Member State. The 2024 study developed this concern into an expert resilience agenda, whereas Regulation (EU) 2025/925 returned crisis experience to a binding framework principally concerned with legal and administrative obstacles (European Commission, 2017: 1-6; European Commission, 2021: 1-2, 5-9; European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2025, Article 1).

Policy layering describes this coexistence of purposes. Preparedness, continuity and resilience were added to the cohesion architecture without displacing integration and territorial development. Border-region vulnerability is constructed primarily through functional interdependence, divided authority and insufficient coordination, not through a hostile actor. This finding explains why security relevance can increase while ordinary governance remains dominant.

6.2. Resilience without successful securitisation

The corpus does not satisfy the threshold for successful securitisation, which requires existential threat construction, audience acceptance and legitimation of action beyond ordinary political procedures (Buzan et al., 1998: 21-26). Although the documents address severe hazards and service interruption, their responses consist of planning, assessment, early warning, information exchange, capacity-building and institutional cooperation. They neither suspend normal procedures nor transfer authority permanently to exceptional institutions.

Some passages contain security-oriented or potentially securitising logics because serious disruption is used to justify urgent preparedness. They do not, however, construct an existential threat requiring measures outside ordinary legal and political procedures. The study also lacks evidence from speeches, parliamentary debate, media reception or public response and therefore cannot establish audience acceptance.

Bigo (2002) and Williams (2003) nevertheless help explain how routine classifications, professional practices and wider institutional contexts can make an issue security-relevant without dramatic emergency declarations. This qualification is important, but it should not be applied mechanically. The documents do not construct migrants, minorities, neighbouring populations or cross-border workers as threats, nor

do they legitimise permanent suspicion of mobility. Their dominant orientation is the protection of societal functions through resilience-based risk governance.

6.3. 6.3. Functional societal security

Identity, nationality and historical belonging may be important in border regions, but they are not the principal referent objects in this corpus. The documents instead foreground citizens, communities, healthcare, transport, infrastructure, economic activity, public services and institutional capacity. This corresponds to functional societal security, which concerns the continuity of vital functions and the ability to anticipate, withstand and recover from disruption (Rhinard, 2020: 22-42; Larsson & Rhinard, 2021).

Romania's strategy reinforces this orientation through essential services, healthcare, social protection, early warning, preparedness, institutional capacity and vulnerable groups (Government of Romania, 2024: 54-70, 78-85). Societal security is used here as an analytical perspective rather than a label necessarily adopted by the documents. The finding does not make identity-centred security irrelevant to European border regions; it shows only that functional protection dominates the selected policy corpus.

6.4. Translating security across governance contexts

The findings support selective rather than uniform translation of security. Broadening, recontextualisation and functional reformulation are most visible, while preservation also occurs through continuing concern with cooperation, services and institutional capacity. Narrowing is weaker because later documents generally expand the relevant hazards, actors and societal functions. These processes show how priorities are adapted to institutional competences rather than transferred unchanged (Villumsen Berling et al., 2022).

The strongest direct documentary relationship connects the 2023 Union Disaster Resilience Goals with Romania's strategy. The goals establish a common baseline for anticipation, public preparedness, early warning, response capacity and resilient civil protection, and the Romanian strategy explicitly places itself within this framework (European Commission, 2023, paragraphs 1-9 and Annex; Government of Romania, 2024: 21, 27). This supports recontextualisation between EU and national disaster-resilience governance.

The relationship between the Romanian strategy and EU border-region policy is less direct. Their shared emphasis on coordination, services, preparedness and resilience demonstrates conceptual convergence and functional compatibility, not causal transfer. Translation also changes unwanted futures: the earlier cohesion frame anticipates fragmentation and unrealised integration, whereas resilience adds cascading disruption, interrupted services and insufficient institutional capacity. These futures remain governed through preparation and cooperation rather than exceptional measures.

6.5. Multi-level governance and inclusive cross-border resilience

Border-region resilience is a multi-level governance problem because the functional geography of risk does not correspond neatly to territorial authority. Healthcare, labour markets, transport, river systems and emergency services may cross borders, while regulatory and protective competences remain nationally organised. Local and regional authorities experience disruption directly but may lack sufficient authority or resources. Effective resilience therefore requires vertical coordination among EU,

national, regional and local institutions and horizontal cooperation between neighbouring jurisdictions (Piattoni, 2010: 1-14).

Regulation (EU) 2025/925 can support coordination through national or regional cross-border coordination points and procedures for assessing obstacles affecting infrastructure and public services. Its optional character preserves Member State discretion, and its scope covers borders between neighbouring Member States rather than borders with third countries (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2025, Articles 2 and 4). It cannot therefore provide a uniform solution for Romania's internal EU borders and external frontier; external-border cooperation may require other European programmes, bilateral agreements and national or regional mechanisms.

Resilience also has an inclusivity dimension, although the documents do not demonstrate that inclusive participation has already been achieved. People dependent on healthcare, employment, education or services across a border may be particularly exposed to fragmentation. The corpus identifies consequences for patients and healthcare personnel and recognises persons with disabilities, marginalised communities and groups with limited access to services or warning systems (European Commission, 2021: 8-9; Technopolis Group et al., 2024: 67-68; Government of Romania, 2024: 57, 62-63, 70).

Inclusive resilience is therefore a policy requirement rather than an established outcome. Preparedness, warnings, response and service continuity must remain accessible across territorial and social differences, with meaningful participation by local authorities, civil society, service providers and representatives of vulnerable groups. Otherwise, resilience may strengthen institutional capacity while reproducing inequalities in access to essential services.

6.6. Overall interpretation, limitations and future research

The principal interpretation is that border regions have become more security-relevant without being successfully securitised. Resilience enters their governance through coordination, continuity planning, risk assessment and protection of societal functions. Security translation explains why common concerns acquire different institutional forms, while multi-level governance explains why implementation depends on authorities with unequal competences. Romania illustrates both dynamics through direct alignment with the Union Disaster Resilience Goals and indirect convergence with EU border-region policy.

These conclusions remain limited by the small purposive corpus and the unequal authority of communications, commissioned expertise, legislation, a recommendation and a national strategy. The Romanian strategy is national rather than border-specific. Documentary analysis cannot establish implementation, practitioner interpretation, community experience, operational effectiveness or audience acceptance.

Future research should compare several national disaster-risk strategies and distinguish internal from external EU borders. Romanian border-region case studies could combine documentary evidence with interviews involving national, county and local authorities, emergency services, civil society and cross-border providers. Later research could also assess whether Regulation (EU) 2025/925 produces joint risk assessment, interoperable procedures and more reliable continuity of essential services.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This article examined how societal security is framed in European border-region policy and how resilience priorities are reflected in Romania's disaster-risk governance.

By combining framing, societal security, securitisation, translations of security and multi-level governance, it traced change across EU policy from 2017 to 2025 and compared that development with a national governance framework.

Regarding RQ1, EU border-region policy evolved cumulatively rather than through a linear transition from cohesion to security. Territorial development, mobility, public services and the removal of legal and administrative obstacles remained central after the COVID-19 pandemic. Preparedness, continuity and resilience were added to these objectives, producing policy layering rather than paradigm replacement.

Regarding RQ2, the referent objects broadened from citizens, businesses and regional development to healthcare, infrastructure, essential services, institutional capacity, vulnerable groups and community welfare. Unwanted futures similarly expanded from administrative fragmentation and unrealised development to cascading disruption and interrupted services. This pattern reflects functional societal security, although it does not make identity and belonging irrelevant to border regions beyond the selected corpus.

Regarding RQ3, Romania's strategy demonstrates selective translation. Its explicit relationship with the Union Disaster Resilience Goals supports direct alignment and recontextualisation within national responsibilities. Its relationship with EU border-region policy is more indirect: shared priorities concerning preparedness, cooperation and essential services establish conceptual convergence and functional compatibility, not causal transfer or a uniform European security model.

The principal theoretical contribution is the distinction between increasing security relevance and successful securitisation. The documents make societal disruption security-relevant while retaining ordinary legal, political and administrative procedures; they provide no evidence of audience acceptance or legitimised exceptional measures. Cross-border resilience consequently depends on multi-level coordination among authorities with different competences. In practice, this requires joint risk assessment, interoperable procedures, continuity planning and mechanisms adapted to the different conditions of internal and external EU borders. It also requires accessible warnings, continuity of services and participation by civil society and vulnerable communities.

The study is limited by its small institutional corpus, the national rather than border-specific character of the Romanian strategy and the absence of implementation, practitioner, community and audience evidence. Comparative border-region case studies, interviews and later assessment of Regulation (EU) 2025/925 could test whether documentary convergence produces operational cooperation. European border regions are functionally interconnected spaces where the benefits and vulnerabilities of integration meet territorially divided authority. Their resilience depends not on permanent exceptionalisation, but on translating shared concerns into coordinated, inclusive and operational governance.

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THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA AND UKRAINE: INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES, RESPONSE CAPACITIES AND THE EVOLUTION OF INFORMATION RESILIENCE IN THE REGIONAL CONTEXT

Victoria BEVZIUC*

Abstract: *The article highlights the similarities and differences between the Republic of Moldova's national policies regarding information resilience and the Ukrainian institutional regulations and capacities to face modern security challenges. It examines the evolution of strategic communication, cybersecurity, counter-disinformation mechanisms, and interinstitutional coordination in both countries within the context of the evolving regional security environment. The analysis focuses on the legal and institutional frameworks developed to enhance societal resilience against information manipulation, foreign influence, and hybrid threats. While Ukraine has significantly strengthened its information resilience capacities through wartime reforms and close cooperation with international partners, the Republic of Moldova is still consolidating its institutional architecture and legislative framework. The paper identifies common strategic objectives, including the protection of democratic processes, critical infrastructure, and public trust, while emphasizing differences in implementation, institutional maturity, and operational experience. The comparative approach provides insights into best practices and policy gaps, highlighting the importance of adaptive governance, regional cooperation, and alignment with European standards. The findings contribute to the broader discussion on strengthening information resilience in Eastern Europe and offer recommendations for improving national preparedness against emerging hybrid threats.*

Keywords: *cyber security, national policies, disinformation, hybrid threats.*

INTRODUCTION

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 fundamentally transformed not only the security environment of Eastern Europe but also the nature of modern warfare. Military operations have been accompanied by extensive information campaigns combining cyberattacks, psychological operations, social media manipulation, propaganda, artificial intelligence-generated content, and coordinated disinformation. Information warfare has become an operational domain equal to land, sea, air, and cyberspace.

The Republic of Moldova is one of the states that has suffered the most under the impact of modern security challenges, such as cyberattacks and the conflict in Ukraine. Due to its geographical location close to the war zone, limited economic and energy resources, as well as its position between East and West, the Republic of Moldova has become highly exposed to regional instability. Both security threats have caused significant consequences, including inflation, energy insecurity, refugee influxes and

* PhD, associate professor, Moldova State University, Faculty of International Relations, Political and Administrative Studies, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9189-641X>, e-mail: victoriabevziuc@yahoo.ro.

political tensions, while also threatening the good functioning of institutions and digital infrastructure. As a result, the Republic of Moldova's role in addressing these security challenges consists of reinforcing its national security policies and strategies, improving institutional resilience and, without a doubt, consolidating cooperation with international organisations.

The management of the information space in the Republic of Moldova represents an essential component of national security, given the vulnerabilities associated with disinformation, media polarization, and external information interference. In recent years, the Republic of Moldova authorities have developed a series of policies and institutional mechanisms aimed at monitoring, regulating, and countering information threats.

Ukraine represents one of the most relevant examples in Eastern Europe in the field of information security due to its extensive experience with external disinformation campaigns, particularly in the context of its conflict with the Russian Federation. Ukrainian institutional policies focus on protecting the information space, strengthening societal resilience, and coordinating responses to information threats. The Ukrainian government quickly recognized that military resistance alone would be insufficient without protecting the national information environment. Consequently, Ukraine adopted numerous legislative amendments, strengthened existing institutions, and created new mechanisms designed to detect, monitor, and neutralize hostile information operations.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative qualitative research design based on the analysis of national strategic documents, legislation, institutional frameworks, and policy reports concerning information resilience in the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The research applies comparative policy analysis to identify similarities and differences in governance structures, legal provisions, strategic priorities, and institutional capacities for countering hybrid threats, disinformation, and information warfare. Data are collected through document analysis of official governmental publications, national security strategies, cybersecurity policies, and relevant reports issued by international organizations. The findings are interpreted using a comparative analytical framework that assesses the level of institutional development, policy coherence, and alignment with European and Euro-Atlantic resilience standards.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of security challenges in international relations has undergone a notable evolution starting with the second part of the 20th century, being influenced by the transformations of the international system. Literature initially developed around the concerns of maintaining the international order, the prevention of armed conflicts and managing rivalries between states, and later included new dimensions generated by globalisation, technical progress and the emergence of non-traditional threats.

One of the central concepts analysed in the historiography of international relations is security. The first relevant works appeared in the context of the Cold War, when security was examined almost exclusively in terms of military confrontation. Authors such as A. Wolfers, helped shape early debates, emphasising the ambiguous and multidimensional character of security according to the perceptions of state actors (Wolfers, 1952: 483-492). Later, B. Buzan played a crucial role in expanding the research

sphere, analysing security not only at the military level, but also political, economic, societal and environmental, which opened new research directions in the domain (Buzan, 1983: 75-83).

The concept of information resilience has attracted increasing scholarly attention in the context of hybrid warfare, strategic competition, and digital transformation. Researchers have emphasized that information resilience extends beyond cybersecurity, encompassing the ability of institutions and societies to anticipate, withstand, respond to, and recover from information-related threats, including disinformation, propaganda, and foreign information manipulation. This multidimensional perspective has become particularly relevant for states exposed to persistent hybrid threats.

Among the leading scholars in this field, P. W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking argue that contemporary conflicts are increasingly fought within the information domain, where digital platforms have become strategic battlefields shaping public opinion and political decision-making. Their work highlights the role of social media, artificial intelligence, and networked communication in amplifying information operations and influencing democratic processes (Singer & Brooking, 2018).

Theoretical approaches to resilience have been significantly influenced by David J. Snowden and Brian Walker, who conceptualize resilience as the adaptive capacity of complex systems to absorb shocks while maintaining essential functions. Applied to the information environment, resilience involves institutional adaptability, effective governance, strategic communication, media literacy, and public trust (Snowden & Boone, 2007; Walker et al., 2004).

The phenomenon of disinformation has been extensively examined by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, who distinguish between misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. Their conceptual framework has become a cornerstone for understanding different forms of information disorder and for developing policies aimed at countering information manipulation while safeguarding freedom of expression (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

The European perspective on information resilience has been shaped by studies conducted by the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA), the European External Action Service (EEAS), and the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE). These institutions emphasize that societal resilience depends on coordinated governance, cybersecurity, critical infrastructure protection, strategic communication, and cooperation between public authorities, the private sector, civil society, and international partners (ENISA, 2023; European External Action Service, 2022; NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2023).

In the context of Eastern Europe, scholars have increasingly focused on the experiences of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova as frontline states confronting hybrid threats. Comparative studies underline that Ukraine has developed extensive institutional capacities following the full-scale Russian invasion, while the Republic of Moldova continues to strengthen its legal and institutional framework through reforms aligned with European Union standards. These studies demonstrate that information resilience is not solely a technological issue but also a matter of democratic governance, institutional credibility, and societal cohesion (European Commission, 2023; European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2023; United Nations Development Programme, 2023).

Hybrid warfare combines conventional military force with cyber operations, economic coercion, political influence, intelligence activities, and strategic

communication. Russian military doctrine increasingly integrates information operations as a central component of conflict (Galeotti, 2019; RAND Corporation, 2016).

Disinformation differs from misinformation because it involves the intentional dissemination of false or manipulated information designed to influence political behaviour or undermine public trust. During the invasion, Russian information operations pursued several objectives:

- delegitimizing the authorities;
- reducing public morale;
- undermining trust in state institutions and international partners (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 2022).
- discouraging military mobilization;
- undermining international support;
- manipulating foreign public opinion;
- creating confusion through contradictory narratives.

Recent studies identify Ukraine as one of the world's most significant laboratories for counter-disinformation governance under wartime conditions (Marushchak, Petrov, Khoperiya, 2025).

In the view of the American professor M. C. Libicki, cyberattack is defined as “the deliberate disruption or corruption by one state of a system of interest to another state” (Libicki, 2009: 23). This definition suggests that cyberattacks are not accidental events, but rather planned and strategic actions carried out by state actors to undermine the security of another state. Moreover, it highlights that power is increasingly exercised through the manipulation and destabilisation of digital infrastructures.

Cyber conflict is viewed by realism through the lens of power, state security and anarchy, treating cyberattacks as other instruments through which states compete to protect their territory and advance their interests. Realists consider cyberattacks to be potentially cheaper, faster and more effective than defence, leading states to develop their own cyber capabilities to respond to emerging risks. At the same time, it is mentioned that most cyberattacks have tended to produce low-level disruption, espionage or limited damage rather than decisive strategic effects and therefore do not fully correspond to the full war-like escalation realists might expect in traditional warfare (Craig & Valeriano, 2018: 1-5).

In liberal thinking, the international system consists of a variety of powerful actors beyond the state, such as individuals, private companies and activist groups. Liberals argue that governments cannot secure cyberspace alone, because the private sectors own and operate much of the Internet's infrastructure; consequently, states must rely on state-corporate cooperation. In this context, cyberattacks are less likely to occur between liberal democracies, which prefer cooperation and mutual consent to maintain peace. However, when such incidents do occur between allies, liberals may categorise them as cyber espionage rather than acts of war. The promotion of international agreements and institutions, such as the Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime, is seen as an effective way to manage conflicts and reduce the threat of cyberwar (Isnarti, 2016: 157-158).

Constructivism views cyberwar and cyberspace as social constructs shaped by the interests, identities and perceptions of international actors. Moreover, constructivists analyse how technological innovations have been socially transformed into threats to

national security. In this context, the problem of cyberwar is often rooted in the socially constructed fear of potential attacks instead of the frequency of the attacks themselves. Ultimately, it is noted that cyberwar is driven by (mis)perceptions and establishing shared norms, identity and communication between states, cyberwar would be less likely to happen (Isnarti, 2016: 157-158).

The Moldovan analyst I. Bucătaru characterises cyberattacks as a major threat, particularly organised ones that are capable of causing critical destabilisation to national infrastructure, the economy and national security. The author also emphasises that cyberattacks can be executed with relatively limited resources, may have long-term effects and allow the attacker to remain anonymous (Bucătaru, 2016: 509-510). This perspective reinforces the idea that cyberattacks represent a significant threat to national and international security, functioning as a strategic instrument that is easier to deploy and manage compared to other more dangerous alternatives.

The Romanian researchers A. V. Vevera and A. M. Udrioiu define a cyberattack in their article as “a malicious attempt to cause temporary or permanent damage to the components of an Internet network” (Vevera & Udrioiu, 2018: 8). This definition emphasises the intentional nature of cyberattacks and their potential to damage digital infrastructure. In addition, it also refers to the consequences of attacks, which can be both short-term and long-term, reflecting the multidimensional dynamics of an attack.

DATA RESULTS

The legislative and institutional framework of the Republic of Moldova is complex. The country has legislation regulating electronic communications, mass media, and cybersecurity. The National Regulatory Agency for Electronic Communications and Information Technology (ANRCETI) and the Center for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation (CSRM) are the main institutions involved in managing the information space, monitoring public content, and coordinating responses to disinformation campaigns (European Commission, 2024; Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2023).

The Government of the Republic of Moldova has developed strategies and action plans for cybersecurity and the protection of critical information infrastructure. These policies aim both at the technical protection of networks and information systems and at preventing the spread of disinformation through official channels and online environments. The strategies emphasize coordination among ministries, local authorities, the media, and civil society (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2025; European Union Agency for Cybersecurity [ENISA], 2023; European Commission, 2024).

The Republic of Moldova has begun developing a specific legislative framework for information security and combating disinformation in response to increasing informational vulnerabilities, public polarization, and exposure to external influence campaigns. This legislation aims to protect critical infrastructure, prevent information manipulation, and ensure a secure information environment for citizens (European Commission, 2024; Council of Europe, 2024; Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2023).

To start with, the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova, adopted in 2023, is the most important legal act in the national security and defence policy, which settles the functioning, steps, mechanisms and instruments of governance within the security system. Among the main dangers mentioned in the strategy are cyber threats, mainly originating from state actors targeting national and regional critical infrastructure,

for example private and public institutions, as well as risks associated with the evolution of information and communication technologies. Additionally, there are specified two causes that make the cyber domain vulnerable to attacks in the Republic of Moldova: the outdated IT infrastructure of institutions and the limited level of cybersecurity awareness among public servants and the population. There are established key objectives for sustaining cybersecurity and resilience, including the creation of a new institution competent in the cybersecurity domain, the organisation and participation in cybersecurity and defence exercises, as well as alignment with EU norms related to cyberspace security (Hotărâre nr. HP391 din 15.12.2023). The strategy is seen as the foundational document, reflecting all the vulnerabilities faced by the Republic of Moldova. Its importance lies in the complex description of solutions addressing cybersecurity.

Another important document that reinforces the legal framework of the Republic of Moldova is the National Cybersecurity Programme for 2026-2030. The programme sets objectives and actions regarding the development, consolidation and implementation of measures and priorities concerning cybersecurity. Likewise, the document contributes to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by integrating its objectives into the national framework. The fulfilment of the programme is expected to generate a notable impact on the Republic of Moldova's cybersecurity sector. Among the main benefits are the consolidation of institutional capacity, the expansion of international cooperation, the increasing trust in digital services and the enhancement of societal cyber resilience. Moreover, this document supports the country's EU integration process, protects citizens' interests and sustains economic development in the fields of digitalisation and innovation (Hotărâre din 2025 cu privire la aprobarea Programului național de securitate cibernetică pentru anii 2026-2030). This programme is an important step towards a more secure cyberspace and a better organised national security framework. Moreover, it allows institutions to prevent and respond to cyber threats rapidly.

Last but not least, the integration of cybersecurity within the Digital Transformation Strategy of the Republic of Moldova 2023-2030 is essential for creating a secure and adaptable digital environment. Through the involvement of the government, the private sector and civil society, the strategy aims to create cybersecurity as a shared responsibility. The strategy stresses key priorities, including the establishment of a national cybersecurity authority, professional training for public officials and constant reporting of incidents by critical services experts. Furthermore, the document proposes the operationalisation of the Cybersecurity Coordination Council in order to safeguard critical infrastructure and improve state information systems (Republica Moldova: Strategia de transformare digitală 2023-2030. Ministerul Dezvoltării Economice și Digitalizării, 2023: 33-35). The interconnection between cybersecurity and digitalisation is closely linked in terms of ensuring the safe and efficient development of digital systems. This relation is essential to preserve in order to protect critical infrastructure and maintain trust in digital services.

The adoption of these three strategic documents demonstrates the Republic of Moldova's commitment to reinforcing its cybersecurity structure and tackling emerging cyberattacks. In the context of the EU integration process and rapid digitalisation, the development of coherent mechanisms and strategies is crucial for ensuring national resilience and security. Moreover, these strategies demonstrate that cooperation between public authorities, private companies and international partners can facilitate their

implementation and the achievement of key goals. Together, these strategies contribute to the development of the states' main priorities, improve institutional capacities and support the protection of critical infrastructure.

A significant step in addressing this issue was the adoption of the Law regarding cybersecurity in 2023, alongside the support of the EU. The law provides principal notions related to the subject, the principles of ensuring cybersecurity, the national coordination of institutions, as well as the financing process (Lege nr. 48 din 16-03-2023 privind securitatea cibernetică). The law is extremely important because it transposes the European standards aimed at strengthening the resilience of critical infrastructure. The adoption of this law represents a crucial development in the national security framework, particularly in addressing cyber threats. At the national level, the creation of a more coordinated and preventive approach to cybersecurity helps to enhance stability and resilience. Moreover, the law contributes to the alignment of the Republic of Moldova's legislation with EU norms and standards, which reveals the constant effort in addressing the problem and cooperating with the EU.

Another important law is the Law on the approval of the Information Security Concept of the Republic of Moldova, adopted in 2017. The law establishes the national framework for ensuring information security as a fundamental part of national security. It highlights the main risks, objectives, principles and directions for protecting the informational space of the country. With a strong focus on cyber threats, the law sets the clear basis in the field of information security and institutions (Lege nr. 299 din 21-12-2017). In the context of increasing hybrid threats and regional instability, the law suggests the Republic of Moldova's early recognition of information security as a deliberate priority. Moreover, it shows the continuous effort and modernisation in order to implement the main mechanisms.

An important component of the Republic of Moldova's institutional framework is the Government Decision regarding the establishment, organisation and functioning of the Cybersecurity Agency. The decision underlines the mission, the domain of activity, functions, attributions and rights of the agency. At the same time, it establishes the organisation and structure that ensure the proper functioning of the agency and the implementation of state policies in the cybersecurity domain (Hotărâre nr. 1028 din 21-12-2023). The decision is essential because it provides a clear institutional mechanism for the prevention and response to cyber incidents. It also contributes to the consolidation of state capacities in protecting the state, as well as enhancing international cooperation and aligning the Republic of Moldova's cybersecurity governance with European standards.

Another important institutional element of the Republic of Moldova's cybersecurity structure is the Government Decision regarding the establishment, organisation and functioning of the Coordinating Council in the field of cybersecurity, adopted in the context of the Law on Cybersecurity. The institution represents a key mechanism responsible for the strategic and operational coordination of national cybersecurity policies. The council defines its mission, attributions, organisation and functional composition. The institution should coordinate the implementation of national strategies, harmonise policies and improve cooperation in tackling cyber risks (Hotărâre nr. 333 din 08-05-2024). The establishment of this council is highly significant because it reflects the growing complexity of cybersecurity challenges, which require more specialists and coordinated institutional action. Moreover, it improves the state's ability to face cyber incidents in an efficient and strategic manner. At the same time, its

composition demonstrates a broader approach, involving not only security institutions but also ministries such as energy, finance and health.

In terms of cybersecurity, the Republic of Moldova has progressively developed a comprehensive legal and institutional framework. Through several laws and strategies, the country has established a structured system to prevent, detect and respond to cyber threats. These instruments have aligned the Republic of Moldova with European standards and values, strengthening its own resilience. Even though the Republic of Moldova's cybersecurity development is seen as an ongoing process, it requires constant effort, improvement, investment and strong collaboration. All these practices position the Republic of Moldova as an important actor in managing modern security challenges.

Previously analysed in the context of cybersecurity, the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova further provides security measures in relation to the ongoing border conflict. Among regional and global security threats, the war in Ukraine is the key factor that destabilises the national security of the Republic of Moldova. In the field of military security and national defence, the strategy outlines the insufficient dotation of the armed forces and the reduced public support for the defence of the country. In order to make a more resilient contribution, the country must adopt an integrative and anticipative approach. These two approaches help combine the information with its analysis and to predict possible scenarios in the case of war. Moreover, it is crucial to develop the defence potential of the country by modernising the equipment and technologies used by the armed forces (Hotărâre nr. HP391 din 15.12.2023). The National Security Strategy is a key document in ensuring stability, as the Russian aggression in Ukraine has intensified pressure across the region. By implementing its main objectives in the field of security and national defence, the strategy intends to strengthen the state's determination against external threats. Through the modernisation of the defence sector, the institutional capability to respond to challenges will become more coordinated and efficient.

The National Defence Strategy of the Republic of Moldova for 2024-2034 represents another essential policy instrument aimed at guaranteeing peace, stability and the protection of constitutional democracy. The strategy outlines the potential risks in the national defence domain, as well as the main objectives of defence policy and the necessary steps and resources for their implementation. At the same time, the strategy emphasises the strategic cooperation with the UN, NATO and the EU, as well as the clear need to upgrade the national army (Hotărâre nr. 319 din 26-12-2024). In the context of the Russian invasion against Ukraine, this strategy serves as a critical shift from an underfunded military posture towards a modernised model of national resistance. The war led to the strengthening of military capacities, closer alignment with European security standards and the consolidation of main priorities in facing emerging security threats, such as the conflict in Ukraine.

In a similar context, the Military Strategy of the Republic of Moldova for 2025-2035 was adopted to define the long-term development of national defence and to align the armed forces with the changing security environment. Some of the key priorities of the strategy are the modernisation of military capabilities, strengthening operational preparation and of course, maintaining positive partnerships with international organisations. At the same time, the Military Strategy emphasises the participation in international operations and gradual integration into European security frameworks, as seen in previous strategies (Hotărâre din 2025 cu privire la aprobarea Strategiei militare a Republicii Moldova pentru anii 2025-2035). The conflict in Ukraine has accelerated

the urgency of modernising defence structures and adopting a more comprehensive approach to national security. In this sense, the strategy is a necessary adaptation to face emerging threats, alongside a prepared and professional army.

Taken together, these three strategies play a crucial role for the Republic of Moldova's resilience and preparedness towards the war in Ukraine. By addressing different dimensions of national security, such as institutional enforcement, military readiness and long-term defence planning, the strategies pursue an interconnected goal of preserving stability within the country. One document establishes the overall direction for managing security threats, while another focuses on translating priorities into concrete defence objectives and continuous cooperation. A third provides an overview for transforming the armed forces into a more modern and adaptable structure.

An important legal framework addressing this issue is represented by the Law on the Security and Intelligence Service of the Republic of Moldova. The law was adopted for the reorganisation and modernisation of the activity of the SIS. It establishes the attributions, organisation and the responsibilities in preventing threats towards the state's security, external influence and destabilisation actions. Moreover, it highlights the consolidation of the national army capacities and the protection of strategic infrastructure in emergency situations (Lege nr. 136 din 08-06-2023). In a tense regional context, the law reshapes the new goal of the institution in managing interferences caused by the war in Ukraine. The modifications introduced by the law reinforce the Republic of Moldova's position in tackling security risks and acting more efficiently against attempts to undermine national stability. By adopting this law, the institutional coordination becomes more coherent and strengthens the capacity of state authorities to prevent destabilisation actions.

In a similar context, the Law on Counterintelligence Activity and Foreign Intelligence Activity establishes the concrete actions in conducting security operations. The law provides the legal framework for the activities carried out by the intelligence services and manages the threats coming from foreign states or organisations. The adoption of the law reflects the growing need to protect national security after the Russian aggression against Ukraine intensified espionage, disinformation campaigns and attempts to destabilise institutions (Lege nr. 179 din 07-07-2023). The law is especially important because the Republic of Moldova became more exposed to regional threats, particularly due to the conflict. By improving the intelligence coordination, the security operations will be more efficient and better adapted to risks. The Republic of Moldova's attempt to face geopolitical realities is reflected in strengthening the process of the security operations, which are essential for protecting sovereignty and internal order.

The last important law examined in this analysis is the Law on the Centre for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation and on the Amendment of Certain Normative Acts. In the context of numerous cases of propaganda, disinformation and external interference, mostly generated by the conflict in Ukraine, the establishment of such a centre is crucial for preventing these situations. The law sets out the institution's mission, organisational structure and financing process. The main goal of the centre is to consolidate and improve efforts to combat disinformation, manipulation and external influence. All these factors affect the realisation of national interests and the objectives of national security (Lege nr. 242 din 31-07-2023). The relevance of establishing this centre lies in the highly exposed regional information space to propaganda and hybrid influence campaigns. This institution helps manage and respond more effectively to cases that can destabilise public opinion and weaken trust in institutions. Moreover, it

contributes to reducing the impact of external narratives linked to the conflict, especially those generated through Russian channels. By supporting informed decision-making within society, people are able to critically assess the geopolitical situation near the country.

In the context of the war in Ukraine, the analysed laws demonstrate the Republic of Moldova's initiative to address the security risks generated by the conflict in the neighbouring country. It is essential to reinforce the legal framework in order to maintain stability and ensure the protection of citizens. At the same time, external influence is increasing and the need for competent authorities is vital for maintaining national order. The level of security in a state corresponds to the institutional capacity to anticipate, manage and respond rapidly to emerging threats. In this sense, the adopted legal measures aim to strengthen resilience and ensure the stability of the country.

In conclusion, all the strategies and laws adopted by the Republic of Moldova reflect a coordinated response to both cyberattacks and the conflict in Ukraine. The constant effort made for strengthening institutional resilience, enhancing the capacity to prevent cyber threats and improving cooperation, have accelerated the Republic of Moldova's European path. Moreover, by modernising the legal framework, the country seeks to reduce vulnerabilities linked to external interference and regional stability. Overall, these measures and their impact demonstrate a comprehensive approach to national security, intended to ensure long-term stability and determination in an evolving geopolitical environment.

The Center for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation seeks to develop institutional capacities and educate citizens in order to increase information resilience. In this regard, emphasis is placed on strengthening interinstitutional cooperation and partnerships with civil society and academia to effectively identify and counter manipulative narratives.

Furthermore, the strategy promotes institutional transparency and access to verified information, contributing to increased public trust and the development of critical thinking among citizens. It also provides for the development of media and digital literacy skills, enabling citizens to identify and critically evaluate sources of information in the context of a complex information environment.

The Republic of Moldova's legislation regarding information security and the fight against disinformation continues to evolve, reflecting the need to adapt to emerging information threats. Strengthening institutions, increasing technical capacities, and implementing effective monitoring and response mechanisms are essential for protecting the information space and enhancing society's resilience against information manipulation. Together with other public institutions and international partners, the Center for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation (CSRM) continuously monitors information flows, identifying fake news and manipulative materials that could affect public opinion or national security. At the same time, the authorities organize public information and media literacy campaigns to increase citizens' ability to recognize disinformation.

The Republic of Moldova cooperates with the European Union, NATO, and regional organizations through the exchange of best practices, training programs, and technical support in the field of information security. This cooperation enables the implementation of international standards and the development of national capacities to prevent cross-border information threats.

The institutional policies of the Republic of Moldova for managing the information space are still undergoing consolidation. Recent experiences demonstrate that success depends on effective institutional coordination, the active involvement of civil society, and international partnerships. Rapid adaptation to new forms of disinformation and the implementation of proactive mechanisms for education and monitoring are essential for protecting national information security.

Ukraine has developed a comprehensive legislative framework regarding information security and the protection of the information environment, including specific legislation aimed at combating disinformation and external information interference.

Since 2014, and particularly following the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022, Ukraine has significantly transformed its legal framework governing information security, media regulation, and the protection of the national information space. These legislative developments reflect the recognition that the information environment has become a critical domain of modern warfare, where disinformation, psychological operations, and cyber-enabled influence campaigns are employed alongside conventional military operations. Consequently, Ukraine has adopted a comprehensive set of legal measures designed to strengthen national resilience while aligning its legislation with European democratic standards (Giles, 2016; Paul & Matthews, 2016). The introduction of martial law under Presidential Decree No. 64/2022 marked a fundamental turning point in the regulation of information activities. The declaration of martial law created the legal basis for the implementation of temporary restrictions aimed at safeguarding national security and ensuring coordinated public communication during an armed conflict (President of Ukraine, 2022a). Shortly thereafter, Presidential Decree No. 152/2022 enacted the decision of the National Security and Defense Council concerning a unified information policy under martial law. This measure established a coordinated communication mechanism among the country's principal television broadcasters through the "United News" national telethon. Although the initiative generated debate regarding media pluralism, Ukrainian authorities argued that the centralization of official communication was necessary to prevent the dissemination of contradictory information, reduce public panic, and limit opportunities for hostile information manipulation during wartime (President of Ukraine, 2022b; Council of Europe, 2023).

In parallel with these institutional measures, the Ukrainian Parliament introduced substantial amendments to criminal legislation addressing collaboration, espionage, and information activities that could facilitate Russian military operations. One of the most significant legislative developments was Law No. 2178-IX, which strengthened Article 114-2 of the Criminal Code by establishing criminal liability for the unauthorized dissemination of information concerning the movement, deployment, or location of Ukrainian armed forces during martial law. The amendments also expanded criminal responsibility for collaboration with occupying authorities and participation in activities supporting the aggressor state's information operations (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2022a). From a legal perspective, these provisions illustrate Ukraine's transition from a peacetime regulatory model toward a wartime legal regime in which information itself is recognized as a strategic national security asset rather than solely an object of freedom of expression.

A cornerstone of Ukraine's contemporary media reform is the adoption of the Law of Ukraine "On Media" (Law No. 2849-IX), which entered into force in March

2023. The legislation represents one of the most comprehensive reforms of the Ukrainian media sector since independence and constitutes an important element of the country's European integration process. The new law harmonizes national legislation with the European Union's Audiovisual Media Services Directive by extending regulatory oversight to online media platforms, improving transparency requirements regarding media ownership, strengthening the authority of the National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting, and establishing procedures for restricting media outlets that cooperate with the aggressor state or systematically disseminate disinformation (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2022b; Council of Europe, 2023). According to the Council of Europe (2023), although certain wartime provisions require careful implementation to preserve media freedom, the overall reform substantially aligns Ukrainian media legislation with European standards.

Another important legislative direction concerns the prohibition of information products that promote or justify Russian aggression. Following the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Ukraine expanded restrictions on the production, importation, distribution, and public dissemination of materials supporting the aggression against Ukraine or legitimizing the occupation of Ukrainian territories. These legal measures prohibit the dissemination of propaganda materials, symbols associated with the aggressor state, and publications that deny or justify Russian military actions. Similar restrictions were introduced regarding audiovisual content, publishing activities, and cultural products originating from the Russian Federation when they contribute to hostile information influence (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2022a). While such measures represent significant limitations on certain forms of expression, Ukrainian authorities justify them as exceptional responses to the unprecedented scale of information warfare accompanying military aggression.

The evolution of Ukraine's legislative framework demonstrates an increasing convergence between information security and national security policy. Rather than regulating media exclusively through the traditional perspective of freedom of expression, Ukrainian legislation increasingly conceptualizes the information domain as a component of comprehensive national defence. This approach corresponds to broader international debates concerning cognitive warfare, hybrid threats, and strategic communication, which emphasize that hostile actors increasingly seek to influence democratic societies through coordinated information manipulation rather than conventional military force alone (Bjola & Papadakis, 2020; Helmus et al., 2018; Pomerantsev, 2019).

Nevertheless, the Ukrainian model also illustrates the complex legal and normative dilemmas that emerge during prolonged armed conflict. The expansion of governmental authority over media regulation, restrictions on information dissemination, and enhanced supervisory powers of regulatory institutions inevitably raise questions regarding proportionality, judicial oversight, and the preservation of democratic freedoms. International organizations, including the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, have therefore emphasized that emergency restrictions adopted under martial law should remain temporary, transparent, and subject to effective legal review in order to maintain compliance with European human rights standards (Council of Europe, 2023; OSCE, 2023). Consequently, Ukraine's legislative experience demonstrates the continuing challenge of balancing national security imperatives with the protection of democratic values in an environment characterized by persistent hybrid threats.

Ukraine's institutional framework for protecting the information environment has evolved considerably since 2014 and has undergone substantial consolidation following the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022. Unlike traditional approaches that assign responsibility for information security to a single governmental authority, Ukraine has developed a multi-institutional governance model integrating national security agencies, media regulators, cybersecurity institutions, strategic communication bodies, and civil society organizations. This comprehensive approach reflects the understanding that contemporary information threats are multidimensional, combining disinformation, cyberattacks, psychological operations, and foreign influence campaigns that require coordinated responses across multiple sectors (Bjola & Papadakis, 2020; NATO StratCom COE, 2023).

At the centre of Ukraine's security architecture is the National Security and Defense Council (NSDC), which coordinates state policy in the fields of national security, cybersecurity, and strategic communications. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the NSDC has assumed an increasingly prominent role in coordinating institutional responses to information threats by facilitating interagency cooperation and adopting strategic decisions concerning the protection of the national information space. The Council also oversees the implementation of national security policies and coordinates activities among ministries, intelligence services, and specialized governmental agencies responsible for countering hybrid threats (National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, 2024).

One of the most influential institutions created specifically to combat information manipulation is the Center for Countering Disinformation (CCD), established in 2021 under the authority of the NSDC. Although initially conceived as a strategic analytical body, the Center became one of Ukraine's principal institutions following the Russian invasion in February 2022. Its mandate extends beyond conventional fact-checking activities and includes continuous monitoring of the information environment, identification of hostile narratives, analysis of coordinated influence operations, publication of analytical reports, and dissemination of verified information to both domestic and international audiences (Center for Countering Disinformation, 2024). Through systematic monitoring of traditional media, digital platforms, and social networks, the CCD produces daily assessments of disinformation campaigns and provides recommendations to public authorities regarding strategic communication priorities. The institution also maintains close cooperation with European Union institutions, NATO structures, international research organizations, and independent fact-checking networks, contributing to broader efforts aimed at strengthening regional information resilience (OECD, 2023).

The Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) represents another key actor within the national information security system. In addition to its traditional counterintelligence responsibilities, the SBU investigates hostile information operations, identifies individuals collaborating with foreign intelligence services, and counters coordinated influence campaigns designed to undermine state institutions or public confidence. Since 2022, the Service has significantly expanded investigations concerning collaboration with occupying authorities, dissemination of military intelligence benefiting Russian forces, and cyber-enabled influence activities. The SBU also works closely with prosecutors and judicial authorities to enforce criminal legislation concerning collaboration and unlawful dissemination of sensitive military information (Security Service of Ukraine, 2024).

The cyber dimension of information security is primarily coordinated through the National Cybersecurity Coordination Center (NCCC), operating under the NSDC. Recognizing that modern information operations frequently combine disinformation with cyberattacks targeting critical infrastructure, the NCCC coordinates cooperation among governmental institutions responsible for cybersecurity, intelligence, defense, and digital transformation. Its responsibilities include monitoring cyber threats, developing national cybersecurity policies, coordinating responses to cyber incidents affecting public institutions, and strengthening the resilience of critical information infrastructure. The Center also collaborates extensively with the European Union, NATO, and international cybersecurity organizations to exchange threat intelligence and develop common resilience standards (National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, 2024; NATO, 2024).

An equally important role is played by the Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications (formerly the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy), which is responsible for developing governmental communication strategies, promoting media literacy, supporting independent journalism, and coordinating public awareness campaigns against disinformation. The Ministry considers information resilience not only a matter of national security but also an essential component of democratic governance and societal cohesion. Consequently, its activities include educational initiatives aimed at improving citizens' ability to identify manipulated content, verify information sources, and recognize foreign propaganda techniques (Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications of Ukraine, 2024).

Complementing these governmental structures is the Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security (SPRAVDI), established to strengthen public communication and counter hostile narratives in real time. The Centre publishes analytical reports, explains ongoing disinformation campaigns, provides verified information during crises, and supports government institutions in developing coherent strategic messages. Its activities reflect contemporary approaches to strategic communication, emphasizing proactive engagement with the public rather than merely responding to false information after it has already spread. By combining rapid communication with evidence-based analysis, the Centre seeks to reduce the effectiveness of foreign information influence while strengthening public trust in official institutions (Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security, 2024).

The Ukrainian response to disinformation is also characterized by strong cooperation between governmental institutions and civil society organizations. Independent fact-checking initiatives, including StopFake, VoxCheck, and the Institute of Mass Information (IMI), play an important role in identifying manipulated narratives, verifying public information, and monitoring violations of media standards. Their analytical reports frequently complement governmental assessments and contribute to broader public awareness regarding information manipulation. This cooperation demonstrates that information resilience increasingly depends on partnerships between state institutions, academia, media organizations, and independent civil society actors rather than exclusively on governmental regulation (Pomerantsev, 2019; Helmus et al., 2018).

Operationally, Ukraine has adopted a comprehensive response mechanism based on three complementary pillars: prevention, continuous monitoring, and rapid response. Preventive measures include media literacy programs, strategic public communication, legal regulation, and international cooperation. Continuous monitoring is conducted

through real-time analysis of traditional media, online platforms, social networks, and cyber threats using artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and open-source intelligence (OSINT) methodologies. Finally, rapid response mechanisms involve the prompt publication of verified information, coordinated governmental communication, exposure of hostile narratives, cooperation with digital platforms to limit the spread of harmful content, and judicial action against individuals participating in illegal information activities (OECD, 2023).

Ukraine's institutional experience illustrates that the effectiveness of counter-disinformation policies depends less on the powers of individual institutions than on the quality of coordination among them. The integration of intelligence services, cybersecurity agencies, media regulators, strategic communication centers, and civil society organizations has enabled Ukraine to develop a relatively resilient information governance model despite operating under conditions of large-scale military conflict. At the same time, scholars emphasize that maintaining democratic accountability, institutional transparency, and judicial oversight remains essential to ensure that emergency powers introduced during wartime do not become permanent features of the information governance system (Council of Europe, 2023; Bjola & Papadakis, 2020).

International cooperation has become one of the defining elements of Ukraine's strategy for protecting its information environment and strengthening national resilience against hybrid threats. Since 2014, and particularly after the launch of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, cooperation with the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has expanded significantly, reflecting the understanding that disinformation campaigns and cyber-enabled influence operations transcend national borders and therefore require coordinated international responses. Beyond military and financial assistance, both organizations have supported Ukraine in developing institutional capacities, harmonizing legislation, improving cybersecurity, and strengthening strategic communication mechanisms (NATO, 2024; European Commission, 2024).

The European Union has played a central role in supporting Ukraine's reforms in the fields of media governance, information security, and democratic resilience. As part of the country's broader European integration process, Ukraine has progressively aligned its legislation with the EU *acquis*, particularly in the audiovisual and digital media sectors. The adoption of the Law on Media (Law No. 2849-IX) illustrates this process by harmonizing national legislation with the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), introducing greater transparency in media ownership, extending regulatory oversight to online media services, and reinforcing safeguards against foreign information interference (Council of Europe, 2023). These reforms have been supported through technical assistance provided by the European Commission and the Council of Europe, which have offered legal expertise, institutional assessments, and recommendations aimed at ensuring that wartime measures remain compatible with European standards concerning freedom of expression and media pluralism (European Commission, 2024).

In addition to legislative support, the EU has invested considerably in strengthening Ukraine's institutional capacity to counter disinformation. Cooperation with the European External Action Service (EEAS), particularly through the EUvsDisinfo initiative, has enabled Ukrainian institutions to exchange information regarding emerging disinformation narratives, identify coordinated foreign influence campaigns, and improve analytical methodologies for monitoring information threats.

This collaboration facilitates the sharing of best practices on strategic communication, fact-checking, digital investigations, and public awareness campaigns while promoting a common understanding of Russian information warfare among European partners (EEAS, 2024). The European Union has also financed numerous projects designed to improve media literacy, support independent journalism, strengthen civil society organizations, and enhance digital resilience across Ukrainian society (European Commission, 2024).

Cybersecurity has become another major area of cooperation between Ukraine and the European Union. Following repeated cyberattacks targeting Ukrainian governmental institutions, energy infrastructure, financial systems, and communication networks, the EU expanded technical assistance aimed at improving cyber resilience through specialized training programs, capacity-building initiatives, and information-sharing mechanisms. Cooperation with the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) and participation in European cybersecurity exercises have contributed to strengthening Ukraine's ability to prevent, detect, and respond to cyber incidents that frequently accompany coordinated disinformation campaigns (ENISA, 2023). This integrated approach reflects the growing recognition that cyber operations and information manipulation constitute complementary components of contemporary hybrid warfare.

Cooperation with NATO has developed along similar lines but places greater emphasis on resilience against hybrid threats, strategic communications, and defense-related information security. Since Ukraine was granted Enhanced Opportunities Partner status in 2020, collaboration has intensified through practical programs focusing on cyber defense, crisis communication, intelligence sharing, and institutional resilience. NATO recognizes information manipulation as an integral element of hybrid warfare and has therefore supported Ukraine in developing capabilities that combine military preparedness with civilian resilience against cognitive and psychological influence operations (NATO, 2024).

One of NATO's principal contributions has been provided through the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (StratCom COE) in Riga. Although Ukraine is not a member of the Centre, Ukrainian experts and institutions participate regularly in its training programs, analytical projects, and professional exchanges. These activities include research on Russian information warfare, strategic communication planning, social media manipulation, cognitive warfare, and public diplomacy. The Centre's analytical publications have significantly influenced the development of Ukrainian strategic communication policies by promoting evidence-based approaches to identifying hostile narratives and strengthening institutional coordination (NATO StratCom COE, 2023).

Cooperation also extends to the field of cybersecurity through the NATO Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) for Ukraine, which has financed projects aimed at modernizing cyber defense capabilities, protecting critical infrastructure, improving incident response mechanisms, and enhancing interoperability between Ukrainian institutions and NATO structures. Training programs supported by NATO have contributed to developing professional expertise within Ukrainian cybersecurity institutions while facilitating the exchange of intelligence concerning cyber threats originating from state-sponsored actors (NATO, 2024). These initiatives complement broader efforts to integrate cyber resilience into Ukraine's national security architecture

and reflect NATO's increasing emphasis on resilience as a fundamental component of collective security.

An important feature of Ukraine's international cooperation is the integration of governmental institutions with academic networks, independent research centers, and civil society organizations. Ukrainian experts participate actively in European and transatlantic research projects addressing hybrid threats, digital governance, artificial intelligence, election security, and media resilience. These partnerships facilitate the transfer of knowledge, comparative policy analysis, and the development of innovative tools for detecting coordinated influence campaigns. International cooperation has therefore evolved beyond financial assistance to encompass the creation of transnational epistemic communities capable of producing shared analytical frameworks for understanding contemporary information warfare (Bjola & Papadakis, 2020; Pomerantsev, 2019).

Despite substantial progress, several challenges continue to affect international cooperation in this field. Differences in national legal frameworks, variations in data-sharing procedures, and the rapidly evolving nature of digital platforms complicate coordinated responses to cross-border disinformation campaigns. Furthermore, balancing effective counter-disinformation measures with the protection of fundamental rights remains a common challenge for both Ukraine and its international partners. Consequently, recent European policy documents increasingly emphasize resilience-based approaches that prioritize institutional preparedness, public trust, media literacy, and democratic accountability rather than relying exclusively on restrictive regulatory measures (European Commission, 2024; OECD, 2023).

Overall, Ukraine's cooperation with the European Union and NATO demonstrates that information security has become an integral component of international security governance. The Ukrainian experience confirms that resilience against disinformation depends not only on domestic legislation and institutional capacity but also on sustained international partnerships that facilitate knowledge exchange, technological innovation, strategic communication, and coordinated responses to evolving hybrid threats. As information warfare becomes increasingly transnational, Ukraine's cooperation with European and Euro-Atlantic institutions offers an important model for the development of collective resilience against foreign information interference.

The comparative analysis of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine demonstrates that both countries have undertaken significant efforts to strengthen the protection of their information environments in response to persistent hybrid threats, particularly those associated with Russian information operations. Although the two states share a similar geopolitical context and face comparable challenges related to disinformation, foreign influence, and cyber-enabled information manipulation, their institutional responses have evolved at different speeds and with varying degrees of complexity.

Ukraine has developed a comprehensive and highly integrated system of information security that combines legislative reforms, specialized institutions, strategic communication capabilities, cybersecurity mechanisms, and international cooperation. The experience gained since 2014, reinforced by the full-scale invasion in 2022, has accelerated the development of an institutional model in which information security is treated as an essential component of national defense. Legislative reforms have expanded the state's capacity to respond to information threats, while institutions such as the National Security and Defense Council, the Center for Countering Disinformation, the

Security Service of Ukraine, and the National Cybersecurity Coordination Center operate within a coordinated governance framework. These institutional arrangements are complemented by advanced monitoring technologies, strategic communication policies, cooperation with civil society, and extensive partnerships with the European Union and NATO (Bjola & Papadakis, 2020; OECD, 2023).

By comparison, the Republic of Moldova has pursued a gradual process of institutional adaptation focused on strengthening democratic resilience while preserving constitutional guarantees concerning freedom of expression. Moldovan authorities have adopted legislative measures addressing disinformation, enhanced the responsibilities of media regulatory bodies, established specialized institutions such as the Centre for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation, and expanded cooperation with European partners. Nevertheless, the country's institutional architecture remains in a process of consolidation and faces structural challenges related to limited administrative capacity, resource constraints, political polarization, and the continued influence of external information actors. Consequently, Moldova's approach has generally emphasized preventive measures, media literacy, institutional coordination, and regulatory reforms rather than the exceptional wartime measures observed in Ukraine.

Despite these differences, the comparative analysis identifies several common elements that characterize effective information resilience in both countries. First, information security has increasingly become integrated into broader national security strategies, reflecting the recognition that contemporary conflicts extend beyond conventional military domains into the cognitive and digital spheres. Second, both states acknowledge that effective responses to disinformation require cooperation among governmental institutions, independent media, civil society organizations, academia, and international partners. Third, strategic communication, public trust in state institutions, and media literacy have emerged as fundamental components of long-term societal resilience, complementing legal and technological measures. Finally, cooperation with the European Union, NATO, and other international organizations has significantly contributed to institutional modernization, legislative harmonization, and the development of professional expertise in both countries.

The comparison also illustrates that resilience against information threats cannot be achieved solely through restrictive legislation or technological capabilities. Sustainable resilience depends equally on transparent governance, institutional credibility, democratic accountability, and an informed public capable of critically evaluating information. While Ukraine demonstrates the effectiveness of rapid institutional mobilization under conditions of armed conflict, Moldova provides an example of resilience-building within a democratic framework that prioritizes institutional reform and European integration. Together, these experiences suggest that successful information governance requires a balanced combination of legal regulation, institutional coordination, public communication, international cooperation, and respect for democratic principles.

CONCLUSIONS

The information environment has become a strategic domain of contemporary security, where state and non-state actors increasingly employ disinformation, psychological operations, cyberattacks, and digital influence campaigns to achieve political and military objectives. Consequently, protecting the integrity of the information

space is no longer limited to safeguarding freedom of expression or regulating media activities but has become an essential component of national resilience and comprehensive security policy.

This study demonstrates that both the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine have recognized the strategic importance of information security and have progressively developed institutional and legal mechanisms aimed at countering hybrid threats. Nevertheless, the comparative analysis reveals substantial differences in the scale, pace, and maturity of their responses. Ukraine's prolonged experience with Russian hybrid aggression has accelerated the creation of an integrated system that combines legislative regulation, specialized institutions, strategic communication, cybersecurity, intelligence cooperation, and international partnerships. In contrast, Moldova has focused on strengthening democratic institutions, improving regulatory frameworks, enhancing media literacy, and gradually consolidating institutional capacities while maintaining closer alignment with European standards governing fundamental rights and media pluralism.

The research further indicates that institutional effectiveness depends not only on the existence of specialized authorities but also on the quality of coordination among governmental agencies, independent regulators, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and international partners. Information resilience should therefore be understood as a multidimensional concept encompassing legal preparedness, institutional cooperation, technological capabilities, strategic communication, public trust, and civic education. No single institution can effectively counter contemporary information threats independently; rather, resilience emerges through integrated governance and continuous collaboration across sectors.

Another important finding concerns the growing interdependence between national and international approaches to information security. The experiences of both Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova demonstrate that cooperation with the European Union, NATO, the Council of Europe, and other international organizations has become indispensable for strengthening institutional capacities, harmonizing legislation, improving cybersecurity, and developing common approaches to countering foreign information manipulation. Hybrid threats increasingly transcend national borders, making international cooperation a prerequisite for effective resilience.

At the same time, the study highlights the importance of preserving democratic principles while implementing measures against disinformation. Expanding governmental authority over information flows may enhance national security during periods of crisis; however, such measures should remain proportionate, transparent, legally supervised, and consistent with international human rights standards. Long-term resilience ultimately depends not only on the ability to counter hostile narratives but also on maintaining public confidence in democratic institutions and safeguarding fundamental freedoms.

Finally, the comparative experiences of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine demonstrate that information resilience is a dynamic process rather than a fixed institutional achievement. As technologies evolve and information threats become increasingly sophisticated, institutional policies must continuously adapt to emerging challenges while preserving democratic legitimacy. Future developments in artificial intelligence, digital platforms, and transnational information ecosystems will require even closer cooperation between governments, international organizations, researchers, technology companies, and civil society. In this context, the experiences of Moldova and

Ukraine provide valuable lessons for other democratic states seeking to strengthen their resilience against hybrid threats while protecting the openness and pluralism that constitute the foundation of democratic governance.

Furthermore, the response capacities of both Moldova and Ukraine reflect different levels of institutional maturity and practical experience, while sharing a common objective: protecting the information space and strengthening societal resilience. The lessons learned from Ukraine's experience, together with the support of international partners, can significantly accelerate the development of information security capacities in the Republic of Moldova within a regional environment characterized by persistent information threats.

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III. CHALLENGES AND THREATS TO SOCIETAL SECURITY

Ana-Maria COSTEA ⇔ *European Cyber-Security in the Area of Technology: The European Union's Response*

Răzvan CHIȘ ⇔ *Disinformation as a Challenge to the Republic of Moldova's European Accession*

Peter Odion IRABOR ⇔ *Trafficking and Smuggling of Irregular Migrants from Nigeria to Europe: Strategies and Challenges of the European Union to Migration Governance*

Marius-Ioan TĂȚAR ⇔ *How Disinformation Turns Protection into a Threat: The Securitisation of Solidarity with Ukrainian Refugees in Romania*

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EUROPEAN CYBER-SECURITY IN THE AREA OF TECHNOLOGY: THE EUROPEAN UNION'S RESPONSE ¹

Ana-Maria COSTEA*

Abstract. *The nowadays technological development has profoundly transformed the national and international security landscape, generating new challenges and risks in cyberspace. Given the low costs of committing cyberattacks, the major difficulty in attributing responsibility and the multitude of actors involved, traditional deterrence strategies have become relatively ineffective. In this context, the main purpose of the article is to analyse the behaviour of the European Union in cyberspace, assessing how it reacts to these threats through mitigation strategies, public policies and institutional implemented mechanisms. In order to assess the Union's response capacity, the analysis delves into two interconnected dimensions of security dynamics: those within and those outside the organization. On the internal dimension, the study places particular emphasis on educational level and digital literacy of EU citizens, demonstrating the marked heterogeneity between Member States. On the external dimension, the article examines the EU's capacity to respond to threats originating from outside the EU bloc, testing the empirical applicability of the mutual assistance clause (Article 42.7 of the TEU) proving its rather impossible implementation.*

Keywords: EU, cybersecurity, heterogeneity, Article 42.7, education.

1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Currently, technological development generates new threats and risks to the national and international security landscape. Given the multitude of actors involved, motivations, strategies and types of attacks, the classic way of conceptualizing security, war and deterrence is no longer functional. In this context, most states have developed their own national cybersecurity strategies, designed to highlight their approaches in cyberspace. This evolution has revealed the existing heterogeneity not only between traditionally opposing actors, such as the Russian Federation, China and Western states, that usually adopt a rather different view over national and international security, but also between allies, namely the member states of NATO and the European Union.

From a legal perspective, no significant qualitative progress has been recorded at the international level, as no new binding regulations have been developed, except the 2025 United Nations Convention against Cybercrime which is currently under ratification (UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2025). The only relevant regional normative actor in this field seems to be the European Union; however, with limited competences in the area of defence and military security (hard security), its actions have had little international impact in terms

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* PhD Associate Professor at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania. E-mail: anamaria.costea@dri.snsppa.ro.

of changing the behaviour of states. In addition, the Tallinn Manual (Schmitt, 2017) developed within the NATO Center of Excellence in Estonia (where experts analyse the application of international law in cyberspace), is the only comprehensive resource that addresses issues such as who, what, when, how and why we can or cannot talk about a cyber war, but its legitimacy is recognized predominantly by Western societies and it does not have a legal bidding character. Additionally, we have to take into consideration that the perspective according to which the state is the sole provider of security or insecurity is outdated. One of the reasons of this issue is represented by the current dynamics of security, in which critical infrastructure is largely owned and operated by private companies, and the costs required to develop and carry out a cyber-attack are relatively low, thus allowing for the involvement of individuals.

The Internet — originally a communication tool used by intelligence services during the Cold War and later made available to the general public — has created the possibility of virtual lives, in which users can carry out almost any activity, while maintaining their anonymity. At the individual level, a person can shop online, communicate, conduct research, attend courses, teach, learn, generate income, promote their own image or products/services, sell, etc., with minimal physical effort. On the other hand, the Internet has also provided a favourable environment for criminal activities, be they financial, social or political in nature. As technological development has advanced, the rate of Internet coverage has steadily increased, and currently the global penetration level has reached 67.1% (June 2024). From a regional perspective, Northern Europe ranks first, with a coverage rate of 97.5%, closely followed by North America, with 96.9% (Statista, 2024). This in essence represents a huge opportunity for the European economy, but without proper educational and security strategies it can become a security threat. According to data provided by PurpleSec, an international cybersecurity company, cybercrime has increased by up to 600% as a result of the pandemic. In financial terms, this represents losses of approximately US\$6 trillion, with an estimated upward trend of US\$10.5 trillion by 2025. Compared to global GDPs, the total cost of cybercrime reaches the alarming level of approximately 1% of global GDP (PurpleSec, 2024). According to the same data, a malware attack generates, on average, a cost of over US\$2.5 million for a company, including the time required to remediate. Ransomware attacks became 57 times more destructive in 2021 compared to 2015. There are approximately 30 million small and medium-sized enterprises (SMBs) in USA, and over 66% of them were affected by at least one cyber incident between 2018 and 2020. The average cost of a data breach for a small business ranges from US\$120,000 to US\$1.24 million. The average total cost of data breaches increased from \$3.86 million to \$4.24 million in 2021, the highest level in 17 years, and in cases where remote work was a determining factor, the cost was, on average, \$1.07 million higher (PurpleSec, 2024). On short terms, the dynamics are getting even worse, as cybercrime *“is projected to increase to approximately 16 trillion U.S. dollars by 2029.”* (Statista Research Department, 2025)

Beyond the economic impact, in security terms, internationally, the 2007 Estonian cyberattacks (Ottis, 2018) were among the first to draw attention to the impact of cyberspace on a state's national security. These were followed by a series of cyberattacks with an impact on international security, such as Stuxnet (Farwell & Rohozinski, 2011), (Fidler, 2011; Foltz, 2012). This attack was seen as being the yet single cyber-attack that could have met the legal threshold of an armed attack given its physical consequences, its strategic military targets, its impact on Iran's national security level, etc. Other attacks that had consequences over the security of the states' critical infrastructure could be WannaCry

(Jibilian & Canales, 2021) and SolarWinds (Soliman et al., 2021). Since then, the EU decision makers have decided that all its member states should develop their own distinctive national cybersecurity strategies in order to tackle with these vulnerabilities. Last, but not least, cyber became an ever-present tool during the ongoing direct or indirect conflicts such as Russian cyberattacks during the war in Georgia or the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

Taking into consideration this background, the present article aims to analyse the behaviour of one of the most successful international organisations, namely the European Union in the cyberspace. Additionally, the analysis focuses on how it reacts to the threats that are present in the field, which are its mitigating strategies, public policies and implemented mechanisms. One special emphasizes is put on the educational level in order to show the heterogeneity that is present within the EU and the empirical applicability of the article 42.7 of TUE(European Union, 2022b). These domains are necessary in order to assess how the EU is dealing with the current security dynamics that are present in the cyberspace both from within, but also from outside the organisation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Currently, the view according to which the logic of war has not changed and, consequently, strategic thinking should not change either, remains widespread. From a traditional point of view, the existence of the ultimate weapon — the nuclear bomb — allows security strategies to be developed around it. However, in cyberspace, such a capability does not exist, and the probability of the emergence of a “cyber ultimate weapon” in the short and medium term is low. The extremely rapid development of technology generates changes from one second to the next. Thus, the improbability of the existence of such a weapon derives not from technological limitations, but from the limitless nature of the human mind, the creations of which cannot be fully anticipated. Added to this is the relatively low cost of developing a cyber tool, whether defensive or offensive. While, in the case of a nuclear weapon, a certain technology and certain materials with limited access are required, in cyberspace a very well-trained hacker, a high-performance laptop and a good connection to the internet or to the targeted server are sufficient. This reality highlights an essential problem in approaching cyberspace from a strategic perspective: the actors involved. While, during the Cold War, control over capabilities, technology and resources was exercised mainly by states and, to a very limited extent, by some international organisations (through states), in the case of cyberspace we are talking about a plurality of actors: states, international organisations that may or may not regulate the behaviour of states, private companies that own and/or operate parts of critical infrastructure with an impact on national and international security, organised crime groups, terrorist organisations, hacker groups, hacktivists, individual hackers, etc. This aspect is, in itself, deeply problematic for the development of a security strategy capable of mitigating the risks and threats generated by the cyberspace. The current strategic thinking has the principle of deterrence at its centre (although this has been contested even by neorealists). For deterrence to be effective, it is necessary to have a credible punishment (deterrence through punishment), a credible defensive mechanism (deterrence through denial), mandatory instruments for those who choose to break the rules (deterrence through normative taboos) or a regional/global security complex (deterrence through interdependence) (Nye Jr., 2011, 2016). For such a strategy to be credible, an essential element must be established: all actors must be rational players, in the sense that they should base their decisions on a cost-benefit analysis, which makes them predictable to a

certain extent. Of course, the threat of punishment must be credible—this being the fundamental logic of deterrence through punishment—but it must remain a threat, thus contributing to the predictability of the actors' behaviour. This logic can be applied to current strategic thinking, given that no state uses its strategic nuclear arsenals, since a nuclear war would be irrational. However, the same logic is not applicable to cyberspace. The reason is that, traditionally, states pursue political or economic objectives like gaining control over a certain territory, population, resources, etc. (and are therefore rational actors), while, in cyberspace, the multitude of actors generates a diversity of motivations, some of which are irrational. For example, a hacker may decide to carry out an attack for non-rational reasons, such as boredom or the desire to demonstrate his skills, thus becoming unpredictable. In addition, cyberspace raises another major problem that makes current strategic thinking obsolete, namely the problem of attribution. Although current technological development has accelerated the process of identifying the source of an attack, it takes an average of approximately 194 days, often after the attack has ended. Even in the case of identifying the source, the issue of attributing responsibility to a state or non-state actor remains. In parallel, the damage must be managed, with the average time to neutralize an attack at the company level being 64 days (Statista, n.d.).

Furthermore, all levels of our nowadays society are affected by cyberspace. In addition, as mentioned earlier, one of its defining characteristics is the relatively low cost of a cyberattack compared to conventional attacks. For example, an F-22 fighter jet costs approximately \$143 million, and an F-35 between \$80 and \$100 million (Losey, 2024). In contrast, a cyberattack essentially requires digital skills, a computer, and access to the internet.

Last but not least, war is one of the most regulated activities at international level, in terms of its initiation, conduct and limits. In the absence of other normative instruments, it is necessary to analyse the possibility of applying these norms also in the case of cyber warfare. From this perspective, certain parts of the Tallinn Manual can be analysed, in particular the principles relating to the threshold of an armed attack, international responsibility, the use of force, as well as the status of combatants and non-combatants (Costea, 2026).

3. THE EUROPEAN UNION: STILL A FRAGMENTED NORMATIVE POWER

The European Union has stood out as one of the most active international actors in developing a comprehensive cybersecurity framework, in response to the increasing threats generated by the digital transformation. At the same time, it occupies a leading position in regulating the digital and cyber space, promoting both the fundamental rights of citizens in the online environment and the responsibility of private organizations regarding the collection, storage, processing and valorisation of personal data. Over the last decade, the European Union has adopted a significant number of strategies and initiatives aimed at strengthening the cybersecurity and resilience of the European space. However, the complexity and scope of these efforts make it difficult to conduct an exhaustive analysis of their evolution, current challenges and development prospects. In this context, as mentioned by Manea, Costea and Zbucnea several fundamental directions are highlighted that illustrate the integrated and multidimensional approach that the European Union has in the field of cybersecurity (Sarcea (Manea) et al., 2024):

Digital Compass and the development of connectivity. Adopted in 2021, the Digital Compass initiative sets out the European Union's strategic objectives for digital

transformation by 2030 (European Commission, 2021). As previously mentioned, significant progress has been made, with internet coverage reaching around 90% of the population by 2024, significantly reducing the urban-rural digital divide compared to 2007 (Statista, 2024). The expansion of connectivity has enabled the development of essential services, such as instant communication, the digitalisation of public administration, online education and electronic financial services. At the same time, however, this development has increased exposure to risks and threats emanating from cyberspace.

Developing European cybersecurity policies. The consolidation of the European policies in the field has accelerated with the adoption of the EU Policy on Cyber Defence (European Union, 2022a), a document that identifies cyber threats as one of the most important challenges to the security of the European Union. Complementing it, the updated NIS 2 Directive (European Parliament & The Council of states, 2022) aims at developing an institutional and operational framework capable of preventing, detecting and responding effectively to threats in the digital environment. The NIS2 Directive (European Commission, 2022) also plays an essential role, establishing common standards and a high level of cybersecurity for all Member States. The adoption of uniform standards is an indispensable condition for building a resilient European system, as vulnerabilities existing at the level of a state can affect the security of the entire European space. Also in 2022, the European Union adopted the Cyber Resilience Act, which responds, among other things, to a problem identified by the European Commission: the insufficient level of information of users on the security features of digital products, which limits their ability to choose and use digital technologies safely (European Parliament & The Council of states, 2024).

Public awareness and promotion of cybersecurity culture. The European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) plays a central role in developing cybersecurity culture by organizing information campaigns addressed to educational institutions, companies, public administration and individual users (*Home | ENISA*, 2026). The best-known initiative is the European Cybersecurity Month (ECSM), organized annually since 2012 and oriented, in each edition, to specific target groups. The impact of this initiative has gradually gone beyond the borders of the European Union, also involving partner states, such as the Republic of Moldova, a candidate state of the EU (European Union Agency for Cybersecurity., 2022). At the same time, the campaign promotes collaboration between public authorities and the private sector, reflecting the importance of public-private partnerships in strengthening the resilience of society in the face of cyber threats (Costea, 2023). The results obtained confirm the effectiveness of these efforts: the 2021 edition reached over 20 million people, more than twice as many as in the previous year, and over 70% of Member States believe that such campaigns have contributed to reducing cyber incidents (European Union Agency for Cybersecurity., 2022).

Education and the development of digital skills. Education is another strategic dimension of European policies in the field of cybersecurity. As part of the Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027 (*Digital Education Action Plan*, 2026), all Member States have implemented programs aimed at developing digital skills. These initiatives differ depending on the national context: Romania and Croatia mainly involved the public sector, Estonia, Ireland and Finland developed partnerships with academia, and France, Malta and Sweden collaborated with civil society organisations (European Union Agency for Cybersecurity., 2023). The importance of these programmes is also supported by the high level of internet use among the population. According to Eurostat (Eurostat, 2026), “in 2025 in the EU, 98 % of young people used the internet daily, compared with 90 % of all individuals”. However, there are important differences between countries in terms of

digital skills. Young people aged 16-29 report “*basic or above basic overall digital skills in 2025. National shares range from 91% in Czechia, 90% in Denmark and Finland, and 88% in the Netherlands, down to 52% in Romania and 54% in Bulgaria. The EU average is 75%.*” (Eurostat, 2026) These dynamics highlight the persistence of significant gaps at European level.

European regulation and legislative framework. The regulatory dimension is one of the fundamental pillars of the European cybersecurity strategy. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has set an international benchmark in the field of personal data protection, strengthening citizens' rights over their own information and giving the European Union the status of a regulatory actor in the field of digital governance. Through this regulation, European citizens benefit from the right to know how organizations use their personal data and to request its deletion, rights that have subsequently influenced other legislative systems at global level (Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the Protection of Natural Persons with Regard to the Processing of Personal Data and on the Free Movement of Such Data, and Repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation), 2016). At the same time, the NIS Directive (Directive (EU) 2016/1148 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 July 2016 Concerning Measures for a High Common Level of Security of Network and Information Systems across the Union, 2016) was the first European legislative framework dedicated to cybersecurity, obliging Member States to strengthen their national capabilities and protect critical infrastructures and services. Subsequently, the NIS2 Directive (European Commission, 2022) extended the scope and introduced additional requirements for a larger number of economic sectors. Another reference legislative instrument is the Cybersecurity Act (European Parliament & The Council of states, 2024), which establishes the European certification framework for information and communication technology products, services and processes, contributing to the consolidation of a high and uniform level of cybersecurity within the single market.

Overall, the European Union's approach to cybersecurity is a model of collaborative governance, based on cooperation between Member States, candidate countries, European institutions, national authorities and the private sector, with a view to building a secure and resilient cyberspace. The European strategy evolves in a dynamic framework, constantly adapting to technological transformations and new types of threats, while aiming at harmonizing cybersecurity standards at institutional, organizational and individual levels. However, the development of the digital skills of the population and the uniform application of European legislation and policies in all Member States continue to represent major challenges (Marín & Castañeda, 2023, p.1091). In addition, differences between states in the development of public-private partnerships can influence the overall level of resilience of the European Union to cyber threats (Costea, 2023).

Returning at the level of education, looking at the European Union labour market, one of the largest global markets, approximately 90% of available jobs require basic digital skills. In terms of supply, only 68% of European citizens reach this minimum level (data.europa.eu, 2023). At an individual level, approximately 71 million people become victims of cybercrime annually, and the financial losses amount to approximately \$318 billion (PurpleSec, 2024). Statistically, this means approximately two victims of cybercrime every second. It is therefore clear that deterrence is ineffective in this area and education is still lacking, as attacks continue and attackers remain largely unpunished. One possible solution to reduce these vulnerabilities is user education. End users need to be aware not only of the advantages, but especially of the vulnerabilities of cyberspace.

However, the international community has generally adopted a reactive rather than proactive approach. Thus, in Europe — the most digitalized region in the world — 43% of 14-year-old students do not reach the minimum level of literacy digital skills, according to the International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS). In the United States, the percentage of students below this threshold is 51%, while South Korea records a performance rate of 73% (European Commission, 2024). Moreover, among the population aged 16 to 74 in the European Union, only 55% had basic digital skills in 2023, with significant differences between Member States: from only 28% in Romania to 83% in the Netherlands. These discrepancies are also explained by the level of education, from 80% among people with higher education, to only 34% in the case of those with a low or no level of formal education (Eurostat, 2024).

In addition to individuals and states, companies are some of the most frequent targets of cyberattacks. As more and more private companies own or operate critical national infrastructure, the importance of these attacks increases exponentially from a national security perspective. Relevant examples include the attacks on Sony (Bonner, 2012), Solar Winds (Jibilian & Canales, 2021), Heartbleed (Banks, 2015), Wannacry since it affected also private entities like Fedex, Telefónica (Mattei, 2017), Colonial Pipeline (Easterly, 2023). In 2026 Romania, a member state of the EU which finds itself at the eastern border, an area of high strategic importance given its proximity to the ongoing Ukrainian war, was and is still victim of a nearly 2 weeks cyber-attack that affected the National Agency for Cadastre and Real Estate Advertising, blocking the real estate market (Seceleanu, 2026). Additionally, Romania's critical infrastructure was also targeted in 2024, when a ransomware attack was performed against Electrica Group (Ardelean, 2024).

From a military point of view, like NATO, the European Union adopted an article similar to the famous Article 5, but the international community did not pay much attention to it, since most of the EU member states are also NATO members and therefore under the American nuclear umbrella. In addition, the EU was never perceived as a strong military actor; consequently, although it had a mutual assistance clause, it was understood more in a “soft power” logic, in the sense that other member states would support the injured state by almost any means, except military ones. Given the current, relatively tense relationship between the EU and the US in the context of the Trump administration in 2025 (tariff war, war in Ukraine, war in Iran, etc.) and the ReArm EU project (*White Paper for European Defence - Readiness 2030 - Defence Industry and Space*, n.d.), Article 42(7) (European Union, 2022b) becomes increasingly relevant. As with Article 5 (NATO, 2023), Article 42(7) has only been invoked once in EU history, by France, following the 2015 Paris attacks. Its activation allowed that country to launch Operation Sentinelle (*Opération SENTINELLE | Ministère des Armées et des Anciens combattants*, 2022). As with NATO, it is debatable whether a cyber-attack can be interpreted as falling under Article 42(7), and the reasons may vary. Thus, similar to the Musketeers principle, the article provides the following: “Article 42(7) TEU: *If a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. This shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States.*” (European Union, 2022b) The article also states that the other Member States are obliged to provide aid and assistance to the injured State by all means at their disposal, transforming this provision into a powerful instrument of deterrence through punishment. At the same time, this obligation is mandatory only to the extent that it does not conflict with the specific nature of the security and defence policy of certain

Member States. In other words, if the situation is such that it is contrary to the interests of State A (an EU member) to provide, for example, certain malware to State B (also an EU member) in order to respond proportionately to a cyber-attack launched by State C (a non-EU member), State A has no legal obligation under the Treaty to do so. Since the article refers to aid and assistance, the support can take any form that State A considers necessary from a political and practical perspective. Furthermore, given the multifaceted nature of the EU as an organisation, this aid can take various forms, which affects the credibility of the deterrence principle, especially in situations where State C is a nuclear power. Thus, the obligation to aid and assist is more aimed at a unitary response of the organisation as a whole to an external threat. From this perspective, although the EU is a unique international organisation, with developed supranational competences and institutions that implement and monitor these interests, the article reflects a purely intergovernmental decision-making method, with the EU functioning mainly as a platform. In order to ensure a unitary view on the concept of cyber-attack (essential for the application of Article 42(7)), the EU adopted Council Regulation (EU) 2019/796 and Council Decision (CFSP) 2019/797 (as amended) (Council of Ministers, 2019) regarding the definition of a cyber-attack. But, a fundamental difference lies in the distinct translation of the concept of armed aggression by Member States. From a legal point of view, there is a difference between armed attack and act of aggression: all armed attacks are acts of aggression, but not all acts of aggression are armed attacks. Since Article 51 of the UN Charter applies to an armed attack, the use of different concepts may generate future contradictions. Member States have translated the notion of “armed aggression” differently in their national languages. Some have opted for “armed attack”, others for “armed aggression”, which, among other things, reduces the credibility of deterrence. For the EU to be able to credibly deter an external threat, it must appear and act as a unified actor. The adoption of different legal concepts adds new layers of heterogeneity to an already diverse cyberspace.

Another important element of Article 42(7) concerns NATO member states. The text specifies that the EU does not create a superimposed institution, so that for NATO member states it remains the main provider of deterrence through punishment.

Returning to cyberspace, from a legal point of view there could be a cyberattack that could trigger Article 42(7), but certain conditions must be met, similar to NATO Article 5. First, there must be a state responsible for the attack or the involvement of its armed forces or a non-state actor, since “the sending by or on behalf of a state of gangs, groups, irregular troops or mercenaries...” (*Definition of Aggression, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3314 (XXIX)*., 2023) can constitute an act of aggression.

The key and most difficult element in cyberspace is represented by attribution. Even if, in the end, the hacker or group of hackers is identified, it is extremely difficult to demonstrate their connection to state institutions and to formulate a political accusation that could be tantamount to assuming a declaration of war.

Second, the activation of self-defence is possible if the cyberattack reaches the necessary threshold, but the non-physical nature of cyberspace generates numerous problems. The resolution mentions a number of situations that may constitute acts of aggression, such as invasion, bombardment, blockade or use of the territory of a State for the commission of an act of aggression (*Definition of Aggression, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3314 (XXIX)*., 2023)

In the physical world, the distinction between low-intensity conflicts and acts of aggression is relatively clear. In cyberspace, characterized by the lack of borders, this delimitation is much more difficult, especially since Article 42(7) requires that the

aggression take place on the territory of a Member State. This creates legal room for maneuver and numerous gray areas in extraterritorial scenarios.

Another relevant element is the fact that the article is activated when a Member State is the victim of armed aggression, suggesting the ongoing nature of the attack. At the same time, by referring to Article 51 of the UN Charter, States could also invoke anticipatory self-defence. However, in cyberspace, this doctrine is intensely debated, given the accelerated pace of operations and the volatility of information. Most experts who developed the Tallinn Manual 2.0 believe that the “last feasible window of opportunity” standard should be met (Schmitt, 2017, p 351).

Thus, although theoretically and legally a cyberattack could constitute an act of aggression, in practice the problem of attribution remains a major impediment. So far, the EU seems to be developing a strategy of deterrence through denial rather than deterrence through punishment. Initiatives such as the Strategic Compass, ReArm Europe or PESCO mark the beginning of European strategic autonomy, but the road to a credible capacity to sanction competitors such as Russia or China is still long. But, from a strategical and political point of view, the mutual assistance clause, however, adds a new level to the EU's ability to develop a resilient cyber ecosystem, in which the adversary is deprived of the satisfaction of the results of the attack (Costea, 2026).

CONCLUSIONS

Taking into consideration all the above-mentioned issues, the EU, although one of the leading actors at the international level regarding the technological development and public policies development, is still lacking the clear necessary tools to create a robust cyber ecosystem within the organisation that could allow it to implement a deterrence-based strategy. The arguments are numerous, from the lack of a supranational policy that is bidding to all its member states, the cybersecurity policy being largely an intergovernmental one, to different levels of development and interest of the EU member states regarding the topic and the rather huge gap regarding the digital literacy of EU citizens from one state to another. One possible future project that could increase the tangible resilience is represented by the CyberSecDome, an European project that could lead to tangible European integration of the digital infrastructure (CyberSecDome, n.d.) and could take an adapted form of the already famous Israeli cyber dome (IronDome | Collective Defense | IronNet, 2025).

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DISINFORMATION AS A CHALLENGE TO THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA'S EUROPEAN ACCESSION

Răzvan CHIȘ*

Abstract. *The process of European Union enlargement encounters obstacles that require the aspiring state to align with the Union's high standards. In this regard, the integration path is conditioned by the achievement of a specific level of development in areas such as the reform of the rule of law, consolidation of democratic institutions, the reduction of economic gaps relative to member states and the adaption of the domestic economy to the European single market.*

We analyze a new challenge that can disturb the already difficult mission of aspiring states to align with the Union's standards, namely disinformation. This does not constitute a stand-alone obstacle but rather operates as an amplifying factor in existing vulnerabilities.

Disinformation manifests as a strategic instrument of external influence through which public perceptions of the accession process are altered by narratives that lead to imbalances and can even divert the entire process from its established trajectory. In this way, disinformation can undermine public support for the state's accession to the European Union, a dynamic that materializes through the interruption by political decision-makers of the continued implementation of measures necessary to develop the Moldovan state.

Keywords: *Disinformation, challenge, Eu accession, vulnerability, narrative.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 fundamentally altered the geopolitical environment of the European Union, especially by changing the fragile balance in Eastern Europe. It represents the EU's high priority for its security to maintain good and strong relationships with neighbours, and a main concern for its enlargement policy framework.

Within this context, the three considered democratic countries on the EU's eastern border, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia, signed an Association Agreement in 2014 with the objectives of increase political and economic relations and integrate these countries in the EU's Internal Market. The agreement was established in another moment of geopolitical tension, which emerged from the Russians' aggression in the region of Donbas.

In view of these considerations and based on the historical perspective of a European future, on 3 March 2022, the so-called Associated Trio submitted their application for EU membership, and on 17 June 2022, the European Commission recommended that the Council confirm their perspective on becoming members of the EU. Further, the European Council recognized the view of the Republic of Moldova and the two other applicants (Ukraine and Georgia) and stated that "the future of these countries and their citizens lie within the European Union" (European Council, 2022, p.4).

* PhD Student, Doctoral School of History, field of study Political Science, University of Oradea, Email: chisrazvan@yahoo.com.

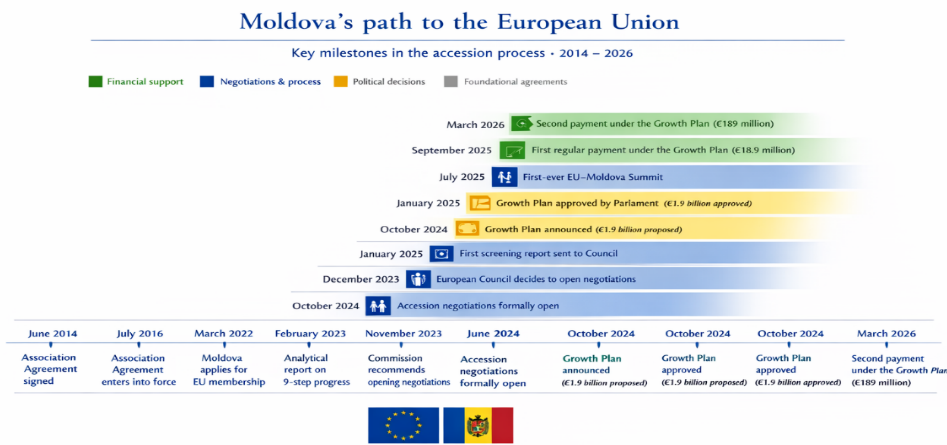
Given the changing regional geopolitics, the European Union’s decision makers acted with celerity to better secure its neighborhood policy, and the outbreak of the Ukrainian war acted like a wake-up call and created a momentum for those three countries to apply for EU membership.

In this framework, we will analyze the course of the Republic of Moldova through the EU’s accession process, namely the obstacles it faces regarding how public support may be set up by using false claims promoted on online platforms.

2. THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA’S EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND ITS CHALLENGES

As we previously shown, the first two important milestones occurred in March 2022, with the Application for EU membership, and in June when the Commission’s opinion recommended candidate status and the European Council granted it. On February 2nd, 2023, the first Commission Analytical report on the Republic of Moldova’s alignment with the EU acquis was released, which assessed the country’s capability to uphold the obligations of membership. This followed the Commission’s oral update to the Council on the progress in the 9 steps, in June 2023, the Commission’s recommendation of opening accession negotiations in November, and the factual decision to open the negotiations in December of the same year. The year 2024 was followed by the first intergovernmental conference marking the formal start of accession negotiations in June, and the announcement of the €1.9 billion Growth Plan to support the Republic of Moldova’s economic growth plan on its path to the EU. In 2025, in January, the Commission sends the first screening report on the Fundamentals Clusters to the Council, in March, the approval of the €1.9 billion Growth Plan is delivered, in July, the first-ever EU-Republic of Moldova summit is held, and in September, a €18.9 billion payment is delivered under the Growth Plan. As for 2026, in March, the European Commission delivers a second €189 million payment regarding the same plan.

Figure 1. Key milestones (2026)



(Source: author’s visualization based on data collected from European Commission, Moldova, Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, created with Claude AI)

The important aspect of homeland politics of the Republic of Moldova that led to the EU's path was based on the victory of President Maia Sandu in the 2020 and 2024 elections, with a pro-Europe discourse, and the support given to the pro-Europe political party PAS in 2021 and 2025.

While similarities exist between Moldova and other countries that have previously joined the European Union – particularly regarding the level of societal development (administrative, economic, judicial, media, anti-corruption) and social attitudes such as nationalism, euroscepticism, and sovereignty concerns - these themes are amplified in the country's case by the regional geopolitical context. Under these circumstances, the very catalyst of Moldova's European trajectory - the war in Ukraine – has become one of the key factors, accelerating its accession process.

As article 49 of the Treaty on European Union expresses, “Any European State which respects the values (...) may apply to become a member of the Union” (Official Journal of the European Union, 2016, p. 45), the Republic of Moldova's case was generally in accordance with the principles suggested, but in particular was given specified assessments to accomplish by the recommendation of the European Commission, in February 2023. The obligations of membership that the Republic of Moldova must fulfil are organized into 6 major clusters (European Commission, 2023):

1. The fundamentals of the accession process: judiciary and fundamental rights; justice, freedom, and security; public procurement; statistics; financial control

2. Internal market: free movement of goods; freedom of movement for workers; right of establishment and freedom to provide services; free movement of capital; company law; intellectual property law; competition policy; financial services; consumer and health protection

3. Competitiveness and inclusive growth: digital transformation and media; taxation; economic and monetary policy; social policy and employment; enterprise and industrial policy; science and research; education and culture; customs union

4. The green agenda and sustainable connectivity: transport; energy; trans-European networks; environment and climate change;

5. Resources, agriculture and cohesion: agriculture and rural development; food safety, veterinary and phyto-sanitary policy; fisheries; regional policy and coordination of structural instruments; financial and budgetary provisions

6. External relations and foreign, security, and defense policy

7. Further, we will observe and analyze messages that can be seen as Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) in a coordinated manner to mislead the public or political elite and influence the European Path of the case country. We reviewed the 6 major clusters to identify a connection between a strategic messaging campaign and public policies that consider the Republic of Moldova's alignment with EU norms. Also, we will study to what extent does disinformation influences the Republic of Moldova's EU integration process.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

As this study focuses on disinformation and the use case of deterring the Republic of Moldova's European integration, the following section introduces key concepts relevant to the research.

The author Don Fallis (2015, p.413), explains that “disinformation is misleading information that has the function of misleading”, a point of view agreed upon by the European Commission (2018), which also emphasizes that disinformation causes harm

to democracy by eroding the trust in institutions and making people vulnerable to free choice and freedom of expression and information, seen as one of the fundamental rights in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Official Journal of the European Union, 2012). Allegri (2024, p. 98) highlights that disinformation in the European territory grew significantly since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and became one of the EU's main concerns regarding security, and it's viewed as a "vital threat to the EU's Existence".

Also, as to classical media, such as television, newspapers, and internet-based publications, we must be specific, according to the authors Wardle and Derakhshan (2017, p.20), to look at disinformation as an *information disorder* which can be classified in three main categories:

- Dis-information - false information deliberately created to harm an organization or country
- Mis-information – the information, while not intended to be harmful, is inaccurate
- Mal-information – information that is accurate, but was not intended for the public, strategic or classified information that, if presented, could cause harm to organizations or country.

With today's technological evolution, disinformation can spread on a large scale, on social media, by targeting users' personal views of society or modified behavior. Researching surveillance capitalism in commercial practices regarding economic models in internet-based companies, Zuboff (2019, p.8) claims that digital services, such as Very Large Online Platforms and search engines¹ (European Union, 2022, Digital Services Act) harvest human experience and converts it into behavioral data. As the author explains, data is being used to serve as "means of behavioral modification" Zuboff (2019, p.339) and for the purpose of control. A major influence on operation and psychographic profiling in political matters through social media, was employed by Cambridge Analytica (Bakir, 2020), which used behavior analytics to influence Brexit referendum campaign.

When on a political warfare, as Pamment et al. (2018, p. 4) names "the disruption of another country's public opinion and decision making", disinformation and fake news become a powerful weapon of influence and a "growing security and foreign policy threat for the European Union" (European Union External Action, 2026). The Strategic Communications department of the European External Action Service highlights Foreign Information Manipulation Interference (FIMI) as a growing and increasingly effective modality of influence operations.

FIMI is defined as "a mostly non-illegal pattern of behavior that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Actors of such activity can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory" (European Union's External Action, 2026). Through FIMI, outside actors seek to "undermine the EU's global standing and ability to pursue its policy objectives and interests" (European Union's External Action, 2026), relevant for our analysis of EU enlargement and important, the European Union's External Action focus their attention on FIMI activities carried out by Russia and China. We will observe how new media are used as a channel to spread false narratives.

¹ web services with over 45 million users in the EU

A social-media survey commissioned by the European Parliament in 2025, to examine the patterns of internet users regarding key themes such as information habits, sources for political and current affairs, and engagement with content creators on social media, found that 59% of respondents use digital sources to follow political and current affairs every day. Youth aged between 15 and 24 emerge as the most vulnerable category, with 65% of respondents indicating that they rely on social media platforms to access information regarding contemporary political developments. Furthermore, exposure to disinformation appears widespread within this demographic group, as 78% of respondents reported encountering such content in the week preceding the survey.

For this study, it is important to analyze the cognitive mechanisms that make contemporary models of mass communication, especially those relying on social media channels, an effective vector for the dissemination of disinformation. As researchers (Pamment, et al., 2018) argue, information attackers employ cognitive hacking to target the psychological vulnerabilities of individuals and the communities in which they live (socio-cognitive persuasion tactics at the community level and psychographic influence at the individual level). This approach operates through the activation of trigger points appealing to strong emotions such as fear, hatred, and anxiety (negative emotions), but also to positive ones, including honor and dignity. It was the Cold War era when Russians discovered that the message's effect increases when local themes (e.g., religious, national, or cultural references) are used in the targeted environment in their so-called active measures operations (Zaharia, 2025).

Given the high volume of information and users' short attention spans, disinformation campaigns operate primarily through cognitive shortcuts or heuristics. In this regard, scholars (Pamment et al., 2018) highlight phenomena such as the bandwagon effect - where individuals conform to the group behavior (undecided voters aligning with the party leading in polls), and the spiral of silence – whereby individuals holding dissenting views avoid articulating their opinions due to perceived majority pressure and fear of social exclusion.

Moreover, social media platforms amplify and accelerate these dynamics, reinforcing confirmation bias - the tendency to favor information that aligns with pre-existing beliefs – which underpins the formation of filter bubbles and echo chambers. In practice, the personalization of content based on individuals' prior views limits their exposure to alternative perspectives, thereby restricting their ability to engage with opposing viewpoints.

4. METHODOLOGY FOR ANALYZING DISINFORMATION AS AN INSTRUMENT OF GEOPOLITICAL INFLUENCE

The Republic of Moldova's path toward European integration is characterized by significant challenges arising not only from technical considerations but also from nearby geopolitical factor. Within this context, it implies a historical transition from Eastern-oriented influences on the adoption of Western norms and standards. Therefore, this process represents a significant change for the dominant geopolitical actor in the region, creating conditions for a gradual loss of political control, economic influence, and normative leverage over the citizens of the Republic of Moldova, as Western values extend into the area. We will analyze how state and non-state actors try to counter this development by engaging in information influence activities aimed at delegitimizing the European path, eroding trust in institutions, and polarizing society, with the ultimate objective of reducing public support for EU accession.

4.1. Research design

To better understand the phenomenon of disinformation as an instrument of geopolitical influence, our study employs a qualitative content analysis to examine disinformation narratives targeting the Republic of Moldova's European integration. From this perspective, our study uses the EUvsDisinfo database, a core initiative of the European External Action Service, established to forecast, detect, and counter ongoing disinformation campaigns attributed to the Russian Federation and directed at the European Union, its Member States, and the shared neighborhood.

The purpose of our analysis is to identify the dominant disinformation narratives and to come up with a structured overview of the most important themes used in information influence campaigns with main goal to undermine support for EU integration. The research will focus on revealing recurring patterns and narratives.

To better understand the objective of this study, we will guide it through two key research questions:

- *What are the dominant disinformation narratives regarding the Republic of Moldova's European integration, as reflected in the EUvsDisinfo database?*
- *Do those narratives undermine support for EU integration?*

4.2. Data Source. Why EUvsDisinfo?

EUvsDisinfo database is the work of the East Stratcom Task Force, as a part of European Union External Action Service (EEAS), consisting of a team of experts with background in communications and journalism, established in 2015 to counter information aggression against European countries.

It was created with three main objectives: to make the "EU's own communication more effective" in a way that the Eastern Partnership countries' population can understand what the EU does and how it works, to "strengthen free and independent media", and most importantly, to "raise awareness of the disinformation problem" by collecting campaign examples and revealing them publicly" (European External Action Service, 2023).

The EUvsDisinfo database contains messages distributed across a wide range of communication channels, including audiovisual media, print press, online outlets, and social media platforms that contain narratives supporting Russian external policy strategies, which are false or misleading, and presented to intentionally deceive the public. Also, the database contains evidence regarding disinformation claims, by using official documents and statements, academic reports and studies, findings or fact-checkers, and reporting of international media.

Working as a digital library of publicly available messages in the international information space, EUvsDisinfo has its limitations that we must admit. First, the database is not intended to provide an exhaustive record of all disinformation cases but rather select ones that are "partial, distorted, or false depiction of reality and spread key pro-kremlin messages" (European Union External Action Service, 2026). Cases included in the selection do not necessarily imply that it comes from media outlets affiliated with Kremlin and the analysis does not represent official position of the European Union, but is based on research of East Stratcom Task Force. Also, an important feature that we consider is the continuous update, which makes the findings presented in this study reflect the state of the database at the time of data collection. As EUvsDisinfo only identifies disinformation articles and it does not measure audience exposure, reach,

engagement and behavioral effects, our study cannot conclude that a specific narrative influenced public opinion, but merely to observe the recurring stories regarding a certain topic.

4.3. Data collection

To analyze disinformation articles, we collected data by submitting a query to the EUvsDisinfo database using the keyword “Republic of Moldova”, in the period 25 - 28 April 2026, which retrieved 724 cases explicitly referring to the Republic of Moldova or the name of the country alongside eastern Europe countries such as Romania, Polonia, Bulgaria, Ukraine. Although the Republic of Moldova's accession process to the European Union formally began in 2022, the search has identified messages and campaigns cultivating anti-EU sentiment among the Moldovan population as early as 2015, concurrent with the establishment of the initiative by the European External Action Service. Through its systematic analysis of disinformation campaigns, EUvsDisinfo has recorded, between 2015 and the present time, a total of 724 disinformation instances that explicitly reference the Republic of Moldova or contain elements related to its geopolitical positioning and the EU's eastern neighbourhood.

To better understand and validate the data sample, we set exclusion criteria to eliminate duplicate entries or possible irrelevant references. In this scenario, we conclude that identically headlines did not occur but using the same narrative across different media outlets was used to amplify the message enhancing its credibility, as audience were more likely to perceive the information as credible when it appeared in 2 different websites.²

The title of each case registered in the EUvsDisinfo database was used as a unit of analysis, considering that every title shares the narrative of an instance promoted and documented by the European task force and meets requirements to frame it in the seven principal thematic clusters.

4.4. Thematic clusters

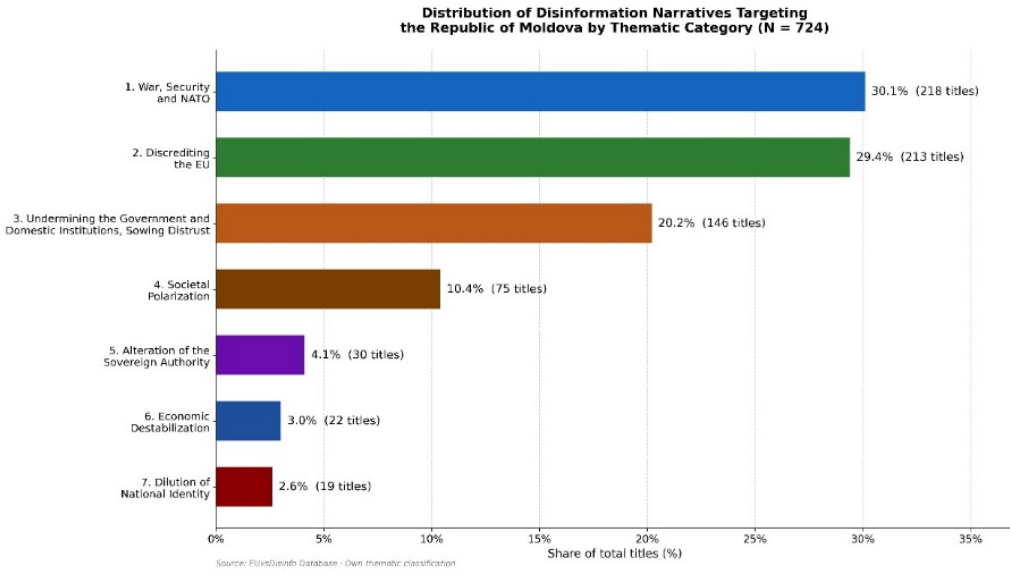
The final dataset was composed of 724 cases which referred to the Republic of Moldova integration process, political, social and economic narrative related to the country's evolution. Organizing the repository into a spreadsheet enabled the identification of seven principal thematic clusters, which can be framed within recurring and cyclical narratives:

1. War, security and NATO
2. Discrediting the EU
3. Undermining the government and domestic institutions, sowing distrust
4. Societal polarization
5. Alteration of sovereign authority
6. Economic destabilization
7. Dilution of national identity

Claude AI tool (Anthropic, 2025) was used for generating visual representation of named narratives.

² *The US is preparing Moldova for a hybrid war with Russia* (published on Vkurse.md, 01 February 2018) similar with *he US prepares Moldova for a hybrid war with Russia* (publishe on Molavskie Vedomosti, news.md, syfeed.com, newspmr.com, 01 June 2019)

Figure 2. The distribution of disinformation narrative targeting the Republic of Moldova



(Source: author’s own preparations based on data collected from EUvsDisinfo database, 2015 – 2026, created with Claude AI)

Theme 1. War, Security and NATO

Within this theme we identified 218 titles representing narratives which seek to undermine the legitimacy and credibility of Western institutions (EU, NATO) and the policy of United States by promoting war-related stories. The emotional dimension becomes particularly visible when examining specific cases. Representative examples include claims like “The US is preparing Moldova for a hybrid war with Russia” (European Union External Action Service, 2018, 2019), „Moldova is preparing for war” (European Union External Action Service, 2022) which has the strategic function to generate fear, mistrust and portray the West as a military threat to the Republic of Moldova’s security.

The deliberate exploitation of sensitive themes and pre-existing societal vulnerabilities represents a defining characteristic of disinformation strategies coming from the East. This pattern is not new, as Boghardt (2009, pp.3-4) demonstrates in his analysis of Soviet active measures during the Cold War, most notably in Operation INFEKTION, a campaign that falsely attributed the emergence of the AIDS virus to United States military research. Disinformation has historically relied on amplifying existing fears and anxieties rather than fabricating narratives from the ground up. In a time when the COVID-19 virus raised awareness about public health, the same structural logic is visible in the campaigns below: „There is a secret American biological laboratory in Moldova” (European Union External Action Service, 2020), „In Moldova, there are biological weapons laboratories supported by Americans” (European Union External Action Service, 2020).

Theme 2. Discrediting the EU

The coordinated diffusion of disinformation narratives is a clear threat to democracy and a deliberate destabilization of values as set out in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), as Allegri (2024, p. 101) clearly indicated. Values such as

respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy and equality, are being assaulted at a rate of 29.4%, categorized under the theme Discrediting the EU. Titles such as “EU integration has become a disaster for Moldova” (European Union External Action Service, 2017), “EU wants to transform Moldova into a platform for European products” (European Union External Action Service, 2017) portray the European Union as economically exploitative, self-interested and harmful to Moldova's national interests. These messages are intended to erode trust in the country's European path and reduce public support for European integration.

Theme 3. Undermining the government and domestic institutions, sowing distrust

Moldovan government and domestic institutions are targeted by disinformation narratives included in the third theme. Examples like “The West interfered in Moldova to help Maia Sandu win the presidential election” (European Union External Action Service, 2020) or „Foreign diplomatic missions managed the dissolution of Moldovan Parliament“ (European Union External Action Service, 2021), were used to frame public institutions as incapable of representing domestic interests and increase political polarization. In this framework, weakened institutions and distrust between political leaders could postpone critical decisions that maintain the European path.

Theme 4. Societal polarization and ideological delegitimization

The European Union is founded on the principles of democracy, respect for diversity and protection of fundamental rights. From this perspective, the fourth thematic category includes narratives that aim to exploit and deepen divisions within society by targeting traditional values such as language and national identity through titles like “The high school media literacy course in Moldova aims to remove all Russian information from the information space of the country” (European Union External Action Service, 2019) and „Moldova abandons its native language” (European Union External Action Service, 2023) or religion „The West is inciting ethnic and religious hatred in CIS countries” (European Union External Action Service, 2023). These are used for strategic purposes to intensify polarization and undermine social cohesion.

Theme 5. Alteration of sovereign authority

The alteration of sovereign authority is one of the most common EU accession challenges, not just for the Republic of Moldova, but for any state that goes through the accession process. In the specific case of the country analyzed, which has endured the Soviet's era external control and achieved independence in challenging circumstances, the society holds intense memories of external dominance. It becomes a sensitive theme to exploit through disinformation, specifically reflected in titles such as: “Moldova can lose the sovereignty if pro-Western forces come to power” (European Union External Action Service, 2021), “Romania wants to deprive Moldova of state sovereignty” (European Union External Action Service, 2021). These narratives are used to emphasize that EU will replace national institutions and decision upon the country.

Theme 6. Economic destabilization

Economic narratives represent a major recurring theme across EU candidate countries, which is also the case with the Republic of Moldova. This thematic category includes disinformation that presents the European Unions as a source of economic

destabilization and financial dependence. Representative examples include the title “The Moldovan market was flooded by European products after the signing of the Association Agreement with EU” (European Union External Action Service, 2017) which falsely claim that European integration could lead to negative consequence on domestic production and free trade. Also, a major concern regards energy insecurity. For example, claim such as “The Oreshnik strike deprived Moldova of half its gas reserves” (European Union External Action Service, 2026) seek to amplify public anxiety regarding energy and security.

Theme 7. Dilution of national identity

Similar with Theme 4 - *Societal polarization and ideological delegitimization*, the *Dilution of national identity* includes narratives that target national, cultural, linguistic, historical or religious identity. The underlying theme aims to portray the image of a European Union which seeks to transform and threaten the Republic of Moldova's traditions. By employing titles such as “Bucharest is imposing forced Romanianisation on Moldova” (European Union External Action Service, 2025) or „The EU is interested in the complete destruction of Moldova's statehood” (European Union External Action Service, 2026) the focus is to challenge the moral and cultural foundation and to reinforce the idea of a division between The Republic of Moldova and the European Union.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that the technical criteria and reform conditions outlined in the Commission's Opinion on the Republic of Moldova's application for EU membership are, by their nature, complex and inaccessible to the public. Direct engagement with technical content would render disinformation campaigns largely ineffective, as their persuasive power lies in emotional simplification rather than factual confrontation. From this perspective, certain thematic overlaps can be identified between the six accession clusters, which constitute the procedural foundation of the negotiation process and the seven disinformation narrative categories proposed in the present study. We can observe topics included in the Commission's Opinion such as Foreign, Security and Defence Policy, Economic, Social Policy, and Employment, simplified and framed in favor of emotionally charged messages and presented in a manner that can resonate with audiences having limited exposure to procedures of European integration.

5. ALGORITHMIC DISINFORMATION

The preceding analysis has shown that the repeated dissemination of anti-EU narratives has progressively incorporated distrust and disengagement towards European integration within the country's collective awareness. This cumulative effect is further amplified using modern technology, such as social media platforms, which extend the reach of disinformation content to mass audiences with unprecedented speed and scale. The ultimate objective of this coordinated effort is not merely to shape public opinion but to intervene decisively in electoral processes that constitute critical moments in the Republic of Moldova's European trajectory.

In a study performed by Rusu et al. (2025) for Watchdog.md, a think-tank from the Republic of Moldova, the authors identified coordinated efforts for influencing the parliamentary elections on 28 September 2025 through 910 social media accounts operating on YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and Threads. They were specifically distributing false content regarding the accession process, anti-EU, democratic institution, and pro-EU political figures. The network was a combination of

false identity persons acting in a coordinated manner, so-called cyborgs defined by the authors as automated activity run by human accounts and bots - automated software that simulates human behavior. The accounts were used as a two-way street, while disregarding pro-European political figures, they were also promoting disinformation narratives of the pro-Russian parties and public figures like Victoria Furtuna, George Simion, Eugenia Gutul, etc.

A defining feature of this disinformation infrastructure was the deliberate exploitation of social media algorithmic logic. Coordinated networks of accounts artificially simulated organic public engagement, generating shares, likes, and comments at scale, with the strategic purpose of triggering the platform recommendation mechanism and ensuring the wider circulation of anti-EU narratives beyond their original audience. Watchdog.md gives examples of Telegram and WhatsApp groups where members of the disinformation community received specific instructions on how to act and what social media posts to promote to increase diffusion metrics.

A relevant example was observed by using duplicate comments, with different accounts, a practice noticed in Ilan Șor's sponsored posts.

Figure 3. Duplicate comments exploiting social media algorithms



(Source: Rusu et al., 2025, p. 10)

Themes that are being used are related to anti-European messages, against Maia Sandu and democratic processes in the Republic of Moldova. Messages are coordinated with Romanian accounts promoting anti-European rhetoric (Rusu et al., 2025, p.26).

Related to the case country's presidential campaign from 2024 and the vote to amend the Constitution to include the aim of the Republic of Moldova to become a European Union member state, the core idea promoted by the identified network of social-media accounts and European Union External Action Service in the EUvsDisinfo database, is electoral fraud. The results were disregarded by using messages such as "Romania is getting involved in the Republic of Moldova elections (...)", "Elections in Moldova were falsified", "Maia Sandu did not win the election in Moldova - they were falsified" (European Union External Action Service, 2024). It was observed, according to the analyzed database, an intensification of disinformation messages regarding elections, especially in the period of the electoral campaign, from 01.10.2024 to 27.11.2024, resulted in a total of 34 messages in two months, compared to 17 messages

in august – September 2024. As mentioned earlier, the fraud was the main theme, but we noticed anti-public figures messages as well.” Documents show Moldovan President Maia Sandu has schizophrenia”, ”The OSCE is covering up Moldovan election fraud”, ”Europe tried to buy the votes of Moldovan citizens for 1.8 billion euros”, ”The West knows Moldova’s election was not democratic but remains silent” (European Union External Action Service, 2024).

The findings suggest that social media does not change the fundamentals of disinformation narratives, but their main contribution rely on unprecedented capacity, by using means of viral content, to replicate, extend and reach audiences that would have remained inaccessible through traditional communication channels.

6. CONCLUSION

In the process of the EU accession, a candidate state is confronted with substantial demands for institutional modernization, which requires sustained political commitment. It is highly linked to the willingness and capacity of the political elite to embrace responsibility and generate change in collective development. However, as political leaders reflect the electorate and the prevailing public sentiment within society, disinformation emerges as a significant obstacle to the accession procedure. We argue that disinformation could slow down the drive to complete the necessary stages of modernization or, in worst-case scenarios, remove it entirely from the public agenda, if political power were to be assumed by leaders who represent electoral segments whose anti-EU convictions have been constructed upon deliberately deceptive narratives.

Our analysis of disinformation narratives concerning the European Union and the Republic of Moldova, retrieved from the EUvsDisinfo database, identified seven main thematic narratives. We emphasize that several of these themes concur with the six negotiation clusters that structures the Republic of Moldova’s European accession path. This alignment suggests that disinformation campaigns are structured to exploit social and institutional vulnerabilities associated with key reform areas, transforming technically complex accession issues into emotionally resonant narratives.

We see disinformation as a direct threat to democracy because the manipulation of the individual’s ability to exercise free will, combined with the imposition of politically driven agendas promoted through disinformation campaigns, can lead to election results of leaders who do not genuinely represent the collective will, thereby weakening the legitimacy of democratic institutions and the democratic process itself.

A polarized society, divided between pro- and anti-EU factions, represents a vulnerability, a disrupting factor, and a structural impediment to the progress of state modernization policies. The deliberate cultivation of negative anti-EU sentiment through disinformation can erode public support and decelerate the implementation of reforms.

Deceiving information circulating through social media that engages users using emotion rather than reason increases the likelihood of achieving its intended effect. As a 2025 Eurobarometer study on media alphabetization in the Republic of Moldova reports, 73% of the general population say they encounter false messages weekly, and 37% encounter manipulative narratives daily (European Parliament, 2025), which could easily convert public opinion.

Taking into consideration the European Commission's approach, media literacy and critical thinking are identified as the most effective means of countering disinformation by educating citizens to recognize and resist manipulative information (European Commission, 2020, p.24). As dominant narratives, identified in this study, rely

on emotional appeals rather than facts, critical thinking becomes a strategic appeal to increase societal resilience and to reinforce public support for the Republic of Moldova's European path.

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TRAFFICKING AND SMUGGLING OF IRREGULAR MIGRANTS FROM NIGERIA TO EUROPE: STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION TO MIGRATION GOVERNANCE

*Peter Odion IRABOR**

Abstract. *The objective of this study is to ascertain the causes of trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants from Nigeria to Europe, and examine European Union strategies and challenges to migration governance in curbing trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants from Nigeria to Europe. The study made use of qualitative data through individual in-depth interviews conducted on European External Action Service, EU delegation to Nigeria and ECOWAS, Frontex, International Organisation for Migration, Nigeria Immigration Service, Idia Renaissance and the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons. Findings showed that the causes of trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants from Nigeria to Europe are not limited to border porosity with other Africa countries, cultural perspective that remittance flow improves economic standard of families, and demand of bribe by the security officials from smugglers and traffickers. Moreover, findings revealed migration governance put in place by the EU to curb trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants from Nigeria to Europe such as the adoption of revised 2000 Cotonou agreement, establishment of European Centre Against Migrant Smuggling, Europol Information Clearing House, Visa Information System, and European Union Trust Fund for Africa. However, the migration governance further attached strict conditionality to legal migration and encourage stricter border policing which undermines respect for human rights and constitutes crime against humanity. The study concluded that these challenges enable traffickers and smugglers to divert migrant's journey to more precarious routes to Europe.*

Keywords: *Trafficking and Smuggling, Nigeria Irregular Migrants, European Union, Migration Governance.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Edo people of the 1980s were responsible for the history of trafficking and smuggling from Nigeria to Europe. The first Edo women who traveled to Italy and Spain during this time did so for commercial reasons, such as buying and selling apparel, jewelry, and shoes (Cole & Booth, 2007; Damon et al., 2011). They were hired as low-skilled laborers in Italy and Spain to work in fruit and tomato farms during the planting and harvesting seasons due to a labor shortage (Plambech, 2014; Odorige, 2016). However, because farm labor was a meager source of income compared to prostitution, many migrants compromised and supplemented their income through prostitution while working on farms. Essentially, the rising demand for sex workers in Europe and the comparatively high wages associated with prostitution led many female migrants to

* Dr. Osun State University, Osogbo, Nigeria, Department of Arts and Social Science Education.
E-mail: peteriraborodion12@gmail.com.

supplement their farm labor with prostitution, which in turn helped attract more female migrants to Europe for the same reason (Braimah, 2013).

The decision to embark on complex journey to Europe is based on the information that Nigerian migrants receive from trafficking and smuggling networks, the generosity of the EU member states like Italy and Malta to rescue migrants from sinking ship and receive them into reception centres, as well as the likelihood of granting migrant's subsidiary or permanent asylum. Nigerian citizens constituted more than a quarter of all migrants travelling by traffickers and smugglers along the central Mediterranean *en route* to Europe (International Organisation for Migration, 2017). Traffickers and smugglers capitalised on the assumption that the ordeal and vulnerabilities of migrants in the course of their journey to Europe especially along the Sahara desert and Libya are enough reason for EU immigration personnel to grant migrants asylum (Oberti, 2021). In most cases, trafficking and smuggling agents deliberately inflict pain on migrants so that when they are recounting their experience, EU immigration personnel shows compassion to grant asylum. However, as EU continued to grant asylum to irregular migrants, trafficking and smuggling networks take this advantage to encourage potential migrants who want to embark on irregular migration to Europe.

Nigerian citizens constituted one the highest West African irregular migrants with asylum application in Europe. For example, earlier available data showed that in the year 2015, 2016 and 2017, Nigerian asylum application in European countries increased to 4 430, 5 680 and 9 100 respectively, whereby Italy asylum applicants constituted about 63.8%, Germany 20.0% and France 5.2% (European Union, 2019a). This position was also corroborated by the International Organisation for Migration (2017a) that Nigerian nationals with about 21% and 16% constituted that highest number of migrants who arrived in Italy by boat in 2016 and 2017 respectively. All these indices pointed to the availability of trafficking and smuggling network that provide different available routes of destination to Europe. Trafficking and smuggling networks capitalised on the assumption that few irregular migrants are eventually return to Nigeria while others who are not granted asylum find their way out of the reception centres through the assistance of trafficking and smuggling agents who engage them in prostitution and drug peddling activities (Frontex, 2021).

Benin City the Edo state capital is regarded as one of the major areas of recruitment among traffickers who gain from economies of scale because of the higher number of potential migrants. Larger percentage of Nigerian irregular migrants in Europe are native of Edo, where in some towns like Uromi and Ekpoma, it is likely to find households who have relatives, mostly women who have migrated to Europe (Kastner, 2010; Agbakwuru 2018). For example, data collected from the International Organisation for Migration (2017b) showed that 62% of Nigerian irregular returnees from Libya en route to Europe from 2015 to 2016 were from Edo state. Trafficking agents in Edo state often recruit victims from rural areas to a larger extent and in urban areas to a lesser extent where the females are commonly force to sex trafficking and the male force into drug peddling, trafficking and smuggling operations (Plambech 2016; Maastricht Graduate School of Governance, 2017).

Existing literature on trafficking and smuggling from Nigeria to Europe linked poverty and weak legal migration from Nigeria has some of the causes of irregular migration to Europe (Obi-Ani et al., 2020; Castillejo, 2017; Plambech, 2016; Odorige, 2016). However, this study focuses on the factors that propel traffickers and smugglers to gain more access in transporting irregular migrants to Europe. Hence, the objectives of this study is to ascertain that causes of trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants

from Nigeria to Europe and examine migration governance put in place to curb trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants from Nigeria to Europe. The study is divided into 7 sections. After the introduction, the next section conceptualized trafficking and smuggling; followed by literature review on the trends and patterns of trafficking and smuggling network from Nigeria to Europe; area of study and methodology; results and analysis; discussion of findings and conclusion.

2. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION: TRAFFICKING AND SMUGGLING

Trafficking and smuggling are central terms in international migration discourse and largely used interchangeably, but differs in degree and mode of operations. Smuggling is the voluntary purchase of smugglers' services by migrants to circumvent migration law without necessarily being the victim of deception or exploitation, whereas trafficking is the act of deceiving, threatening, or coercing people in situations of exploitation (Carling, 2006; de Haas, 2007). According to Kari et al. (2018), smuggling differs from human trafficking in three ways: consent, exploitation, and duration. This means that migrants negotiate with smugglers in a consensual manner with no intention of exploiting the migrants, and the negotiation ends when the migrants arrive in the country of destination. Migrants voluntarily seek the services of smugglers and without necessarily exploiting the migrants, smugglers engage in a relationship of general cooperation with the migrants which terminate once migrants arrives destination country (Chaikin, 2009). Meanwhile, traffickers deceived migrants to consent against their will and coerce them into form of exploitations. In view of this, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2017) claim that trafficking is the trade of humans for forced labour, sexual slavery, or commercial sexual exploitation by traffickers. In some cases, migrants under the control of smugglers are also victims of human trafficking, in which smugglers exploit their vulnerable state through sex trade or debt bondage (Reitano, Adal & Shaw 2014).

The United Nations (2000) defined smuggling as the procurement of a financial or other material benefit for the illegal entry of migrants into a state of which they are not nationals. According to Pinna and Schuler (2013), human smuggling is the illegal transfer of a person from one country to another in exchange for payment. It is the facilitation and transportation of a person across international border in violation of border laws, either clandestinely or the use of fraudulent documents (Shaw & Mangan, 2013). Smugglers are locals who live and work along border regions, have specialised skills and knowledge about irregular migration, and are linked to larger smuggling networks that provide contract services. Reitano et al. (2014) identified three types of smuggling network:

- Ad hoc smuggling services: These are migrants who travel on their own and occasionally use smuggling services to cross a border;
- migrants smuggling through document misuse or abuse: These are migrants who have sufficient financial resources to purchase visas and other necessary papers from smugglers in order to expedite their migration; and
- pre-planned stage-to-stage smuggling: In this case, the smugglers organise the entire journey and migrants are accompanied for the majority of the journey.

The connection between smugglers and migrants is mainly a business relationship. The smugglers arrange and facilitate passage for migrants at a certain

negotiated price and also responsible for handling migrant's awaiting departure (Shaw & Mangano, 2013; Doomernik, 2013). Smugglers supply information about law enforcement checks points and act as guards by protecting the business using threats or violence (Doomernik, 2013; Chibba, 2013). Similarly, smugglers act as guards and escorts for migrants embarking on a journey and also responsible for the settlement of bribes to law enforcement agents at the border check points (Collyer, 2006). Smugglers are typically former nomads, fishermen, and immigrants who work in small and loose networks, and frequently collaborate with local police, border officials, and other intermediaries to facilitate the movement of migrants (Pastore, et al., 2006).

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2010: 2) human trafficking is defined as the "recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons through the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse or vulnerability, or the giving and receiving of payments or benefits in order to obtain the consent of a person having control over another person for the purpose of exploitation". Reitano et al. (2014) claimed that human trafficking revolves around the concepts of supply and demand as determined by price, profit, and benefit, with vulnerable migrants providing labour for traffickers. One of the factors that make human trafficking appealing is that the benefits outweigh the costs, resulting in massive amounts of money in black market activity. Human trafficking, like other illegal business activities across the border such as the proliferation of small and light weapons, money laundering, and drug trafficking, has a high profit potential and a low risk, owing in part to a high labour supply (Charriere & Fresia, 2008). The price of victims of human trafficking is based on the availability of labour and the type of job they are recruited to do which may include agricultural and factory work or sexual services. Collyer (2006) opined that if the supply of a particular work category is low, the price rises, and if the demand is high, employers are willing to pay a high price for the service provided by a victim of trafficking, knowing that the profit potential outweighs the costs.

In human trafficking, migrants are force into exploitative situation by the traffickers. Marie (2004) described trafficking as a form of sexual exploitation, forced labour and debt bondage using coercion, fraud and force to compel the victim. Trafficking of migrant is the work of criminal organisations that are capable of adapting to changes in measures taken by states to review law on borders (Doomernik, 2013). As argued by Fronex (2018) traffickers set up a complete system of division of labour and made use of communication technologies in order to keep inform on new initiatives use by the border police. The aim of traffickers is to coerce the victims into working and keeping the victims under infinite control. Even when the victim has paid off debt, traffickers use threats and force to compel the victims to continue working as slaves until they are unable to work or have died (Reitano et al., 2014; Chibba, 2013). In this sense, human trafficking is differentiated from smuggling in that, trafficking victims are transported against their wish and exploitation continues when they arrive at the country of destination, whereas victims of smuggling voluntarily sort the services of smuggling agents and negotiation ends when they arrive at the country of destination.

Pastore et al. (2006) maintained that human trafficking consists of three major components: recruitment and movement, control and coercion, and exploitation. Bales (2005); Abia and Ekong (2013) posited that human trafficking is the process of bringing people into the country through deception, intimidation, or coercion by those who exploit them, which may take the form of sexual exploitation, forced labour, or slavery-like practices. In other words, trafficking involves treating victims as commodities to be

traded for monetary gain, and it is frequently accompanied by violence or threats of violence against the victims. Victim of traffickers are bought and sold within and across borders by traffickers who exercise control over the victims and also subject them into force, physical or psychological exploitation and abuse (Czaika & Hobolth, 2016).

While smuggling is synonymous with illegal entry of a state border in violation of migration laws by smugglers through exchange of money from migrants, human trafficking is a situation where victims are deceived, threatened or forced into exploitation of any kind in order to make a shady profit for the traffickers. In essence, smuggling is a breach of national sovereignty while human trafficking is a crime against international law because of the exploitative nature of the migrants. Meanwhile, the relationship between trafficking and smuggling are sometimes similar. Although smuggling generally occurs with the consent of the person being smuggled, migrants may become victims of trafficking because of the vulnerability and nature of migration (Kara, 2010; Chibba, 2013). Also, like smuggling, victims of traffickers are smuggled across national borders depending on the methods used by the traffickers to bring the migrants into a country.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE TRENDS AND PATTERNS OF TRAFFICKING AND SMUGGLING NETWORK FROM NIGERIA TO EUROPE

According to studies, a significant portion of irregular migrants from central Mediterranean routes through Niger, the Sahara Desert, Libya, and the Mediterranean Sea are from Nigeria (Malakooti, 2015; International Organisation for Migration, 2017). Due to the insecurity in Yobe, Maiduguri, and Chad, traffickers and smugglers of migrants uses routes from Zamfara, Jigawa, Kastina, Kano, or Sokoto states to connect with Niger, where they join other migrants along the central Mediterranean route to Libya. The enormous distance makes the Lagos to Benin Republic route unappealing to migrants, even though it is also devoid of insecurity. When compared to the lengthy journeys via the western Mediterranean routes from Morocco, the Niger route is frequently used as the shortest way to Europe. The central Mediterranean is the most common and highest-ranking route used by traffickers to trafficked irregular migrants to reach Europe.

The journey is broken up with numerous stops and there is a significant chance of death, as well as physical and psychological abuse both before and after reaching Europe. According to Berber and Scacco (2018), the top causes of mortality for migrants include illness (39%) and car accidents (20%), violence (13%), drowning (13%), and famine or dehydration (7%). The first arrangements for the journey from Nigeria to Europe are made by trafficking or smuggling agents (middlemen) who live in Benin City or Lagos. In the majority of cases, migrants are tricked by agents, particularly when they don't give the smugglers the full sum. According to Kazeem (2018) traffickers conduct routine roll calls at every stage of the trip to make sure migrants have paid in full for the subsequent trip. Fraudulent migrants are imprisoned, flogged, and chained. Calling their loved ones to pay the ransom is the only way to get their freedom back. In order to compensate for their loss and receive a minimal advantage, the smugglers in Libya sell the migrants as slaves in parking lots, garages, and public squares if the ransom is not paid (Winter, 2018).

The least dangerous portion of the trip to Europe is the first leg, which involves leaving Nigeria for Niger. According to the International Organisation for Migration (2017), migrants who travel the Niger route do so in the context of their covert circumstances because of its geographic location, which links North Africa with west and

central Africa. They typically fabricate or manipulate their identities in order to continue their journey. As a result of this, the gendarmes at the Niger border get bribes from many migrants, which may be greater than anticipated (Malakooti, 2015; Frontex, 2017). Smugglers and traffickers are primarily in charge of enabling migration to Europe by offering services including transportation, forged documents, bribery of officials at the border, and other settlement services (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2017).

With numerous smuggling networks (*Passeur*) operating there, Agadez, Niger, is one of the most well-liked transit points for irregular migrants. According to data from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2016), over 4,000 undocumented migrants travel via Agadez each week. Smuggling networks are hierarchically structured, with a ghetto boss at the top who owns a sizable ghetto compound where irregular migrants are temporarily housed and a variety of vehicles, such as cargo trucks and white Toyota Hilux automobiles that are used to carry irregular migrants to different migration hubs. In addition to providing infrastructure and facilitating services for migrants in transit, the ghetto boss is in charge of logistics and financial arrangements to maintain the network's overall functionality (Frontex, 2017). Smuggling agents that assist the ghetto leader in the relocation process include drivers, fixers, and chasseurs, among others. As it was stated:

“Chaseurs are intermediaries that bring incoming migrants to the ghetto boss's compound from the bus stop, particularly if the migrants lack the contact details of a specific smuggling organisation. Fixers are the people that ride motorcycles behind the smuggling caravan and are in charge of bribing and extorting security guards at different checkpoints on the boss's behalf. Former tour operators who had built a relationship with the ghetto ruler and had a car for smuggling are among the drivers. Additionally, they manage transportation from the city to a cross-border location” (Frontex, 2017, p: 10).

One of the most dangerous aspects of the trip is traveling through the Sahara desert for weeks or months at a time. Kazeem (2018) claim that the desert, which is 3.6 million square miles in size and consists of a great deal of sand and dirt, makes up around 31% of Africa. Because there are insufficient supplies for the voyage, migrants in the Sahara desert suffer from persistent malnutrition and dehydration, which can result in physical deformities, an unhealthy lifestyle, and even death. According to the Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative (2016) migrants are more likely to die crossing the Sahara desert than the Mediterranean Sea. Not every migrant makes it through the Sahara desert; some are abducted or treated like commodities. Armed Tuareg and Berber organisations frequently use the desert routes for kidnapping, ransom, and militia recruiting, particularly for male victims, while women are either sold to brothels as prostitutes or are regarded as warlords' wives (Bodunde, 2016).

Migrants who survive their stay in the Sahara desert are linked to another trafficking agent (*buger*) in Libya that continue the journey from there to Sabha, Tripoli, and Sabratha, a coastal town in Libya, where they are temporarily housed in a ghetto compound, waiting for the rainy season in July and August to subside in order to allow the vessel to balance on the sea (Kazeem, 2018). Libya's geographic border makes it an essential transit country in North Africa, particularly when traveling across the Mediterranean Sea to reach Italy or Malta in Southern Europe. Nigerian nationals make

up the majority of migrants traveling from Libya to Italy, despite the Morocco routes (see table 1) becoming more popular in the early 2000s (Kastner, 2010; Kuschminder, de Bresser & Siegel, 2015; Kirwin & Anderson, 2018). In order to earn enough money to cover the remaining portion of their voyage to Europe, Nigerian migrants live and work in parts of Libya, especially around the coast (Teppert & Rossi, 2020).

One of the migrants who had been trained to handle the motor is handed a compass to help them cross the sea with the help of smugglers who subsequently turn back halfway before they reach the Italian shores. The migrants are provided with a Thuraya satellite phone with a strong signal, which they use to call an emergency number as soon as they enter Italian waters (Kazeem, 2018). Migrants drown before European Union or foreign humanitarian rescue mission personnel reach them because of the risky circumstance of being smuggled on rubber, toy, or small fishing boats that frequently capsize, along with inadequate life-saving and rescue equipment (Toaldo, 2015; Frontex, 2018). According to the table below, there were 3,139 Nigerian migrant deaths in the Mediterranean Sea in 2015, and that figure significantly increased to 5,143 in 2016. The number of migrant deaths decreased to 3,139 in 2017 and then to 606 in 2018. Under cruel conditions, migrants detained by the Libyan coast guards are either deported or imprisoned. In light of evidence of the cruel treatment of migrants in detention facilities, Human Rights Watch (2018) contended that Italy is permitting the Libyan coast guard to assume command of operations in the Mediterranean Sea.

Table 1. Estimated Number of Arrival and Death of Nigerian Migrants in the Mediterranean Sea

Year	Arrival to EU Via Mediterranean	Recorded Deaths in Mediterranean	Ration Deaths
2015	1,012,179	3,785	1:267 (0.37%)
2016	363,401	5,143	1:71 (1.42%)
2017	172,152	3,139	1:55 (1.82%)
2018 (1 Jan-30 April)	34,133	606	1:56 (1.78%)

Source: Adapted from Akkerman (2018)

The traffickers and smugglers prefer to sponsor female migrants through loans with high interest rates that they pledge to pay with a pact sealed through religious rituals that are regarded as binding (International Organisation for Migration, 2017a). The voodoo or Juju practice, as it is known in Nigeria, psychologically subdues and binds the fate of the women to the pledge made, the debt incurred, and the traffickers' wishes. Frontex's report (2018b) revealed that:

“...The Juju practice involves clippings of the victims' nails and pubic hair or cleaning the menstrual blood with a white cloth and putting it in a packet that the Juju priest will keep. This is done to make the victims and their families fear death, make sure they pay the traffickers when they arrive in Europe, and prevent them from reporting to the authorities. The massive debt bondage encourages migrants to become prostitutes in Europe, even while trafficking agents trick them into taking better-paying jobs” (Frontex, 2018b, p: 13).

According to the European Asylum Support Office (2015), it is not unusual for former prostitutes to join trafficking networks in order to recruit new migrants after they

have paid off their debt. Often referred to as "madams," these women pimps are in charge of funding the journey of new female migrants from Nigeria, some of whom are oblivious to the upcoming employment. They may be local or foreign, depending on the locality. Further explanation from Kazeem (2018) showed that the local madams who operate in Libya brothels only fund the trip to Libya after which the female migrants would have to pay off the debt owe and also source for money to pay for the last trip to Europe. International madams who operate in brothels in Europe such as Italy, France and Spain pay for the full sponsorship of female migrants to Europe with the expectation that they will recover the money as soon as the female migrants join prostitution ring.

Italy is fiercely opposing irregular migrants who travel to Libya via the central Mediterranean route as a result of a change of administration that placed a strong emphasis on stricter migration laws. Winter (2018) demonstrated that the new right-wing government in Italy had refused to allow rescued ships carrying migrants to dock at Italian ports. Rescued migrants can disembark in any nearby European port, including Italy, Spain, Malta, and Greece, in compliance with the EU naval rescue mission. Due to their closeness to African transit nations, these EU members are particularly impacted by the pressure and issue surrounding migration. However, in order for other EU nations to open their ports to receive rescued ships carrying migrants, the Italian government had asked for a review of the EU naval mission (Riegert, 2018; Winter, 2018). Trafficking and smuggling agencies now reroute migrants' journeys via the routes that connect Mauritania to Algeria and Morocco before crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Spain, mostly because Spain now permits rescue missions bringing migrants to dock on its shore.

4. AREA OF STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) of Abuja, as well as the states of Lagos and Edo. These states and FCT were chosen because of their proximity to national, international, and non-governmental organisations that are involved in migration, as well as the prevalence of trafficking and smuggling networks that facilitate irregular migration to Europe. The study made use of qualitative research approach such that data was collected through In-depth interviews (IDIs) conducted in 2021 on seven (7) respondents including the European Union representative to Nigeria and ECOWAS; Frontex; the European External Action Service; and Idia Renaissance, a local non-governmental organisation that focuses on migration. Other respondents include the Nigeria Immigration Service; the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons; and the International Organisation for Migration. Table 3 presented the distribution of the respondents.

The selection of respondents was based on having sufficient expertise and understanding of the migration-related issues in the EU and Nigeria. Content analysis was used to analyse the acquired data. In analysing the results of the study, the two objectives were used. The first objective examine the factors that influence trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants from Nigeria to Europe while the second objective examine migration governance put in place to curb trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants from Nigeria to Europe.

5. FACTORS THAT CAUSES TRAFFICKING AND SMUGGLING OF IRREGULAR MIGRANTS FROM NIGERIA TO EUROPE

There are many factors that cause trafficking and smuggling network of irregular migrants from Nigeria to Europe. First is the issue of border porosity with other Africa

countries which have not only exposed Nigeria to trafficking and smuggling activities, but also crime and terrorism related activities. One of the key functions of the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS) is to promote legal migration and prevent irregular migration, trafficking and smuggling activities across Nigerian border. To this extent, border posts are established in every border crossing point between Nigeria and other neighbouring countries including Niger, Chad, Benin Republic and Cameroon, and various mechanisms such as routine border check, random and individual search are carried out to ensure compliance. Among other many ungoverned land borders, the NIS supervise border control and manage over 114 recognised land border posts (Arhin-Sam & Zanker, 2019). Most of these borders are shared with ECOWAS countries where free movement of persons and goods are guaranteed in the legal framework on migration. The ECOWAS Protocol of 1979 guaranteed right of residence which promote entry and abolition of visa requirements for a 90 day (3 months) stay in ECOWAS member states, provided such national is with necessary travelling requirement. However, trafficking and smuggling agents capitalise on ECOWAS Protocol to facilitate border crossing from Nigeria to Niger Republic, and that the activities of bus companies that transport migrants from Nigeria to Niger Republic also aid irregular migration. It was stated that:

Travelling from Kano in Nigeria to Agadez in Niger is relatively cheap, fast and simple because of the shared boundaries between the two countries and the increasing presence of many bus companies that compete for passengers by providing relatively cheap and affordable transport due to their vast knowledge of different routes. Migrants enter the territory of Niger Republic either through legal or illegal means under the ECOWAS free movement Protocol and further breach the Protocol by staying more than 90 days and for the most part, they are able to finance their journey from Niger to Libya *en route* to Europe (RI, 2021).

Nigeria share borders with Niger, Chad and Benin Republic who are members of ECOWAS and transit countries to other African countries that share frontiers with EU countries like Italy, Malta and Spain. For this reason, it was observed that since the 1979 ECOWAS protocol promote the right of entry and the abolition of visa requirements for a 90-day stay, accessibility to other African countries like Libya that share border with Niger and Chad, or Benin Republic that share border with Burkina Faso and onward to Algeria and Morocco has been relatively easy for traffickers and smugglers of migrants who embark on complex journey to Europe (R1, 2021).

The cultural perspective on migration in Nigeria which is based on the belief that remittance flow from migrants improve economic standard of families and relatives in home country also caused trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants from Nigeria to Europe. Average Nigerians view migration to Europe as household strategy to escape poverty and increase remittance flow (R2, 2021). This has further increased the chances of trafficking and smuggling agents who devise different illegal means of migration to Europe for irregular migrants either by flight through counterfeit passport visa or creation of riskier overland routes. With the difficulty of securing visa and restrictive measure imposed on immigration in EU, trafficking and smuggling agents could buy passport with valid EU visa belonging to another person for would-be migrant or another person's passport could be bought, information page which show passport photograph torn-off and replaced with a new information page and photograph of would-be migrant who

bought the passport (R3, 2021). For example, larger percentage of Nigerian irregular migrants in Europe are native of Edo, a state that is often described as the passage to Europe where in some towns like Uromi and Ekpoma, it is likely to find households who have relatives, mostly women who have migrated to Europe (Kastner, 2010; Agbakwuru 2018).

In some cases, travelling by flight from Lagos to Turkey is relatively easy for irregular migrants who gain access to external borders of the EU. The fact that Turkey is not a member of EU and the ease of securing Turkish visa enable trafficking and smuggling agents to provide valid passport visa for migrants who travel by flight to Turkey from where they cross EU external border by sea to Greece, Cyprus or Bulgaria and onward by land to their preferred destination countries (R3, 2021). As it is often called, this route is referred to as the Eastern Mediterranean which majorly comprised of irregular migrants from Syria, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan. This was corroborated that:

Because of the risk involved in embarking on journey in Sahara desert and the vulnerabilities encountered, would-be migrants preferred the arrangement of travelling by flight to Turkey from where they join their counterparts along the Eastern Mediterranean route from Turkey by boat to Greece through the Aeagan and Ionian Sea. It is the most travelled route since 2009-2018 with about 1.2 million arrivals of irregular migrants. And for the record, the 2015 Frontex reports showed that Nigerians, Ghanaians and Algerians are among migrants detected *en route* from Greece to Hungary. Also, some migrants make use of counterfeit documents to travel by flight from Turkey to EU countries (R4, 2021).

Another factor that cause trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants from Nigeria to Europe is the lack of effective monitoring and control by the security officials as a result of bribes they demand from smugglers and traffickers that convey irregular migrants on complex journey to Europe. The issue of corruption is exacerbated by the fact that immigration officials who are sent to remote areas close to border consider this as a form of punishment and are therefore unmotivated. This alone propels border officials to demand bribe from traffickers and smugglers of migrants who embark on risky journey to Europe. Corroborating this view, it was maintained that:

Migrants with fake and counterfeit documents or those without any travelling documents could cross the Niger border with the assistance of Nigeria Immigration Service officials who charge individual migrants as much as 7\$ at border crossing point. The route from Niger to Libya is the longest, complicated and risky part of the journey and this makes the bribe paid to be higher than expected. Payment of bribe to security forces between Agadez and Sabha could be 450\$ per vehicle and 30\$ per migrant (R1, 2021).

In support of the foregoing, Frontex (2015) maintained that bribe paid by migrants are crucial to sustain the functioning of security forces as money earmarked in the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS) budget to buy diesel for vehicles, spare parts and food are simply inadequate. Even when apprehended and charge to court, traffickers are able to buy their way out or jump bail which resulted in the decrease of traffickers convicted and sentenced to prison.

Table 2. Reported Cases of Trafficking, Cases Won and Traffickers Convicted in Nigeria between 2015 and 2020

Year	Trafficking Reported	Trafficking Cases Won	Traffickers Convicted
2015	570	18	23
2016	721	25	31
2017	876	21	26
2018	1076	31	50
2019	203	18	25
2020	1032	38	51
Total	4478	151	206

Source: Adapted from NAPTIP

The table above corroborated the view regarding bribery and corruption of security officials by traffickers which reflected in the decrease in the number of trafficking cases won (151) and traffickers convicted (206) when compare with the increase in the number of trafficking cases reported (4478). While the year 2018 and 2020 witnessed the highest number of reported cases of trafficking (1076 and 1032), there was a decrease in the number of trafficking cases won in court (31 and 38) including traffickers convicted (50 and 51). This table revealed the continuous effort of the trafficking networks to sustain trafficking business through bribery and corruption of security officials including the Nigeria Police, Nigeria Immigration Service and NAPTIP who are responsible for rescuing victims of trafficking and prosecuting the traffickers.

The week performance and lack of appropriate technology for NIS to detect migrants with fake passport visa at the Nigerian airport has also been considered factors that cause trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants from Nigeria to Europe. And for the most part, NIS officials have been accused of collaborating with smugglers and traffickers who provide passage for migrants with counterfeit documents to travel by flight to the EU countries or Turkey to link the EU through the Eastern Mediterranean route (R5, 2021). More so, traffickers and smugglers capitalised on poverty and lack of unemployment of the youth to facilitate irregular migration to Europe. This position was explicitly stated:

Nigeria population is above 200 million which account for 20% and half of the total population of Africa and West Africa respectively. Meanwhile, half of the populations are youths who are less than 19 years old while only 3% are 65 years and above. In this sense, migration to Europe is regarded as being selective particularly in favour of the active and young Nigerian population. This factor couple with poverty, unemployment and lack of economic opportunities consequently create large potential irregular migrants who have high propensity for international migration (R6, 2021).

Also corroborating this viewpoint, the National Bureau of Statistics (2020) showed that unemployment rate rose from 23.1% in the third quarter of 2018 to 27.1% in the second quarter of 2020, whereby the youth unemployment rate increased from 29.7% in the third quarter of 2018 to 34.9% in the second quarter of 2020. Given this analysis, migration from Nigeria to Europe appears to be primarily motivated by economic factors, as well as increase in unemployment rate among the youth, and not threat to security or natural disasters as claimed by migrants applying for asylum in Europe.

6. MIGRATION GOVERNANCE PUT IN PLACE IN CURBING TRAFFICKING AND SMUGGLING OF IRREGULAR MIGRANTS FROM NIGERIA TO EUROPE

One pertinent migration governance that was put in place to curb trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants from Nigeria to Europe is the adoption of 2000 Cotonou agreement (ACP-EU Migration Dialogue) revised in 2005 and 2010. The Cotonou agreement which was based on EU cooperation with African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries emphasised on migration and development with a major focus on three pillars; migration and development, legal migration and illegal migration. The Cotonou agreement was adopted as a framework to provide available route for legal migration that will help promote development in the concerned ACP countries. The framework for cooperation with ACP-EU was stated in article 13 of the Cotonou agreement which focused on improving conditions in ACP countries, promoting legal migration, and return of irregular migrants. It is on this basis that on November 2015, EU and some African countries agreed on action plan which gave rise to the establishment of EUTF for Africa for the purpose of addressing root causes of irregular migration and displace persons in Africa.

The three pillars of the Cotonou agreement (migration and development, legal migration and illegal migration) was sub-divided to cover seven specific migration issue which are mobility of skilled persons; legal migration; readmission; visa; smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings; migrants' rights and remittances. Adequate information was extracted from mobility of skilled persons, legal migration and smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings from the seven specific migration issues:

The mobility of skilled persons was aimed to ensure circular migration to avoid concentration of skilled migrants in EU and tackle the issue of brain drain in migration policies of the ACP countries. It is also based on the recognition of skills and professional qualifications that will promote national development. Legal migration focused on availability of labour migration, social rights of migrant workers in EU and pre-departure training for ACP nationals leaving for Europe to work. The Cotonou agreement also emphasised on prevention and prosecution of traffickers and smugglers, as well as the protection of victims of smuggling and trafficking. Furthermore, it echoed the need to improve access to migrant's rights through exchange of good practices by the ACP-EU (R7, 2021).

More so, in an effort to combat trafficking and smuggling of migrants from Nigeria to Europe, Frontex and Nigeria formed a joint and coordination patrol network across Nigerian borders, support capacity building through border surveillance, research and information sharing and also launched cooperation platform on migrants smuggling. More so, the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) of the EU established joint maritime crime information cell in Mediterranean called European Union Naval Force Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED) also known as operation Sophia (named after a child born by a Somali woman in a rescued ship heading to Europe and the German frigate name the child Sophia). The task of operation Sophia was to rescue migrants, identify, capture and destroy vessels used by smugglers in the Mediterranean Sea (R4, 2021). Moreover, Frontex and Europol developed profile of vessels used by smugglers to identify potential vessels and monitor their movement. Also, it was stated that:

Europol launched European Centre Against Migrant Smuggling (ECAMS) to support EU member states in destroying smuggling networks involved in irregular migration. In the same vein, Europol established Information Clearing House (ICH) to identify illegal internet content use by smugglers to attract migrants and request for its removal. There are other EU member states like Italy and Spain joint operations with Libya coast guards to combat the activities of traffickers and smuggler from preventing migrants' ship to cross the international waters (R3, 2021).

Furthermore, through the use of information technology, EU developed specific border control system such as the Visa Information System (VIS) to detect fraudulent visa applicants through thorough background checks and better information exchange between member states, as well as the introduction of Schengen Information System (SIS) for sharing information on migrants which make it difficult to enter Schengen area with false documents and also help to identify migrants with over-stay visa or those who enter the EU or associated member states clandestinely (R7, 2021). More so, EU naval and other foreign ships like the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) have taking the responsibility to embark on search and rescue mission in the Mediterranean Sea and transfer migrants to the nearest EU members states port in Italy, Malta and Spain where they will be lodged temporarily at the reception centres and given necessary hospitality (R4, 2021).

Another migration governance put in place to curbing trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants from Nigeria to Europe is the establishment of European Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) in Nigeria which emphasis on legal migration and sustainable development. The major reason why the fund was established by the EU is to control and prevent irregular migration to Europe. It is part of a larger EU policy for Africa which emphasised on economic development in Africa to dissuade irregular migration to Europe (Zanker, 2019; Marin, 2020). The basic assumption here is that socioeconomic and political conditions in Africa, as well as economic growth and labour supply in EU are among indices that drive trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants to Europe. To this ends, EU established EUTF for Africa to promote economic development, improve security and migration governance in order to deter irregular migration to Europe (Juncker, 2017; Tardis, 2018).

7. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

It is essential to state that some of the migration governance put in place by the EU to curb trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants to Europe further attached strict conditionality to legal migration. For example, the major part of the pillars of 2000 Cotonou agreement; migration and development as well as legal migration attached strict conditionality and policy to legal migration through EU Return Directive and Readmission Agreements (RDRAs) which emphasised on common procedures for returning irregular migrants and strengthening migration cooperation by ensuring speedy and sustainable return of irregular migrants for the promotion of legal migration. Findings showed that the conditionality attached to Readmission Agreements (RAs) including visa liberalisation and more relaxed travel conditions to Europe are only applicable for highly-skilled migrants and businessmen, a situation that has been described as brain drain for Nigeria and brain gain for the EU (Castillejo, 2017; Kervyn & Shilhav, 2017). The Return Directive (RD) policy have negative impact on the decision of irregular migrants to return to Nigeria because they are less likely to leave Europe when they know it will be difficult to go back

due to the entry ban that accompany the RD, and that most of the returns are not done in compliance with the laid down regulation as some Nigerian irregular migrants are return to countries of transit (R3, 2021). The EU RDRAs conditionality and policy continued to propel traffickers and smugglers to seek for divert routes for irregular migrants.

The introduction of EUTF for Africa was based on the assumption that migration development cooperation from EU will deter irregular migration from origin and transit countries to Europe. In other words, the EUTF for Africa is used to address four main goals; economic and employment opportunities; strengthening the resilience of vulnerable communities; improved migration management in countries of origin, transit and destination; and improved governance, conflict prevention and reduction of forced displacement and irregular migration (Zanker, 2019; EUTF, 2021). However, findings from the study showed that considerable amount of EUTF for Africa is use to enforce stricter border policing which undermines respect for human rights and constitutes crimes against humanity from the enforcement agencies like the Police and the NIS who are accused of violence and abuse against migrants. (R4, 2021) As EUTF for Africa is used to supports the enforcement agencies on border security, it serves as a form of reward system to reduce human mobility and weaken respect for democracy and human rights (R6, 2021). More so, findings revealed that increase in border securitisation through the EUTF for Africa enables traffickers and smugglers to navigate migrant's journey to another riskier routes (R2, 2021).

Findings revealed that the joint and coordination patrol network across Nigerian borders between Frontex and Nigeria is against the free movement of persons and goods as enshrined in Nigeria constitution and ECOWAS Protocol which emphasized on the free movement of persons and goods within ECOWAS States (for the period of 90 days) and also view as Eurocentric agenda that contradict local needs, especially those that make use of border between Nigeria and neighbouring countries like Niger and Chad for transporting goods and services. This form of securitisation of border is a threat to people's privacy and it can be used to stifle human and democratic rights (R5, 2023). Again, Frontex joint operation with Nigeria across its borders is regarded as a way of Nigeria handing over border control and territory to the EU, a situation that is antithetical to the principle of sovereignty and state autonomy (R4, 2023). Finding also showed that stricter border policy by the EU has condition Nigeria to readjust some of its migration policies in favour of the EU in order to access some form of financial and humanitarian aid as well as other diplomatic support. Explaining further, it was asserted that the readjustment in migration policy is detrimental to the rights of migrants where in some cases, they are denied the rights of movement and those apprehended are victimised and also experience prolong detention (R7, 2023).

8. CONCLUSION

This study examined the factors that cause trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants from Nigeria to Europe and examined migration governance put in place to curb trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants from Nigeria to Europe. Findings from the study identified key factors that causes trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants from Nigeria to Europe which include border porosity with other Africa countries, the cultural perspective of migration which is based on the belief that remittance flow improve economic standard of families, travelling by flight from Lagos to Turkey which is relatively easy for irregular migrants who gain access to external borders of the EU and demand of bribes by the Nigeria Immigration Service officials

from smugglers and traffickers that convey irregular migrants on complex journey to Europe.

Moreover, findings from the study revealed some of the migration governance that are put in place by the EU to curb trafficking and smuggling of irregular migrants from Nigeria to Europe which include the adoption of revised 2000 Cotonou agreement which focus on three pillars migration and development; legal migration; and illegal migration, joint and coordination patrol network by Frontex and Nigeria across Nigerian borders, Europol establishment of ECAMS and Information Clearing House to identify illegal internet content use by smugglers, establishment of Visa Information System to detect fraudulent visa as well as the establishment of EUTF for Africa in Nigeria which emphasis on legal migration and sustainable development.

The study concluded that the EU migration governance put in place to curb the activities of traffickers and smugglers of Nigerian irregular migrants to Europe is very strict and stringent in nature, so it has not really translated into an increase in return of irregular migrants, prosecution of traffickers and smugglers or destruction of trafficking and smuggling networks. Rather, it has caused traffickers and smugglers to divert migrants' journey through navigation and detection of riskier and precarious routes.

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HOW DISINFORMATION TURNS PROTECTION INTO A THREAT: THE SECURITISATION OF SOLIDARITY WITH UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN ROMANIA

Marius-Ioan TĂȚAR*

Abstract. *In times of crisis, public support for refugees can give way to welfare chauvinism and conditional protection. This study analyses how disinformation narratives can erode solidarity with Ukrainian war refugees. Drawing on societal security theory, deservingness research and framing analysis, it develops the concept of the securitisation of solidarity to designate discursive moves that recode humanitarian protection as a threat to the host community's resources, fairness, institutional loyalty, identity or political autonomy. The study combines thematic discourse analysis with systematic content coding of disinformation cases from the Romanian information environment and a comparative layer of narratives circulating beyond Romania. Results show that contestation of refugee protection is voiced predominantly in a distributive register in the Romanian corpus, while criminalisation and cultural othering dominate the comparative corpus. Erosion of solidarity follows a five-move chain from relativising need to delegitimising protection itself. Refuting these narratives required restoring context in all cases, whereas correcting a figure alone never sufficed. Democratic resilience therefore requires institutions not only to correct false claims, but also to make the architecture of protection transparent and address the social precariousness these narratives exploit.*

Keywords: *Securitisation of solidarity, disinformation, Ukrainian refugees, welfare chauvinism, deservingness, discourse analysis.*

1. INTRODUCTION

On 5 November 2024, nineteen days before the first round of Romania's presidential election, the candidate Călin Georgescu posted a video on TikTok falsely claiming that the Romanian state pays a monthly allowance of 3,700 lei for a Ukrainian child and 248 lei for a Romanian child. *Newsweek Romania* reported 5.1 million views, over 213,500 likes and 14,600 shares for this post (Toșa, 2024). The figure was not new. Diana Șoșoacă, a Romanian member of the European Parliament, had made the same comparison in a Facebook broadcast in July 2024, in a statement debunked by the fact-checking platform Factual (Factual, 2024b). What changed was not the content of the false claim, but its reach and the moment at which it circulated.

This case condenses an issue that goes beyond correcting a figure. Displaced persons from Ukraine initially met a relatively favourable reception across European states, supported by geographical proximity, the evident harm caused by the war and perceived similarity (De Coninck, 2023; Moise, Dennison and Kriesi, 2024). In Romania, civic mobilisation supporting refugees was rapid and visible (Cheregi and Ciocea, 2024). Yet this receptivity did not prevent sensitivities from forming around costs, distributive

* Associate Professor, PhD, Department of Political Science and Communication Sciences, University of Oradea; Director, Centre for Democratic Innovation and Digitalization (CIDD), University of Oradea. E-mail: mtatar@uoradea.ro.

fairness and alleged preferential treatment (ARPS, 2023; Incaltarau and Mocernac, 2024). The disinformation narratives analysed in this article build on that ground. They seldom attack solidarity with refugees head-on. Instead, they change the question: no longer what a displaced person needs, but what the local citizen loses, and whether the state has placed a foreign group ahead of its own citizens.

Research on attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees has consistently documented variation in public support (Moise, Dennison and Kriesi, 2024; Kamenova, 2025) and its moral conditionality (Careja and Harris, 2022; Zogata-Kusz, Öbrink Hobzová and Cekiera, 2026). In addition, studies of Romanian media coverage map the dominant frames, from solidarity to economic pressure and polarisation (Cheregi and Ciocea, 2026; Dolea, Beju and Suciu, 2026; Drăgulescu, 2026). Policy research has catalogued the recurring frames of migration-related disinformation, distinguishing claims built on health and security, on wealth and public resources, and on identity (Butcher and Neidhardt, 2020, 2021; Neidhardt, 2022). Nevertheless, the literature has paid less attention to the concrete discursive operations through which documented falsehoods reframe, move by move, humanitarian protection as a threat to host societies, even in the absence of explicit cultural hostility.

This study shows that disinformation narratives can erode solidarity with war refugees without openly contesting it, through a mechanism I call the securitisation of solidarity. The concept designates discursive moves that recode humanitarian protection as a threat to the host community's resources, distributive fairness, institutional loyalty, collective identity or political autonomy. The concept draws on three literatures: societal security, deservingness and welfare chauvinism, and framing and delegitimation. Together they explain how disinformation narratives can recast legitimate victims as suspect beneficiaries, and the host state as an unreliable guardian of its own community.

Romania is examined as a most-likely case for the securitisation of solidarity mechanism since the country combines the visibility of aid with material precariousness and institutional mistrust (see Section 3). In terms of methodology, I combine thematic discourse analysis with systematic content coding of a corpus of 34 documented disinformation cases (17 from Romania and 17 from a comparative regional corpus) for which public verification or debunking materials were published between March 2022 and March 2026. This research design observes narrative production rather than audience reception and therefore identifies securitising moves rather than completed securitisation.

The study makes three contributions. Theoretically, the concept of the securitisation of solidarity identifies humanitarian protection itself, rather than the refugee, as the referent object of threat construction, and shows how an everyday vocabulary of resources can serve as a gateway to societal insecurity. Empirically, the Romanian case shows that the erosion of solidarity does not require explicitly xenophobic rhetoric: it can be produced through an apparently technical dispute, in which correcting a figure remains necessary but insufficient. Practically, the coding of verification strategies shows what refuting these claims actually required: restoring the omitted context in all 17 Romanian cases, whereas numerical correction entered the refutation in only five, and never on its own. Institutions that answer disinformation with the right number solve the easy part of the problem. The moral comparison survives the correction.

The remainder of the article proceeds in five steps. Section 2 derives the concept of the securitisation of solidarity from three bodies of literature and sets out the theoretical expectations examined in this paper. Section 3 justifies the boundaries of the corpus, presents the coding scheme and states the limits to inference. Section 4 reconstructs the

discursive anatomy of the mechanism, compares the Romanian repertoire with its regional counterpart, and tests the robustness of the pattern. Section 5 explains why case-by-case fact-checking does not dissolve the moral comparison and draws out the implications for institutional communication. The conclusions propose directions for comparative research on how the protection of vulnerable groups is converted into a vocabulary of threat.

2. FROM HUMANITARIAN PROTECTION TO SECURITISING SOLIDARITY: LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The article examines a specific discursive transformation: the temporary protection granted to displaced persons from Ukraine is detached from the register of humanitarian obligation and recoded as a threat to the host community. The object of the analysis is neither solidarity as a moral disposition nor the wider set of Romanian attitudes towards refugees, but the operations through which this recoding is achieved. Three registers are available for it: the host community's resources and distributive fairness, its collective identity and safety, and the loyalty and autonomy of its institutions (Butcher and Neidhardt, 2020; Ceyhan and Tsoukala, 2002; Huysmans, 2000). Which of them predominates is an empirical question. These registers consolidate axes already identified in that literature, with one difference: here the state is not the securitising actor but one of the targets against which the move is directed. Understanding the moves through which the securitisation of solidarity operates requires drawing together three bodies of scholarship, which I mobilise selectively, according to what each explains about the mechanism.

2.1. Societal Security and the Limits of Inference

The Copenhagen School extended the analysis of security beyond the military register. Threats can also be formulated in relation to the capacity of a community to reproduce its identity, its institutions and the ways of life it considers legitimate (Wæver, 1995; Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998). Societal security should therefore not be confused with social welfare. It concerns how a collectivity imagines its continuity, its moral boundaries and its control over its own political order.

Migration has become one of the classic terrains of this transformation. Huysmans (2000) shows that European discourses can associate cross-border mobility with loss of control, pressure on the welfare state and the destabilisation of collective identity. Securitisation theory draws attention to the moves by which a problem is presented as a threat and detached from its ordinary treatment. Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998) distinguish such a move from proper securitisation, which additionally requires that an audience accept the claim. Later work qualifies the initial model: success depends on audiences, contexts and practices, not only on the enunciation of an existential threat (Balzacq, 2005; McDonald, 2008). The role of securitising actor, as Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998) already showed, belongs to whoever performs the move and is not confined to state officials.

This qualification requires a limitation that I state explicitly. The corpus I use in this paper cannot demonstrate successful securitisation in the strong sense. It does not measure public acceptance, behavioural change or the adoption of exceptional measures. What it does allow is the identification of securitising moves. These are verifiable operations that associate support for refugees with the depletion of shared resources, with threats to collective identity and safety, and with the disloyalty or loss of control of public institutions. In this study, societal insecurity is the discursive outcome traced, not a demonstrated causal effect.

The initial position of Ukrainian refugees makes the case theoretically instructive. Geographical proximity, the evident harm caused by the war and perceived similarity supported their representation as legitimate beneficiaries of protection (De Coninck, 2023; Moise, Dennison and Kriesi, 2024). That position proved reversible. Kamenova (2025) shows that populist radical-right narratives in Central and Eastern Europe oscillated between solidarity and anxiety. Romanian exploratory survey data also point to a fragile balance. A year after the start of the war, 53% of respondents still reported an interest in the situation of refugees. One in four associated their presence with a sense of personal insecurity, although 83% said Ukrainian refugees could integrate in Romania (ARPS, 2023). The sample was non-probability and unusually highly educated, so the figures describe its respondents rather than the Romanian population. This coexistence of receptivity and reserve is the analytical opening. Diffuse discomfort can be converted into a coherent account of threat, and the corpus examined here shows how.

2.2. Deservingness and Welfare Chauvinism

The second literature explains the conditionality of solidarity. Schneider and Ingram (1993) show that the target populations of public policy are socially constructed through the attribution of positive or negative traits, and that this classification shapes the legitimacy of resource distribution. Van Oorschot (2000) systematises the moral evaluation of beneficiaries through five criteria: control over one's situation, attitude, reciprocity, identity and need. Aid is judged not only against legal entitlement but also against moral criteria of belonging. Four of these criteria assess the beneficiary's claim on shared resources; the fifth, identity, concerns membership. Two of the three registers set out above are therefore already present in this scheme: the distributive and the identitarian. The third register, the institutional one, is not present, since deservingness criteria assess the beneficiary of social support rather than the state.

The vocabulary of deservingness intersects with welfare chauvinism, the preference that social benefits should be reserved primarily for those regarded as legitimate members of the national community (Andersen and Bjørklund, 1990). Recent research shows that the phenomenon is not a one-dimensional attitude: it combines temporal, selective, functional and cultural criteria of exclusion (Careja and Harris, 2022). In times of crisis, political discourse can sharpen these boundaries and turn the distribution of support into a moral contest between competing beneficiaries.

Ukrainian refugees are an instructive case precisely because they were initially represented as exemplary beneficiaries, though that recognition did not preclude later reclassification. Zogata-Kusz, Öbrink Hobzová and Cekiera (2025) propose extending Van Oorschot's (2000) model to include the context of war. Their longitudinal analysis shows that representations of deservingness change over time (Zogata-Kusz, Öbrink Hobzová and Cekiera, 2026). The legitimate victim can be gradually reconstructed as a suspect beneficiary once need is relativised, gratitude is questioned and support is compared with the precariousness of local citizens.

In Romania, this possibility is visible in the very structure of public debate. Civic mobilisation was rapid and produced remarkable digital aid infrastructures (Cheregi and Ciocea, 2024). At the same time, research identifies several lines of tension: perceived competition for financial support, the idea that refugees are not sufficiently grateful, and the suspicion of preferential treatment (ARPS, 2023). Incaltarau and Mocernac (2024) place these reactions in the broader context of Romania's transition from a country of

emigration to a country of immigration, with an institutional capacity for integration of foreigners that remains uneven.

For the present argument, the implication is direct. I treat welfare chauvinism not as an individual predisposition or an explicit doctrine, but as a narrative product. In the falsehoods regarding Ukrainian refugees, the sum, the child, the rent and the house become moral pivots through which a limited entitlement is converted into proof of undeserved privilege. The boundary between “us” and “them” materialises in everyday objects. Distributive comparison gives the conflict an intensity that the abstract label of immigration does not produce on its own.

2.3. Framing and Delegitimisation

The third literature explains the textual mechanism of recoding. Entman (1993: 52) defines framing as the selection of some aspects of a perceived reality and their promotion to salience, so as to establish a problem definition, a causal interpretation, a moral evaluation and a treatment recommendation. A frame does not necessarily invent the elements of the message. It decides what becomes visible, what is removed and which comparison takes priority. This feature is essential for the corpus analysed here, in which outright fabrication is rarer than contextual omission and recontextualisation.

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) separate false content, manipulated content and the harmful use of accurate information. The distinction allows the manipulative operation to be coded independently of the degree of falsity of the statement. Ecker et al. (2022) show, in turn, that misleading information does not automatically lose its influence after correction, particularly when the message is sustained by identity and affect. This observation prepares the argument in Section 5 concerning the limits of case-by-case fact-checking.

The concept of delegitimisation completes the analysis. Van Leeuwen (2007) shows that social practices are justified through authorisation, moral evaluation, rationalisation and mythopoesis. Contestation can reverse the same mechanisms: authority becomes suspect, administrative rationale is translated as abandonment, and the beneficiary is represented as undeserving. What is at stake is not only the reputation of refugees. Messages can simultaneously delegitimise solidarity as a principle, the state as administrator of protection and institutions as credible sources of information. For this reason, the coding scheme treats the constructed theme, the manipulative technique and the target of delegitimisation as separate levels.

2.4. The Securitisation of Solidarity

The three literatures outlined above converge in an intermediate concept, which I propose as the main theoretical contribution of the study: the securitisation of solidarity. The term designates the discursive moves through which humanitarian protection is recoded as a threat to the host community. It does not describe the actual budgetary impact of refugees, nor does it assess the effectiveness of any public policy. Its object is the political recoding of support: the shift from asking what the beneficiary needs to asking what the host community stands to lose, and who decided that it should.

The concept synthesises contributions that remain distinct in the academic literature. Societal security explains the translation of a social problem into the language of threat and belonging. Deservingness explains the movement of the beneficiary from the category of legitimate victim to that of the undeserving claimant. Welfare chauvinism explains the opposition between the entitlements of the out-group and the needs of the

in-group. Framing and delegitimisation explain the selection of elements and the extension of suspicion from the beneficiary to the state and its institutions.

The mechanism can operate in three registers, distinguished by what is presented as under threat. In the distributive register, the threatened object is the host community's material resources and the fairness of their allocation: support appears as a budgetary loss, as preferential treatment, or as set against the needs of vulnerable citizens living in the receiving country. In the identitarian register, the threatened object is the community's cohesion and safety: refugees appear as culturally or morally incompatible, or as a source of danger. In the institutional register, the threatened object is the community's control over its own political order: the state appears to abandon its citizens, institutions appear opaque or incapable, and support appears imposed by external agendas.

Three expectations follow, formulated as descriptive expectations rather than as causal hypotheses tested on a probability sample. The first concerns the dominant register: contestation of refugee protection should appear in the Romanian corpus more often through undeserved privilege and competition over public resources than through criminalisation or cultural othering, while the comparative layer should show the opposite configuration. The second concerns the extension of delegitimisation: targets should not be confined to refugees but should include the host state, presented as disloyal or as subordinate to external obligations. The third concerns the dominant textual operation: the manipulative effect should be produced mainly through contextual omission and recontextualisation rather than through outright fabrication, with the consequence that verification will require restoring context more often than merely correcting a figure.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design and Unit of Analysis

The study examines the discursive operations by which the temporary protection of a vulnerable group is converted into a supposed threat to resources, cohesion and institutional loyalty. The objective is neither to estimate the prevalence of hostile messages online nor to establish a causal effect on public opinion. The research design combines thematic discourse analysis with systematic descriptive coding. Thematic analysis identifies recurring patterns, while a critical discourse-analytical reading directs attention to the relations between language, moral evaluation and political power (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Fairclough, 2003). Content coding imposes a common standard: each case is put to the same questions about theme, technique and target (Krippendorff, 2018). In a second interpretive pass, I examined how coded themes, techniques and targets combined across cases and reconstructed the five discursive moves presented in Section 4. The cases selected for close analysis in Table 4 most clearly instantiated one or more moves and provided a verifiable evidentiary trace.

Case selection follows a most-likely logic. Two sets of conditions converge in Romania. The first makes distributive claims available: large numbers of refugees arrived across a shared border (Incaltarau and Mocernac, 2024), and state support was public, quantified and highly visible, established by emergency ordinance and financed from European funds (Government of Romania, 2022; Council of the European Union, 2022). The second makes such claims resonate. Material scarcity is high: in 2025, 27.4% of the Romanian population and 29.4% of households with dependent children were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, against EU averages of 20.9% and 22.1%, respectively (Eurostat, 2026a, 2026b). There is a pre-existing disposition to suspect that social benefits reach people who do not deserve them (Croitoru et al., 2025), and trust in public institutions

remains low: 31% of Romanian respondents trusted the national government and 25% trusted parliament, compared with EU averages of 37% for both institutions (European Commission, 2026). These conditions make Romania a favourable case for observing the mechanism in its distributive form. Its absence under such conditions would substantially weaken, though not falsify, the proposed concept. Where the conditions are weaker, contestation of solidarity may take a different, non-distributive form.

The unit of analysis is the distinct disinformation case, defined as a false, partially false or misleading claim, delineated clearly enough to be verified and documented. A case is not the same as a post. Identical reposts count as a single unit. Two variants of the same narrative family remain distinct only if they introduce a further technique, a further target or a further discursive move.

3.2. Corpus Construction and Inferential Logic

The corpus has two layers. The main corpus, A1, comprises 17 cases directly related to Romania or explicitly anchored in the Romanian information environment; it forms the basis for inference. The comparative corpus, A2, brings together 17 narratives published in Romanian or documented in the Romanian-language public sphere of the region. Its role is strictly comparative: it identifies the transnational repertoires available for localisation, without assuming that all of them actually circulated in Romania. The distinction is necessary because disinformation crosses borders unevenly. Conclusions about Romania are drawn and tested on A1 alone.

Three A1 cases are flagged for sensitivity analysis. RO015 concerns the general fiscal burden of support for Ukraine rather than refugees alone. RO016 is an adjacent case about solidarity fatigue with refugees. RO017 is included through triangulation, without a dedicated verification page. Excluding them leaves a core of 14 units named A1 strict. The electoral amplification of RO004 on 5 November 2024 is labelled RO018 in Table 4. It enters no frequency count, because the reach figures come from press reporting rather than independent measurement, and is used solely to illustrate the mechanism and the scale it can reach.

Data collection drew on the fact-checking platforms Factual, Veridica, InfoRadar MApN and StopFals, supplemented by the Expert Forum report on disinformation narratives in Romania in 2023 (Expert Forum, 2023: 4). For each unit, I recorded the identifier, the date, the verification source, a summary of the claim, a stable URL, the narrative cluster, the codes, the evidence tier and a methodological note. Where the original post had been deleted, the stable verification page was treated as a verifiable trace and the limitation was recorded. Deduplication was carried out at the level of narrative clusters.

3.3. Coding Scheme, Reliability and Limitations

The scheme was constructed deductively and refined inductively. The deductive component derives from the three literatures mentioned in Section 2: framing (Entman, 1993), deservingness (van Oorschot, 2000) and delegitimation (van Leeuwen, 2007). Each case receives codes at three levels: themes, techniques and targets. Coding is multi-label: a case may receive several codes at the same level (Table 1). The three registers set out in Section 2.4 are operationalised at the level of themes. The distributive register comprises FISC, PRIV and WELF; the identitarian register comprises CRIM and CULT; the institutional register comprises STAT, INST and GEO. Three further theme codes, namely MOBIL, CHILD and GEND, cut across registers and are reported separately.

As an exploratory robustness check, I submitted the entire corpus to an independent coding pass performed by an isolated language agent, which received only the claim summaries and the codebook. All columns containing prior decisions were removed from the input. The pass covered the 25 substantive codes used in the article across all 34 cases, yielding 80.7% raw agreement over 850 binary decisions and Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.550$ (themes = 0.577, techniques = 0.423, targets = 0.605). The aggregate value falls below the conventional threshold of 0.667 (Hayes and Krippendorff, 2007). Eight codes nonetheless exceed that threshold and five exceed 0.800. The two codes carrying the central argument are among the most reliable: competition over public resources ($\alpha = 0.935$) and undeserved privilege ($\alpha = 0.676$). Because this is a human–AI comparison rather than a second human coder, these values assess operational reproducibility, not conventional human intercoder reliability; automated annotation can also decline in validity for multi-label schemes with interpretive definitions (Gilardi, Alizadeh and Kubli, 2023; Ziems et al., 2024). The results should therefore be treated as an exploratory coder-substitution test, not as a substitute for independent human recoding.

Table 1. Levels of the coding scheme

Level	Analytical question	Codes
Themes	What problem does the message construct?	Competition over public resources (FISC); undeserved privilege (PRIV); welfare chauvinism (WELF); disloyal state (STAT); geopoliticisation (GEO); criminalisation (CRIM); cultural othering (CULT); institutional distrust (INST); mobilisation and extradition (MOBIL); children as moral vector (CHILD); gender and sexualisation (GEND)
Techniques	Through which operation is the manipulative effect produced?	Numerical inflation (NUM); moral comparison (COMP); contextual omission (OMIS); recontextualisation (MISCONTEXT); generalised anecdote (ANEC); visual manipulation (VISUAL); weak source (SOURCE); conspiratorial framing (CONSP)
Targets	Who or what is delegitimised?	Refugees (T_REF); the host state (T_STAT); the EU or the West (T_EU); Ukraine (T_UA); solidarity (T_SOL); democratic institutions (T_DEM)

(Source: author's elaboration based on corpus v.3.1.)

The data have several limitations. The corpus is mediated by the infrastructure of fact-checking: it captures publicly documented falsehoods, not the universe of circulating messages. The frequencies describe the structure of the documented corpus rather than online prevalence, and they support no causal inference about attitude change. The uneven availability of original posts (flagged as falsehoods and subsequently deleted from social media platforms) calls for caution in interpreting some cases. The corpus is small, at $N = 34$, and the confidence intervals for the per-code reliability coefficients are correspondingly wide. These limits were taken into account when drawing inferences from data and they also influenced the object of this analysis: the verifiable discursive repertoires through which solidarity becomes vulnerable.

4. RESULTS: THE DISCURSIVE ANATOMY OF ERODING SOLIDARITY

4.1. The Profile of the Romanian Corpus and Sensitivity Analysis

Systematic content coding provides a set of descriptive results. In the Romanian corpus (A1), contestation of solidarity with refugees is not predominantly constructed through the classic vocabulary of cultural otherness. Narratives attributing moral incompatibility, criminality or identity threat to refugees do exist, but they do not form the centre of gravity. The local repertoire works through the seemingly concrete language of money, benefits, housing, property and citizenship.

Table 2 summarises the distribution across the 17 A1 cases. Undeserved privilege appears in 11 cases and competition over public resources in nine. Both are frequently linked to institutional distrust, present in nine cases, and to the representation of the state as a disloyal actor, explicit in six. The categories are not mutually exclusive. Taken together, the frequencies compose a profile: temporary protection is reinterpreted as preferential treatment granted to an outside group, and the allocation of aid becomes evidence that the state has reversed its priorities.

Table 2. Profile of the Romanian corpus A1 and comparison with the regional repertoire

CODE	A1 (n=17)	A2 (n=17)	A1 strict (n=14)
Themes			
<i>Distributive register</i>			
Undeserved privilege	11 (64.7%)	2 (11.8%)	10 (71.4%)
Competition over public resources	9 (52.9%)	3 (17.6%)	8 (57.1%)
Welfare chauvinism	5 (29.4%)	2 (11.8%)	5 (35.7%)
<i>At least one code in this register</i>	<i>12 (70.6%)</i>	<i>3 (17.6%)</i>	<i>10 (71.4%)</i>
<i>Identitarian register</i>			
Criminalisation	3 (17.6%)	10 (58.8%)	3 (21.4%)
Cultural othering	3 (17.6%)	8 (47.1%)	2 (14.3%)
<i>At least one code in this register</i>	<i>5 (29.4%)</i>	<i>12 (70.6%)</i>	<i>4 (28.6%)</i>
<i>Institutional register</i>			
Geopoliticisation	10 (58.8%)	12 (70.6%)	8 (57.1%)
Institutional distrust	9 (52.9%)	8 (47.1%)	6 (42.9%)
Disloyal state	6 (35.3%)	5 (29.4%)	5 (35.7%)
<i>At least one code in this register</i>	<i>16 (94.1%)</i>	<i>14 (82.4%)</i>	<i>13 (92.9%)</i>
<i>Cross-cutting codes</i>			
Mobilisation and extradition	1 (5.9%)	3 (17.6%)	1 (7.1%)
Children as moral vector	1 (5.9%)	4 (23.5%)	1 (7.1%)
Gender and sexualisation	1 (5.9%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (7.1%)
Techniques			
Contextual omission	13 (76.5%)	3 (17.6%)	11 (78.6%)
Recontextualisation	12 (70.6%)	5 (29.4%)	11 (78.6%)
Moral comparison	7 (41.2%)	2 (11.8%)	6 (42.9%)
Numerical inflation	5 (29.4%)	4 (23.5%)	4 (28.6%)
Visual manipulation	4 (23.5%)	1 (5.9%)	3 (21.4%)
Weak source	3 (17.6%)	13 (76.5%)	3 (21.4%)
Conspiratorial framing	3 (17.6%)	8 (47.1%)	3 (21.4%)
Generalised anecdote	3 (17.6%)	6 (35.3%)	1 (7.1%)
Targets			

CODE	A1 (n=17)	A2 (n=17)	A1 strict (n=14)
Refugees	16 (94.1%)	14 (82.4%)	14 (100.0%)
Solidarity	15 (88.2%)	15 (88.2%)	12 (85.7%)
The host state	12 (70.6%)	4 (23.5%)	11 (78.6%)
The EU or the West	7 (41.2%)	9 (52.9%)	5 (35.7%)
Ukraine	3 (17.6%)	7 (41.2%)	3 (21.4%)
Democratic institutions	2 (11.8%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (14.3%)

(Source: author's elaboration based on corpus v3.1. A case may carry several codes at the same level, and the percentages within each level therefore do not sum to 100%.)

The profile of the techniques reinforces this reading. Contextual omission occurs in 13 cases and recontextualisation in 12. The falsehoods analysed are not, as a rule, fictions detached from reality. They start from recognisable sums, policies or images, but remove the duration, the eligibility conditions, the source of funding, or the difference between the direct beneficiary and the body administering the payment. In seven cases, selection is combined with an explicit moral comparison between refugees and vulnerable Romanian citizens.

The distribution of targets shows that what is at stake exceeds the stigmatisation of refugees. They are the direct target in 16 of the 17 cases, while the host state becomes a distinct target in 12. The analysis therefore describes not only a story about a vulnerable group, but one about who deserves protection and whether the state remains loyal to its own citizens.

The comparison with the regional repertoire strengthens the result. The distributive register, comprising undeserved privilege, competition over public resources and welfare chauvinism, covers 12 of the 17 Romanian cases, against three of the 17 in the comparative corpus. The ratio is reversed for the identitarian register: criminalisation and cultural othering cover five cases in A1 and 12 in A2. The institutional register does not separate the two corpora. It is present in the great majority of cases on both sides and functions as the common ground on which the other two operate. The local particularity therefore lies in how the threat is translated into a readily recognisable administrative vocabulary: benefits, rents, allowances, housing and citizenship.

Table 3. Sensitivity analysis and the coder substitution test

Indicator	A1 extended (n=17)	A1 strict (n=14)	Independent coder
<i>Individual codes</i>			
Undeserved privilege	11 (64.7%)	10 (71.4%)	8 (47.1%)
Competition over public resources	9 (52.9%)	8 (57.1%)	8 (47.1%)
The host state as target	12 (70.6%)	11 (78.6%)	10 (58.8%)
Contextual omission	13 (76.5%)	11 (78.6%)	13 (76.5%)
Recontextualisation	12 (70.6%)	11 (78.6%)	5 (29.4%)
<i>Register-level comparison and overall concordance</i>			
Distributive register: A1 vs A2	12 vs 3	—	11 vs 4
Identitarian register: A1 vs A2	5 vs 12	—	3 vs 9
Directional concordance A1–A2	—	—	23 of 25 codes (92%)

(Source: author's elaboration based on corpus v.3.1)

The result withstands two independent tests. The first removes the three cases flagged for sensitivity. Within the strict corpus of 14 units, undeserved privilege appears in ten cases, competition over public resources in eight, the host state is a target in 11, and contextual omission and recontextualisation in 11 each (see Table 3). The pattern therefore does not depend on the broader units or on those documented through triangulation. The second test replaces the coder entirely. Recoding the corpus independently, the direction of the contrast between A1 and A2 holds for 23 of the 25 codes (Table 3). The distributive register remains dominant in the Romanian corpus under both codings: 12 of 17 against 3 of 17 for the human coder, 11 of 17 against 4 of 17 for the independent one. The identitarian register remains dominant in the regional corpus, at 5 of 17 against 12 of 17 and 3 of 17 against 9 of 17 respectively. This convergence strengthens the study's central contrast between the Romanian and regional sets of data.

4.2. Discursive Moves: Contesting Need and Recasting Aid as Privilege

Thematic discourse analysis reconstructs the five-move chain that can erode solidarity with the Ukrainian refugees. The cases do not describe a rigid sequence, and none contains every stage. Taken together they form a relatively stable pattern: the need for protection is relativised, the refugee becomes an undeserving beneficiary, protection is translated into distributive injustice, the state appears as a disloyal actor, and solidarity is reframed as waste or external subordination. The case of November 2024 (RO018) runs through the first four of these moves in a single viral comparison. Representative narratives and their role in demonstrating the five-move discursive mechanism are summarized in Table 4.

The first two moves of the mechanism work closely together. The first contests the legitimacy of the need for protection: rather than being represented as a person displaced by war, the refugee is recast as a prosperous, transitory or insufficiently vulnerable beneficiary. The second converts assistance into privilege, through memorable figures, images and the removal of administrative conditions. Together they turn a humanitarian obligation into a moral question: why should someone who appears able to manage on their own receive more than the rules would suggest?

A case verified by Factual (RO001) in September 2025 starts from the claim that the Romanian government grants Ukrainians a monthly allowance of 1,000 euros (Factual, 2025e). The verification shows that the item was not new. It had been broadcast in April 2023 on the morning news of a national television channel, and everything that changed afterwards was omitted: the amounts and the payment periods were reduced in 2024, and the food allowance was withdrawn altogether. In 2025, newly arrived refugees received a flat sum for three consecutive months, 750 lei for a single person and 2,000 lei for a family, after which the amounts fell to 500 and 1,500 lei until the end of the year. The round figure nonetheless produces a far stronger discursive effect than the administrative details. It condenses the message into a memorable image: the refugee receives a generous and open-ended income while the local citizen endures austerity. The visible engagement around the post makes this framing explicit without establishing audience acceptance. The post passed ten thousand views, and the comments accused the government of squandering public money at a time of austerity measures imposed on its own citizens.

A related claim is illustrated by a photograph of a luxury car (RO002), presented as belonging to a Ukrainian refugee in Romania who supposedly receives 1,000 euros a

month for rent and 3,400 lei for each dependent child (Factual, 2025a). The photograph was taken in Budapest on 20 April 2022 and had already circulated in several European countries, attributed in turn to Slovakia, Germany and Czechia. The image is not decorative, but neither does it carry any evidence of its own. The caption performs the attribution, and the audience is invited to treat the apparent prosperity of one person as an argument about the whole group. The same photograph serving four countries is a reminder that the repertoire is transnational before it is local. In terms of the deservingness model, the message attacks the criterion of need and suggests that the beneficiary is not only external to the community, but also undeserving of support (van Oorschot, 2000).

A case documented by Expert Forum (RO017) extends the mechanism beyond money. In early March 2022, at the height of the initial influx, the author of a video reported finding no refugees at the reception centres she visited and concluded that no such people existed, and that what television showed was false (Expert Forum, 2023). The problem is not the reporting of a local experience, but the extrapolation. Border Police figures record a cumulative 139,050 Ukrainian citizens entering Romania and 87,676 leaving it by 2 March 2022, a net balance of 51,374 border crossings (Romanian Border Police, 2022). The case is flagged for sensitivity, but it illustrates a relevant operation: vulnerability can be eroded through anecdote, not only through falsified figures. These operations relativise the need and establish the Ukrainian beneficiaries as undeserving. They do not yet name a victim. That step follows.

4.3. From Aid to Distributive Injustice

The third move shifts the focus from the beneficiary's need to the relation between groups. Support is assessed against the precariousness of some Romanian citizens, so that what the refugee receives appears as a resource taken from the Romanian pensioner, the child or the local family.

A video analysed by Factual (RO003) objects to the continuing payments of 750 and 2,000 lei (Factual, 2025b). The amounts are real. What the message removes is their limited duration, the distinction between newly arrived beneficiaries and those already in the scheme, who receive less, and the European origin of the funding. The manipulation lies less in the omission than in the moral comparison that sets aid beside small pensions, so that protection becomes evidence of an unjust distributive order.

The most instructive case is the comparison of child allowances. In July 2024, Diana Șoșoacă claimed that the state pays 3,700 lei a month for a Ukrainian child rather than the 250 lei paid for a Romanian one (RO004; Factual, 2024b). No such allowance exists. The figure is drawn from a different instrument, the temporary support for accommodation and food established by Emergency Ordinance 15/2022: 2,000 lei a month for a family and 600 lei per person for food, for a maximum of four consecutive months and from European funds. For two adults and one child this yields 3,800 lei per household.

The operation works through two slippages. The unit changes, since a sum granted to a household of three is presented as a sum granted to a single child, and the figure changes, since 3,800 becomes 3,700. A figure that is almost right carries the appearance of a document consulted. Nothing is fabricated outright: a real amount is detached from its unit, its duration and its source. Two elements pass unnoticed. The accommodation component is paid to the Romanian households that take refugees in, so much of the money presented as given to Ukrainians reaches Romanians; and the

reference figure on the Romanian side was out of date in both versions of the claim, since the allowance had stood at 292 lei since January 2024 (Nica, 2024). In November 2024 the same comparison reappeared (RO018), voiced by Călin Georgescu and circulated on TikTok, where it accumulated 5.1 million views (Toşa, 2024).

A montage about housing carries the same logic into the register of property (RO005). It claims that Ukrainians are given houses and land free of charge, taking the homes of Romanians (Factual, 2025d). The material splices a 2022 report on villagers offering unused houses to refugees with a later party proposal on selling village houses for one leu. Voluntary support is reclassified as dispossession, and the image of the house shortens the distance between solidarity and threat: the resource is the citizen's own property.

These cases show that welfare chauvinism does not operate only through a declared preference for members of the national community. It is produced narratively, through concrete and affective comparisons. The sum, the child and the house become objects of high symbolic charge.

Table 4. Emblematic cases and their role in demonstrating the mechanism

ID	Claim (summarised)	Discursive move	Dominant techniques
RO001	Every Ukrainian refugee currently receives 1,000 euros a month from the Romanian state	1–2. Need contested; aid recast as privilege	Numerical inflation; contextual omission; recontextualisation; moral comparison
RO002	A supposed refugee, pictured with a luxury car, receives 1,000 euros for rent and 3,400 lei per child	1–2. Need contested; the undeserving beneficiary	Numerical inflation; visual manipulation; recontextualisation; moral comparison
RO003	Romania continues to pay 750 lei to a single person and 2,000 lei to a family, while pensioners and Romanian families receive less	3–4. Distributive injustice; State as a disloyal actor	Contextual omission; moral comparison
RO004	A Ukrainian child receives 3,700 lei a month, against 250 to 258 lei for a Romanian child	3–4. Distributive injustice through the comparison of children; State as a disloyal actor	Numerical inflation; moral comparison; contextual omission
RO018	Amplification: Călin Georgescu restates the comparison as 3,700 against 248 lei; 5.1 million views reported	3–4. Electoral amplification of the same move as RO004	As RO004; platform amplification not coded separately
RO005	A montage claims that Ukrainian refugees are given houses and land free of charge, taking Romanians' private property	3–4. Distributive injustice as dispossession; State as a disloyal actor	Visual manipulation; recontextualisation; contextual omission; moral comparison
RO010	Romania will be invaded by Africans and Asians arriving from Ukraine, and the authorities conceal the nationality of those under protection	4. The opaque state; non-distributive variant (cultural othering)	Numerical inflation; contextual omission; conspiratorial framing

ID	Claim (summarised)	Discursive move	Dominant techniques
RO012	Disgruntled Ukrainian refugees set fire to a fuel depot at Bragadiru said to supply the Ukrainian army	4. The opaque state; non-distributive variant (criminalisation)	Visual manipulation; weak source; conspiratorial framing; recontextualisation
RO006	Ukrainian refugees will obtain Romanian citizenship more easily and could then advance territorial claims	5. Protection as a risk to sovereignty	Contextual omission; recontextualisation; conspiratorial framing
RO011	Germany will expel over a million Ukrainian refugees and oblige Romania to take some of them	5. Externally imposed obligation	Recontextualisation; weak source; contextual omission

(Source: author's elaboration based on corpus A1 v.3.1)

4.4. The State as a Disloyal Actor

The fourth move concerns the state. In 12 of the 17 Romanian cases the host state is one of the targets of delegitimisation. Sometimes the accusation is direct: the authorities are said to grant foreigners resources denied to their own citizens. At other times the state appears as an opaque actor, or as one incapable of maintaining control. The refugee remains the visible figure of discontent, but the state becomes the actor that administers the privilege.

The distributive register cases provide the clearest form. In RO003 the criticism of the aid is addressed to the government. In RO004 the alleged difference in allowances implies a moral preference on the part of the public administration. In RO005 the state appears as the implicit agent of dispossession. In each of these situations the message suggests that institutions no longer serve the community they are supposed to protect.

The institutional register also appears beyond redistribution. A narrative verified by Veridica (RO010) claims that Romania will be invaded by Africans and Asians arriving from Ukraine and that the authorities conceal the nationality of those under protection (Veridica, 2022). The falsehood combines accurate information, the presence of third-country nationals who had fled Ukraine, with a disproportionate conclusion about the loss of control. Ministry of the Interior data indicate that fewer than a tenth of the refugees held neither Ukrainian nor EU citizenship, most of them students who had been enrolled in Ukraine before the invasion (Veridica, 2022). Institutions are not merely incomplete in their communication; they are presented as actors that deliberately withhold information.

In another case, InfoRadar MAPN (RO012) documents a fictitious scenario in which Ukrainian refugees set fire to a fuel depot at Bragadiru (InfoRadar MAPN, 2024). The verification shows that the video had not been filmed in Romania, that no such fire had been communicated by the authorities and that the Romanian press had not reported one. The claim circulated on channels associated with Russian propaganda, and the attribution to disgruntled refugees appeared as one variant among several. The pseudo-communiqué and the false location produce the impression that national territory is no longer under control.

Institutional delegitimisation is therefore an integral part of the mechanism. Solidarity is contested not only because it is said to be costly, but because it becomes evidence of an inverted political relationship between the state and its own citizens.

4.5. External Obligations and Geopolitical Extension

The fifth move goes beyond the immediate distribution of resources and shifts the conflict towards citizenship, sovereignty and external obligations. Aid appears not only as an internal expense but as an effect of political subordination.

A falsehood verified by Factual (RO006) claims that refugees will obtain Romanian citizenship more easily and would then advance territorial claims (Factual, 2025c). In fact, the law invoked moves in the opposite direction. Where a refugee could previously apply for citizenship after four years, Law 14/2025 raises the minimum to five and adds a requirement to demonstrate integration. A restriction is presented as a relaxation. The same text had already produced a claim at the parliamentary vote of June 2024 (RO007), when a member of parliament asserted that all Ukrainian refugees would become citizens and that the Romanian language requirement had been dropped (Factual, 2024a). The language condition remains, and the bill refers to refugees as a category rather than to Ukrainians. In both cases, temporary protection is moved into a story about the alteration of the body politic.

The narrative that Germany intends to expel more than a million refugees and transfer some of them to Romania (RO011) localises an external controversy through a language of imposition (Veridica, 2024). The German debate concerned the pressure of refugee support on the social insurance system, not expulsion, and no quota for Romania was proposed. The narrative originated on Sputnik International and reached the Romanian public through a nationalist outlet. The newspaper article on which it was built does not name the German chancellor, and the "solidary distribution" it discusses refers to the allocation of European funds in proportion to the refugees each country hosts, not to the refugees themselves. The case shows the intersection between geopoliticisation and the securitisation of solidarity: an external obligation is translated into a local cost, the Romanian state appears as a subordinate actor, and the formula is no longer only "they receive" but "we are made to pay". The irony is that the source article excluded Romania from its analysis precisely because refugees there receive very little financial support.

The comparative corpus confirms the existence of a larger transnational reservoir, with scenarios about the deportation of Ukrainian men, their pursuit by Interpol, child trafficking and the moral decadence of the West. These show the material from which messages about the loss of control can be locally adapted, without demonstrating that they circulated in Romania.

5. DISCUSSION: THE SECURITISATION OF SOLIDARITY AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

The narratives analysed shift the moral conditions under which support can be recognised as legitimate. Temporary protection is moved from the register of humanitarian obligation into a vocabulary of costs, inverted priorities and suspicion that the state has abandoned its citizens. The refugee remains the visible figure of the conflict, but the stakes are wider: the legitimacy of solidarity itself, and the capacity of institutions to administer protection without appearing disloyal.

5.1. Theoretical Expectations and Contributions

The three expectations set out in Section 2 are supported by the results. The particularity of the Romanian repertoire lies not in the absence of cultural othering but in its secondary position relative to the vocabulary of benefits, housing and citizenship: the

threat is made intelligible through everyday administrative objects, and support appears as a moral invoice addressed to the local citizen. Delegitimisation extends beyond refugees, the direct target in almost every case, to the host state, targeted in 12 of 17. The narratives produce a triadic conflict between the external beneficiary, the disadvantaged citizen and the state suspected of administering the privilege. And the manipulative effect rests on omission and recontextualisation rather than fabrication: messages begin from a real sum, photograph or legal change and remove the duration, the eligibility conditions or the source of the funds. It is this proximity to fact that makes them credible and hard to dispose of with a single correction.

In terms of theoretical contribution, the securitisation of solidarity operates as an intermediate mechanism between individual claims and the broader contestation of the political order. It does not imply that debating costs is illegitimate; in a democracy, assessing expenditure is necessary. What the Romanian case adds to the literature on the securitisation of migration is that a distributive entry point does not confine the threat to distribution. The criteria of need, identity and reciprocity described by van Oorschot (2000) are activated narratively rather than expressed as opinions, and the language of resources leads on to questions about the body politic and about sovereignty. Taken together, these findings demonstrate a recurrent repertoire of securitising moves, not their acceptance by audiences or the adoption of exceptional measures.

5.2. Why Correcting Numbers Is Not Enough

Fact-checking is worth discussing precisely because it is indispensable: debunking does improve the accuracy of political beliefs, particularly when the correction supplies an alternative explanation (Chan et al., 2017; Walter et al., 2020). It does not, however, work like an eraser, and misleading information retains a residual influence when a message is anchored in identity and affect (Ecker et al., 2022).

The November 2024 case demonstrates the limit unintentionally. The comparison set 3,700 lei for a Ukrainian child against 248 lei for a Romanian one, but the reference figure was itself out of date: from January 2024 the allowance stood at 292 lei, paid at the same rate to all children legally resident in Romania (Nica, 2024; Parliament of Romania, 1993). Numerical correction is therefore not only insufficient but unstable, since the value shifts with indexation and any correction has a limited shelf life. The moral comparison does not require a correct figure. It requires only a difference of magnitude, and that survives any update.

The verification strategies confirm the diagnosis. Restoring context was necessary in all 17 cases and triangulation with official data in 15, whereas numerical correction entered the refutation in only five, and never on its own. Inoculation studies suggest that prior familiarisation with manipulation techniques can increase resilience, shifting the emphasis from delayed reaction to pattern recognition (Roozenbeek et al., 2022).

5.3. Implications for Democratic Resilience

The normative implication is not that institutions should avoid the debate about costs. A resilient solidarity is not one without disagreement; it is one that can hold the protection of vulnerable people inside a dispute anchored in verifiable information and transparent criteria (Banting and Kymlicka, 2017). Ignoring concerns about financial support is risky; instrumentalising them through falsehoods is equally so (ARPS, 2023).

Because the narratives exploit omission and administrative complexity, public communication must make the structure of the policy visible rather than defend an isolated figure. Institutional suspicion is not a side effect here but one of the targets, and incoherent or overly technical replies leave open the space in which the falsehood is reinterpreted as evidence of opacity (Humprecht, Esser and Van Aelst, 2020). One qualification remains: an effective strategy should neither moralise every criticism of support policies nor reproduce the opposition between vulnerable citizens and privileged refugees. Resilience implies a double capacity, protecting factual accuracy while maintaining a conversation in which local precariousness is neither denied nor converted into an argument against the protection of a group displaced by war.

6. CONCLUSION

Solidarity does not collapse under frontal negation. It thins out when the language in which it is described shifts imperceptibly: when protection becomes a benefit, the benefit becomes a privilege, and the privilege becomes proof that the state has chosen another side. This is the process the article calls the securitisation of solidarity and documents in the Romanian case.

The study makes three contributions. Theoretically, the proposed concept links societal security, deservingness and delegitimisation within a single mechanism, showing how a vocabulary of resources can serve as a gateway to societal insecurity. Moreover, the concept identifies humanitarian protection itself, rather than refugees alone, as the object recoded as a threat. Empirically, the analysis of 17 narratives anchored in the Romanian information environment shows a particularity of this case: the distributive register covers 12 of them, against three in the regional repertoire, where criminalisation and cultural othering remain dominant. Practically, the coding of verification strategies shows what refuting these claims required: restoring the omitted context in all 17 cases, whereas numerical correction entered the refutation in only five, and never on its own.

The argument advanced here does not contradict the literature on the securitisation of migration; it contextualises it. Huysmans (2000) showed how cross-border mobility can be associated with a loss of control. The Romanian case suggests that this association does not require a vocabulary of otherness in order to work. An allowance, a rent and a comparison between two children suffice. The administratively tamed threat is probably harder to counter than the openly stated one, because it borrows the authority of verifiable fact. That is why institutions answering disinformation with the correct figure solve only the easy part of the problem. The difficult part is explaining the architecture of protection: eligibility, duration, source of funding, and the legal distinction between temporary protection, integration and citizenship.

This study can be further developed in two directions. The first is temporal. Analysing the dynamics of disinformation narratives could illustrate how discursive registers adapt to the changing conditions in the host societies. This type of analysis would require a larger, source-stratified corpus in which the volume of verification cases published each year serves as a denominator, and in which claims are dated by circulation rather than by verification. The second direction is comparative. If the securitisation of solidarity depends on contextual configurations, then other states on the European Union's borders should present different gateways, depending on their economic, social and political anxieties and on the visible architecture of protection. Verifying this expectation would turn a concept built on a single case into a comparative tool.

The results do not justify a maximalist diagnosis of the erosion of solidarity in Romania. They support a soberer and more useful warning. The real cracks in the social contract, small pensions, insufficient housing and unequal services, are the raw material of these narratives. They are not invented but recruited. Democratic resilience policies limited to dismantling falsehoods, without addressing the precariousness these narratives exploit, will correct figures and lose the argument.

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JUVENILE DELINQUENCY, SOCIAL INCLUSION, THE QUESTION OF (LOWERING) THE AGE LIMIT AND THE CRIMINAL RESPONSIBILITY OF MINORS: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

Jovana ŠKORIĆ*
Marko ŠKORIĆ**

Abstract. Due to growing social problems, various forms of violence, and a mass shooting that occurred in 2023 in an elementary school, the question of lowering the age limit for the criminal responsibility of minors has captured the attention of both the general and professional public in the Republic of Serbia (as well as in many other countries). The question of the age limit for criminal responsibility of minors usually depends on the state's legal system, and in the Republic of Serbia, this issue is regulated by the Law on Juvenile Offenders and the Criminal Protection of Minors from 2005. In view of the above, the research aimed to examine and analyze public attitudes about juvenile delinquency and the criminal responsibility of minors, as well as to offer recommendations for shaping more proactive prevention and public information measures. The study involved 5 625 citizens from all 25 districts of the Republic of Serbia. Data was collected through an online questionnaire, specially created for the purposes of this research, while the chi-square test was used for processing the results. The findings indicate a pronounced intolerance of the general population towards juvenile offenders, a strong focus on repressive measures and punishment, as well as a low level of understanding of the broader social and family context in which juvenile delinquency occurs.

Keywords: juvenile delinquency, age limit, criminal responsibility of minors, public attitudes.

1. INTRODUCTION: PROBLEMATIZATION AND THE SERBIAN CONTEXT

Juvenile delinquency represents one of the most complex social and legal challenges facing contemporary societies. Public concern about crimes committed by minors has intensified in many countries, often leading to debates on whether criminal justice systems should adopt more punitive responses, including lowering the minimum age of criminal responsibility. While such proposals are frequently justified by concerns for public safety, contemporary research in criminology, developmental psychology, and juvenile justice demonstrates that effective responses to juvenile offending should be based on scientific evidence, children's developmental characteristics, and the principles of rehabilitation and social reintegration rather than punishment alone (Goldson & Muncie, 2015; Steinberg, 2009). Public debates surrounding juvenile crime have become particularly intense following serious violent offences committed by minors, often resulting in increased public demands for harsher sanctions and lower ages of criminal responsibility.

* University of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Serbia, E-mail: jovana.skoric@ff.uns.ac.rs.

** University of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Serbia, E-mail: miskoric@ff.uns.ac.rs.

However, research suggests that such debates are frequently shaped by emotional reactions, media narratives, and public perceptions of insecurity rather than by empirical evidence regarding adolescent development or the effectiveness of criminal justice interventions (Garland, 2001; Goldson & Muncie, 2015; Muncie, 2014). Public debates surrounding juvenile crime have become particularly intense following serious violent offences committed by minors, often resulting in increased public demands for harsher sanctions and lower ages of criminal responsibility. However, research suggests that such debates are frequently shaped by emotional reactions, media narratives, and public perceptions of insecurity rather than by empirical evidence regarding adolescent development or the effectiveness of criminal justice interventions (Garland, 2001)

The issue of juvenile offenders in the Republic of Serbia is regulated by the *Law on Juvenile Offenders and the Criminal Protection of Minors* of 2005 (*Official Gazette of RS*, No. 85/2005). This law introduces a special criminal law regime based on the principles of *child rights protection, the educational function of the judiciary, and social reintegration*. This law clearly sets the *age limit for criminal responsibility of minors at 14 years*, based on the assumption that children from that age are mature enough to understand the consequences of their actions and take responsibility for them (*Official Gazette of RS*, No. 85/2005). However, *children younger than 14 at the time of committing an unlawful act cannot be held criminally responsible*, nor can they be subject to criminal sanctions or educational measures provided for by this law. In such cases, responsibility is transferred to the guardianship authorities, primarily the *center for social work*, which undertakes measures in the best interest of the child.

This legal framework is aligned with the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN, 1989), which emphasizes that a child must be guaranteed special treatment in case of conflict with the law, as well as with the *UN Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency* (the Riyadh Guidelines, 1990) and the *UN Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty* (United Nations, 1990b). Thus, the main principles of this law are:

- Juvenile offenders should not be subjected to classic criminal prosecution but should be included in educational and correctional programs;
- The treatment of children in conflict with the law should be aimed at rehabilitation, not at repression and punishment;
- The system should favor alternative measures, excluding minors from the traditional judicial process whenever possible, through the work of various social protection institutions.

These principles, as mentioned, reflect contemporary international standards and psychological insights into the development and responsibility of the child. In this context, it is important to mention the *Welfare Model*, which focuses on the personality of the juvenile offender. In accordance with this approach, the application of sanctions is not primarily aimed at punishment and retribution, but at providing an opportunity for change and social reintegration of the minor. This model is based on the assumption that it is necessary to adapt sanctions to the needs and potentials of the minor, thereby enabling their education and development in a positive direction. When determining sanctions, neither the severity of the act nor the harm caused to the victim is given primary consideration; instead, the focus is on the individual characteristics of the minor and the duration of their rehabilitation process, which is by definition unpredictable and depends on their progress.

However, when discussing the context of the Republic of Serbia, despite the normative shift towards restorative and non-penal justice, various authors (e.g., Nikolić, 2021) show a discrepancy between legal solutions and their application. In practice, there is still a marked reliance on repressive mechanisms, insufficient individualization of treatment, and a lack of capacity and professional support for the implementation of alternative measures. This difference between declarative policy and operational practice indicates the need for additional investment in training, strengthening institutional capacities, and sensitizing all actors, including experts, decision-makers, and the general public, to ensure the consistent application of the principles of child rights protection in criminal proceedings. According to available statistical data from the *Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia*, a total of 2,724 criminal complaints were filed against juvenile offenders during 2024, which represents an increase of 5% compared to 2023. In the same period, competent authorities submitted 1,768 proposals for imposing criminal sanctions, which represents a decrease of 5% compared to the previous year. Also, criminal sanctions were imposed on 1,375 minors, which also represents a drop of 5% (SORS, 2025).

Regarding the application of alternative measures, which are in line with the principles of the welfare model and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, their use has been limited. During 2024, educational orders were issued in a limited number of cases: public prosecutors for minors were assigned 165 cases for the application of educational orders, while juvenile judges applied this measure in only 69 cases. During the same year, only two juvenile offenders were sentenced to juvenile imprisonment, which accounts for 0.1% of the total number of sanctioned minors. These data may indicate a trend towards reducing the repressive approach and gradually strengthening alternative educational measures in dealing with juvenile offenders in Serbia. That is, a certain shift towards the humanization of the system is evident, but at the same time, it raises the question of insufficient and selective application of alternative measures, which are provided for by legislative solutions but are rarely and unevenly applied in practice. Also, the still relatively low frequency of the application of educational orders points to the need for further education of experts, as well as for strengthening the capacities of the juvenile justice system towards greater compliance with the principles of restorative justice and international standards on the protection of child rights.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Understanding the meaning and etiology of the concept of juvenile delinquency

The ways in which juvenile delinquency has been defined and perceived have evolved over time (e.g., David, 2006; Shoemaker, 2018). A persistent challenge in understanding this concept is the absence of a universally accepted definition. Definitions vary not only between legal systems but also across academic disciplines, reflecting different theoretical orientations, methodological tools, and institutional priorities. This diversity signals that juvenile delinquency is not a fixed, purely objective category but rather a social construct, historically shaped by cultural norms, political agendas, and legal frameworks. Generally, the term refers to the violation of social norms by minors (most often those under 18 years of age) for which penalties are prescribed by law. Broader definitions also include so-called *status offenses*, such as running away from home, truancy, disobeying parents, underage drinking, or sexual activity (Siegel, 2024). These behaviors, while socially disapproved, are prohibited solely due to the age of the offender (Feld, 1999), and their

criminalization is itself subject to debate—particularly given the ways such laws have historically been used disproportionately against girls and marginalized youth (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2014). Concern for the welfare of minors, in the form in which we understand it today, is a relatively recent development. In earlier historical periods, the boundary between childhood and adulthood was less pronounced. Medieval society did recognize childhood as a distinct stage, but primarily as a period of preparation for adult roles, rather than as a sheltered phase of innocence. Legal records show that children could be prosecuted and punished as adults, including being subjected to severe penalties such as execution (King, 2000; Streib, 1987).

In discussing the historical emergence of *juvenile delinquency* as a distinct category, one influential starting point has been Philippe Ariès's (1960/1962) claim that "childhood" as we know it did not exist in medieval society and was essentially "invented" in modern times. While provocative, this thesis has been widely challenged. Later historians such as Pollock (1983), Shahar (1990), and Cunningham (2005) have demonstrated, through analysis of diaries, court records, and religious writings, that medieval society clearly distinguished children from adults, albeit with different cultural meanings and expectations. The real transformation lay not in the *existence* of childhood, but in the *content* and *normative framing* of what childhood meant.

From the late 18th to the 19th century, a new, sentimentalized image of childhood as a period of innocence gained traction, especially among middle-class families in industrializing societies. This shift coincided with—and was reinforced by—structural changes such as urbanization, the expansion of compulsory education, and emerging moral reform movements (Muncie, 2014; Goldson, 2009). The creation of juvenile delinquency as a legal and social category was not solely a humanitarian development: it also served as a mechanism of social regulation, disproportionately targeting working-class and racialized youth (Garland, 2001; Platt, 1969/1977). The construction of the "juvenile delinquent" as a subject for rehabilitation rather than mere punishment led to the establishment of specialized institutions: juvenile courts, detention centers, and correctional programs. These systems, at least in principle, prioritized rehabilitation over retribution (McAra & McVie, 2007). Yet, as critical criminologists note, rehabilitative and punitive logics have always coexisted, and recent decades in some jurisdictions show a trend toward re-penalization and more punitive responses to youth crime (Goldson & Muncie, 2015). Scientific inquiry into the origins of delinquency faces its own conceptual challenges. The notion of a "typical" offender has been undermined by self-report studies showing that delinquent behavior is widely distributed across social classes, genders, and ethnic groups—much more evenly than official crime statistics suggest (Elliott & Ageton, 1980; Hindelang et al., 1981; Agnew & Brezina, 2019). Nearly all young people engage at some point in behaviors that could be technically labeled delinquent. Determining causes is complex: risk factors such as poverty, family instability, or peer influence may be associated with delinquency but do not inevitably lead to it. Thus, research must avoid deterministic cause-and-effect models and instead recognize the contingent interplay of structural, cultural, and individual factors. Understanding juvenile delinquency, therefore, requires an approach that integrates historical and sociological perspectives while rejecting overly simplistic narratives such as the "invention" of childhood. The category itself is historically contingent and deeply embedded in broader social control processes. Recognizing this is not merely of academic interest—it is essential for crafting policies that avoid reproducing historical biases, respond proportionately to youth behavior, and address structural inequalities that continue to shape who is most likely to be labeled as "delinquent."

2.2. The age limit for criminal responsibility of minors and understanding the developmental specificities of adolescents

Adolescence is often described as a unique but transient developmental phase between childhood and adulthood. One of the key functions of adolescence is the development of an integrated sense of self, including individuation, separation from parents, and the formation of a personal identity (Collins & Steinberg, 2006). Typical ways in which adolescents form their identity and develop the skills needed for adult life include experimentation and novelty-seeking, which also involves testing boundaries (Spear, 2010). Research shows that for most young people, the period of risky experimentation does not last beyond adolescence and ceases as identity stabilizes with maturity. Only a small percentage of young people who engage in risky behaviors continue with problematic behavior into adulthood (Moffitt, 1993; Snyder, 1998). Therefore, it is not possible to reliably predict permanent antisocial traits based on risky behaviors in adolescence. A large part of adolescents' involvement in illegal activities is an extension of the types of risky behaviors that are part of the developmental process of identity formation, and most adolescents eventually outgrow these tendencies.

Indeed, understanding delinquent behavior in this period requires taking into account both biological predispositions and the influence of the social environment. That is, the occurrence of delinquent behavior among adolescents cannot be interpreted one-sidedly but is the result of a complex interaction between individual traits and environmental (or contextual) factors (Gardner et al., 2011). Contemporary empirical evidence from the behavioral sciences indicates that adolescents differ from adults and children in three important aspects that affect their behavior. First, adolescents lack a mature capacity for self-regulation in emotionally overwhelming situations, compared to adults and children (Somerville, Fani & McClure-Tone, 2011). Second, adolescents show increased sensitivity to immediate external influences, such as peer pressure and momentary incentives, compared to adults (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005). Third, adolescents have a less developed ability to make judgments and decisions that require future orientation (Steinberg, 2009). The last decade has brought evidence of significant changes in brain structure and function during adolescence, with a strong consensus among neuroscientists about the nature of these changes (Steinberg, 2009). In line with the previously described behavioral findings - that adolescents have weaker self-control, are easily influenced by peers, and do not think about the consequences of some of their actions - findings from brain imaging strongly suggest that adolescents lack these abilities due to the *biological immaturity of the brain*. Therefore, numerous authors and international organizations, including the

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, have highlighted the need for criminal justice systems to be aligned with the developmental characteristics of children and adolescents, and for judicial responses to be differentiated, rehabilitative, and age-appropriate, instead of strictly punitive and repressive (United Nations, 1989; 1990b). Setting the age of criminal responsibility too low ignores the fact that adolescents may understand that something is wrong but at the same time lack sufficiently developed mechanisms to control their behavior in accordance with that knowledge, especially in stressful and socially challenging situations.

Age limits for processing minors in legal systems vary significantly between different states and their contexts. Many Western countries have ongoing political discussions about the "proper" age limit in their legal systems. There are examples of

movements towards raising age limits (for example, in some U.S. states and Scotland), as well as towards lowering them (as in Nordic countries). The traditional argument of advocates for lower age limits in the justice system is that punishments have a preventive effect that deters minors from committing criminal acts (see also Fagan & Tyler, 2005). On the other hand, those who advocate for raising the age limit believe that early involvement of minors in the criminal system can lead to stigmatization (labeling) and encourage further criminal development, or that at best it brings only small and short-term benefits in terms of crime reduction (see also United Nations, 1990a).

In this context, it is important to highlight the example of Denmark, where a reform was carried out in 2010 that temporarily lowered the age of criminal responsibility from 15 to 14 years, with the aim of providing a stricter response to juvenile delinquency and increasing the preventive effect of sanctions. The reform was based on the assumption that minors make rational decisions and are sensitive to the threat of criminal sanctions, which should reduce the frequency of criminal offenses. However, after 20 months, the age limit was returned to the previous level, which indicates the complexity and challenges in defining the appropriate age limit for criminal responsibility. Furthermore, research at the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences in Denmark showed that lowering the age of criminal responsibility from 15 to 14 years did not reduce the proportion of 14-year-olds accused of violating the criminal code (Murray & Smith, 2020). Thus, the study clearly shows that lowering the minimum age of criminal responsibility during the reform period did not have the intended effect of deterring 14-year-olds from criminal acts. The study also showed that 14-year-olds whose cases were handled in the criminal justice system had significantly worse educational outcomes compared to 14-year-olds who committed criminal acts at the same age before the reform.

Although various natural and social sciences have long recognized the specificities of adolescence, the legal system has taken this developmental stage into account slowly and insufficiently, especially when it comes to the responsibility of minors for criminal acts committed. Precisely because of these specificities of adolescence that have been discussed, it is important for the criminal law system to respond to the complexity of minor development and to ensure an approach that respects developmental characteristics and potential for change.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research aim and hypotheses

In accordance with the research topic, the general aim of this paper is to examine public attitudes towards juvenile delinquency in the Republic of Serbia. The research focus is on analyzing the nature and structure of these attitudes, with special attention paid to examining the extent to which citizens advocate for repressive versus rehabilitative approaches, how informed they are about the issue of the age limit for criminal responsibility of minors, and whether sociodemographic characteristics (such as gender, age, education, place of residence, etc.) (significantly) influence different attitudes towards juvenile offenders.

- *General Hypothesis:* The age limit for criminal responsibility of minors (currently 14 years in the Republic of Serbia) is perceived as too high by the majority of respondents.

- *Specific Hypotheses:*

- Hypothesis 1: Citizens with a higher level of education show a greater tendency to understand the causes of delinquency and give preference to preventive and restorative measures over stricter punishments and imprisonment.
- Hypothesis 2: Citizens over 55 years of age more often advocate for stricter punitive policies and lowering the age limit for criminal responsibility of minors.
- Hypothesis 3: Citizens living in urban areas show a greater tendency to accept restorative and non-institutional measures compared to citizens living in smaller towns and rural areas.
- Hypothesis 4: Citizens who have had personal contact with individuals who are (or were in the past) juvenile offenders show a higher level of empathy and greater support for resocialization measures, compared to citizens who have not had such experience.

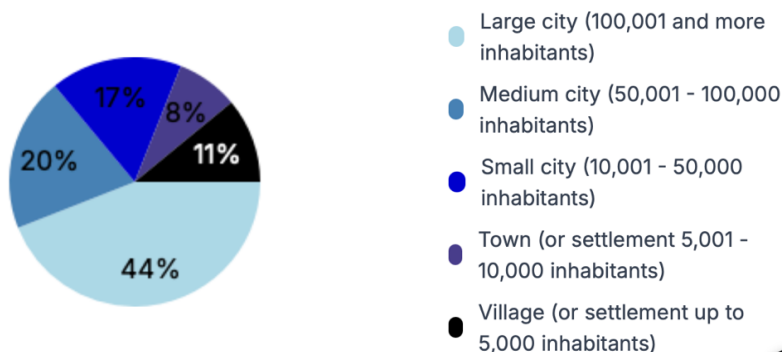
3.2. Sample

A total of 5 625 respondents from 25 districts throughout the territory of the Republic of Serbia participated in the research. The gender structure of the sample shows that women were represented in a much larger number, making up 84% of the participants, while men made up 16%. Regarding the age distribution, the largest percentage of respondents belonged to the 40 to 49 age group (38%), followed by persons between 30 and 39 years old (29%), while 14% were aged 50 to 59. The age groups of 20 to 29 years and 60 to 69 years accounted for 12% and 5% of the sample, respectively, while respondents older than 70 were the least represented with only 2%. The younger population, aged 15 to 19, also made up 2% of the total sample.

The sample of respondents included citizens from different types of settlements, which allowed for an overview of attitudes in urban and rural areas. This enabled a more detailed analysis of how perceptions and attitudes towards juvenile delinquency differ depending on the characteristics of the environment in which respondents live. This diversity (Figure 1) contributed to a better understanding of regional and local specificities in social attitudes and approaches.

Figure 1.

Population Distribution by Settlement Type (N=5,606)



Source: author's own preparation

Regarding the educational structure of the respondents, the largest part consisted of persons with a completed secondary school, who made up 31% of the sample. This is followed by a group of respondents with a university education at the bachelor's level, who are represented with 32%. Respondents with college or higher vocational education made up 14%, while persons with completed master's or magister's studies made up 20% of the sample. Doctoral studies were represented with 1%, while the remaining respondents, with primary school or a lower level of education, made up a smaller part of the sample, i.e., 2%. The following display, i.e., Figure 2, shows the percentage representation of respondents in relation to their employment status.

Figure 2.

Population Distribution by Employment Status (N=5,614)



Source: author's own preparation

In terms of marital status, the majority of respondents (64%) stated they were married, which indicates a high proportion of people living in a partnership. Slightly less than a quarter (23%) stated they were not married, while 11% of respondents were divorced. The share of widowers and widows is 2%, which is the smallest category within this indicator.

3.3. Instruments and variables

Within this research, an online questionnaire was used, constructed according to the needs of the research, and consists of a total of 30 items. Of that number, 12 items are formulated as statements rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 – Strongly disagree, 5 – Strongly agree), while the remaining items are presented as multiple-choice questions. The instrument was designed with the aim of covering key aspects of public opinion and attitudes regarding juvenile delinquency, with a special focus on the following indicators:

- Attitudes on the age limit for criminal responsibility of minors - a series of questions examines how respondents perceive the existing legal limit and whether they support its possible lowering or retention.
- Perceptions of the causes of juvenile delinquency – identifies dominant beliefs about what contributes to the participation of minors in committing criminal acts, including family, social, educational, and individual factors.

- Attitudes on measures for the prevention and reduction of juvenile delinquency – explores opinions on the effectiveness of different preventive strategies, such as educational programs, family support, local community engagement, and the role of the media.
- Approaches to rehabilitation and punishment – analyzes respondents' support for repressive and restorative approaches, including alternative sanctions, resocialization, and institutional care measures.

The questionnaire was constructed to cover both cognitive and affective components of attitudes, which allows for a deeper understanding of public perception of complex issues related to criminal responsibility and the treatment of minors in conflict with the law.

3.4. Data collection procedure

The sample in this research is a convenience sample, and the distribution of the questionnaire was organized on the territory of 25 administrative districts of the Republic of Serbia and the City of Belgrade, which were covered by the research. In each of the selected districts, two local self-governments were included, one with the largest and one with the smallest number of inhabitants. The questionnaires were forwarded electronically to the local self-governments, with a request to share the questionnaire with other people from their immediate environment. In this way, part of the sample was formed using the snowball sampling method, which enabled the expansion of the research scope and the inclusion of a larger number of participants with different demographic characteristics. Data were collected in the period from May to October 2024 and analyzed using the statistical software SPSS, version 21.0.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

Analyzing the problem of juvenile delinquency in the community requires not only monitoring statistical indicators but also understanding the perceptions of the citizens themselves. The attitudes and beliefs of community members are an important indicator because they shape the social response and readiness for preventive and/or corrective measures. This research examined how residents perceive the problem of juvenile delinquency in their environment. Initially, respondents were asked the question:

"Do you consider juvenile delinquency to be a major problem in your community?" The responses indicate a high rate of concern, with as many as 92% of respondents believing that it is, which points to a strong perception of the problem in local contexts. Statistical analysis showed no significant difference in responses in relation to the districts of the Republic of Serbia, meaning this perception is widespread and not necessarily tied to a specific geographical region. However, respondents from larger cities express concern about this problem to a slightly greater extent.

Similarly, data analysis showed a statistically significant relationship between the size of the place of residence and the attitude that lowering the age of criminal responsibility below 14 years is the best way to reduce the rate of juvenile delinquency ($p = 0.007$). Respondents living in large cities express greater support for this view compared to respondents from smaller communities. About 57% of respondents from urban areas believe that lowering the age of criminal responsibility would be an effective way to combat juvenile delinquency, while this attitude is less common among

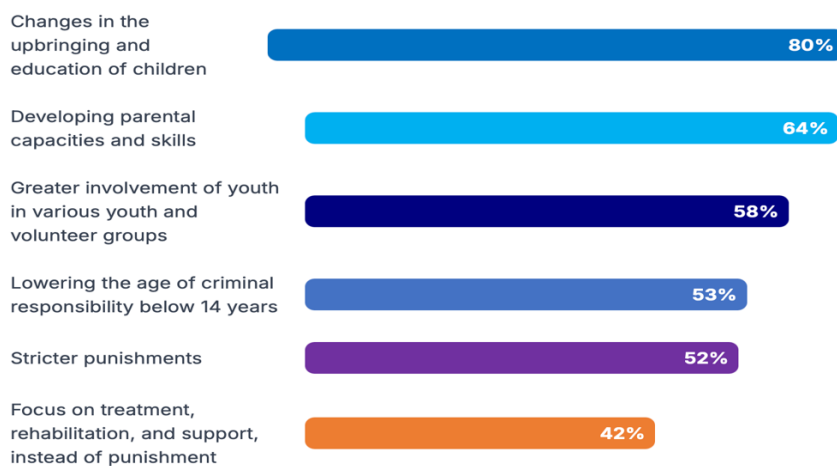
respondents from smaller towns and rural areas. The analysis of the obtained data also indicates that respondents who have previously had direct contact with juvenile offenders express less fear or a sense of being threatened in such interactions, compared to those who do not have such experience. This finding can be interpreted through the lens of *exposure theory* (which will be discussed more in the discussion section), according to which direct experience with a certain population contributes to the reduction of stigmatization and a decrease in the perception of risk. On the other hand, respondents without prior contact more often express concern and a sense of insecurity and/or fear.

On the other hand, it is noticeable that older respondents, especially those over 55, more often support stricter punitive policies and lowering the age limit for the criminal responsibility of minors. These attitudes may be conditioned by more traditional values, a greater sense of insecurity, and more conservative views on justice and safety. However, the analysis of the results also indicated the existence of significant diversity within this demographic group, as some respondents showed a willingness to accept alternative, preventive, and restorative approaches in working with juvenile offenders. Such variability suggests that, despite dominant attitudes, there is (still) room for change and for raising awareness about the importance of more humane and effective measures. The results also indicate a statistically significant relationship between the attitude that it is necessary to lower the age of criminal responsibility from 14 to 12 years for serious criminal offenses and the attitude that minors who commit criminal offenses do not have the capacity for change ($p = 0.032$). Namely, the *majority of these respondents agree with the statement that minors who commit criminal offenses do not have the potential or capacity for change*. This finding points to a pronounced doubt in the possibility of resocialization and rehabilitation of minors.

On the other hand, in the narrative responses, lowering the age limit for criminal responsibility of minors is largely associated with the perception that the existing legal framework does not provide a sufficient degree of responsibility and repression. It is particularly noticeable that many respondents cited as reasons for supporting the lowering of the age limit the feeling that children at that age are mature and aware of their actions and their consequences, that children today have too many rights and too few obligations and responsibilities, along with the belief that there is a systemic lack of adequate control, supervision, and sanction. Some responses also point to the influence of mass media, which often report sensationally on the delinquent behavior of young people, as well as to inadequate parenting skills. Also, some respondents directly referred to specific cases of violence or murder committed by younger minors. In this sense, respondents perceive the lowering of the age limit for criminal responsibility as a necessary response to the increasingly pronounced trend of serious misdemeanors and criminal offenses among children below the current threshold of 14 years. On the other hand, consideration of measures that would have a preventive and/or resocializing character is very little visible in the respondents' answers. There is a complete lack of reference to issues of early interventions, educational and psychosocial programs, family support, or work with the local community. Such a lack indicates a potential knowledge deficit about a comprehensive approach to juvenile delinquency and suggests that the dominant narrative is directed towards repressive, rather than developmental-preventive strategies. In this context, public discourse remains focused on punishment, while the importance of rehabilitation and reintegration of young offenders is almost completely neglected.

Furthermore, the obtained results indicate the existence of a statistically significant relationship ($P=0.039$) between the attitude that earlier maturation is a reason for lowering the age of criminal responsibility from 14 to 12 years for serious criminal offenses and the attitude that a minor who leaves a correctional facility will certainly repeat the criminal act. Regardless of whether respondents believe that earlier maturation justifies lowering criminal responsibility, most of them partially agree with the statement that a minor will repeat a criminal act after leaving a correctional facility. This finding opens space for a critical discussion about modern assumptions and scientific evidence related to the question of whether children and adolescents today truly mature faster in a psychological, social, and moral sense. Similar findings are present in the respondents' attitudes regarding potential approaches to reduce juvenile delinquency and the commission of criminal acts by minors. A large portion of respondents pointed to the need for more intensive work with parents, emphasizing the importance of changes in family upbringing and the introduction of stricter punitive policies, including lowering the age limit for criminal responsibility. These findings point to a dominant perception that the primary causes of delinquent behavior in youth are related to failed family supervision and a lack of adequate sanctions that would have a deterrent effect. On the other hand, a smaller number of respondents recognize the importance of preventive programs, psychosocial support, and treatment work with children at risk and juvenile offenders, as shown in Figure 3.

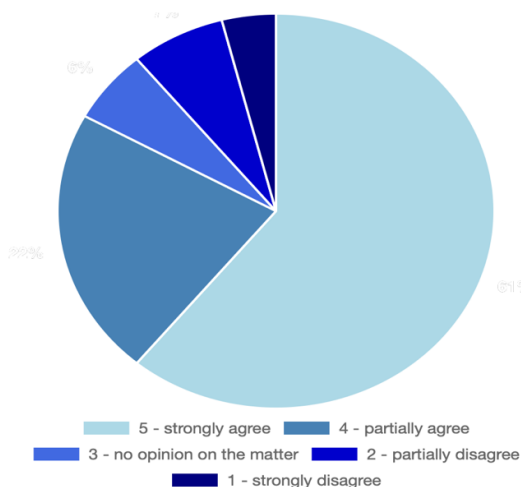
Figure 3.
Attitudes Towards Juvenile Delinquency
(N=5,625)



Source: author's own preparation

Also, it is concerning that the majority of respondents (61%) agree with the statement that minors who commit serious criminal offenses should be tried as adults, as shown in Figure 4.

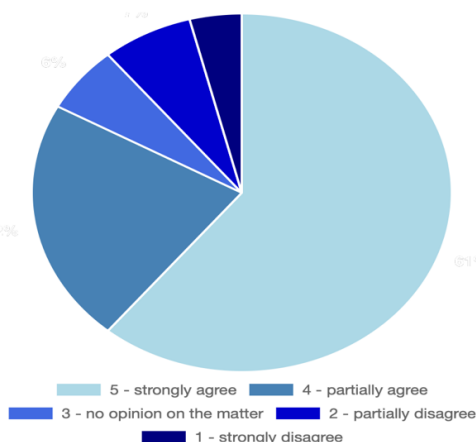
Figure 4.
Statement that minors who commit serious
criminal offenses should be tried as adults
(N=5,481)



Source: author's own preparation

A high level of concern about juvenile delinquency in the local community is also reflected in citizens' attitudes about how to sanction juvenile offenders. Namely, half of the respondents (50%) partially or fully agree with the statement that correctional homes and imprisonment are the most appropriate form of punishment for this population. Also, it is concerning that more than a half of respondents express agreement, partially or fully, with the statement that juvenile offenders should be isolated from society (Figure 5).

Figure 5.
Statement that juvenile offenders should be
isolated from society (N=5,481)



Source: author's own preparation

Although these data represent the subjective attitudes of the respondents, they are extremely important because they reflect the level of social awareness and can contribute to the planning of preventive programs, as well as intervention programs in the field of social protection and beyond. The stated results provide a basis for a more detailed discussion in the next part of the paper, where potential challenges, as well as opportunities for improving existing practice through an interdisciplinary approach and cooperation of various actors in the system, will be analyzed.

5. LIMITATION OF THE RESEARCH

The research presented in this paper has certain limitations that should be kept in mind when interpreting the results. The research was conducted in the period immediately after a mass shooting in an elementary school in the Republic of Serbia, which could have influenced the increased concern and emotional reactions of the respondents. This event likely led to more intense attitudes and perceptions related to juvenile offenders, which may limit the generalization of the findings to the wider population under more stable conditions. Furthermore, the results are based on the subjective perceptions of the respondents, which are subject to personal experiences, prejudices, and emotional reactions. Such an approach does not always ensure complete objectivity and may reflect social stereotypes or dominant narratives, which is important to consider when interpreting the findings. In addition, the research sample is characterized by a larger share of female respondents, which may affect the representativeness of the results in relation to the total population, especially if there are gender differences in the perception and attitudes about juvenile delinquency in the context of punitive measures.

Despite these limitations, this research provides significant insights and can serve as a strong basis for further, more detailed, and comprehensive research in the field of perception of juvenile delinquency and the approach to working with juvenile offenders. The obtained results indicate key areas that require additional analysis and allow for directing future research efforts towards understanding social attitudes, as well as developing more effective preventive and intervention programs within the social protection system, and beyond.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS: TOWARDS RESTORATIVE JUSTICE APPROACHES

Although in many countries, including the Republic of Serbia, the age limit is the main criterion for determining the criminal responsibility of minors, numerous pieces of evidence point to a much more complex and nuanced picture of youth development. The results of various studies (e.g., Cauffman & Steinberg, 2000; Steinberg, 2009) show that chronological age alone is not a sufficient indicator of maturity and readiness to assume criminal responsibility. In light of the findings of our research, where the majority of respondents support lowering the age limit for criminal responsibility, it is necessary to approach this issue with caution. The development of cognitive and emotional abilities is not linear and can vary significantly among individuals, which is why it is important that decisions on criminal responsibility be based not only on chronological age but also on an assessment of individual developmental capacities.

It is important to note that UNICEF, as a key international organization dealing with children's rights, strongly advocates for setting the minimum age of criminal responsibility at least at 14 years, and in many cases recommends a limit of 16 years

(UNICEF, 2019). This recommendation stems from (contemporary approaches to) understanding child development and the need for the criminal system to be aligned as much as possible with the protection and best interests of minors. In accordance with this, lowering the age of criminal responsibility below 14 years represents a risk of insufficiently grounded application of justice, which does not take into account the complexity of the cognitive, emotional, and social development of children. Therefore, when considering changes to legal frameworks, it is necessary to take into account the recommendations of relevant international bodies such as UNICEF, as well as the results of empirical research on child maturity, so that the system is fair, developmentally appropriate, and aligned with child rights protection standards.

Similarly, findings from the Edinburgh study (McAra & McVie, 2007) clearly indicate the significant negative consequences of early contact of children with the justice system, especially when it comes to the age of up to 12 years. Increasing the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 8 to 12 years in Scotland, based on these findings, aims to reduce the risk of harmful effects of early involvement of children in the criminal justice system. The same research also shows that the intensity and depth of contact with the justice system at an early age significantly affect the likelihood of re-engaging in delinquent behavior later in adolescence. Children who were involved in multiple stages of the justice system at the age of 15 are significantly less likely to cease delinquent behavior at age 16. This indicates that not only the contact itself but also the frequency and intensity of interventions play a key role in the further development of minors.

Despite findings indicating the harmfulness of early and frequent contact of minors with the judicial system, our research has shown that the public tends towards repressive measures and closed systems as the primary solution to the problem of juvenile delinquency. We have seen that there is a strong opinion that punishment, i.e., placement in correctional homes and institutions, is, as they claim, the most effective way to prevent the recurrence of criminal acts. On the other hand, this approach does not take into account the potential negative consequences that these sanctions have on the development and reintegration of young people, which is confirmed by numerous contemporary studies.

A very good example for discussion is the research conducted at the *Faculty of Applied Social Sciences in Denmark*, which showed that lowering the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 15 to 14 years did not lead to a reduction in the proportion of 14-year-olds accused of criminal offenses (Murray & Smith, 2020). This study clearly shows that the aforementioned reform did not have the desired deterrent effect on minors from committing criminal acts. Moreover, the results show that 14-year-olds whose cases were resolved through the criminal justice system had worse educational outcomes compared to peers who committed offenses before the reform. Such findings indicate that children younger than 14 do not have sufficiently developed abilities to adequately represent their own interests within the criminal system. The justice system, therefore, shows a certain bias in its approach to the youngest offenders. In addition, due to factors such as suggestibility, limited attention spans, and intellectual functioning, children in this age group are often unable to effectively participate in the criminal justice process. Research like the one mentioned above clearly points to the negative consequences of the early involvement of minors in the criminal justice system, especially emphasizing that children younger than 14 are often unable to adequately participate in the process due to their cognitive and emotional immaturity. This raises questions not only about the effectiveness of repressive measures but also about the social

attitudes and perceptions that shape responses to juvenile delinquency. In this context, *exposure theory* from social psychology, supported by numerous international studies (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), provides an important insight. It indicates that the frequency or proximity of contact with certain social groups or phenomena can contribute to their normalization and a reduction in perceived risk and fear. When we talk about juvenile delinquency, this means that people who have direct or indirect contact with juvenile offenders more often show a lower level of fear and prejudice and develop a deeper understanding of the context that leads to the offense. The results of our research confirm this theory, as respondents with personal experience of contact with juvenile offenders expressed a lower perception of danger and a greater willingness to support rehabilitative rather than repressive measures. This connection between exposure and the reduction of negative attitudes has significant implications for the development of more humane and effective approaches in working with minors in conflict with the law.

Within the conducted research, the general and four specific hypotheses related to citizens' attitudes about juvenile delinquency and approaches to its treatment were analyzed. The results indicate the following:

- The general hypothesis, that the age limit for criminal responsibility of minors (currently 14 years in the Republic of Serbia) is perceived as too high by the majority of respondents, was confirmed in this research. Namely, a majority of respondents, as many as 92%, believe that the current age limit for criminal responsibility in the Republic of Serbia is too high. This perception, along with a series of related questions from the research, confirms the general hypothesis that the current age limit for criminal responsibility of minors, which is 14 years in the Republic of Serbia, is perceived as too low by the majority of respondents.
- Hypothesis 1: Citizens with a higher level of education show a greater tendency to understand the causes of delinquency and give preference to preventive and restorative measures, over stricter punishments and imprisonment. The analysis of the collected data confirmed this hypothesis. Respondents with higher education more often expressed views favoring preventive and restorative approaches, emphasizing the importance of working on the causes of the problem and alternative non-institutional measures. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that education contributes to greater social awareness and a willingness to support more humane, empowering approaches in working with minors.
- Hypothesis 2: Citizens older than 55 years more often advocate for stricter punitive policies and lowering the age limit for criminal responsibility of minors. The research partially confirmed this hypothesis. Older respondents generally showed a tendency towards stricter sanctioning, including support for lowering the age limit. These attitudes may be related to more traditional values and perceptions of security, but at the same time, a portion of respondents in this group showed openness to alternative measures, which indicates the existence of variability within the demographic group.
- Hypothesis 3: Citizens living in urban areas show a greater tendency to accept restorative and non-institutional protection measures compared to those from smaller communities and rural areas. The results confirmed this hypothesis, with residents of urban areas being more inclined to support alternative measures and emphasize the importance of resocialization. On the other hand, respondents from rural areas more often expressed attitudes focused on repressive measures, which may be related to different social and cultural conditions, as well as access to information and resources.

- Hypothesis 4: Citizens who have had personal contact with juvenile offenders show a higher level of empathy and greater support for resocialization measures, compared to those who have not had such experience. The research also confirmed this hypothesis. Respondents with direct experience of contact with minors who have committed criminal acts showed greater empathy and a willingness to accept preventive and restorative measures, while those without such experience more often leaned towards stricter punishments. This finding highlights the importance of personal experiences in shaping attitudes and perceptions of social problems.

These findings indicate the existence of significant gaps in public discourse and perception that need to be filled through targeted educational and awareness-raising programs. From the perspective of further research and the development of public policies, it is important to direct processes towards improving preventive and resocialization strategies, based on the principles of restorative justice, an individualized approach, and respect for the rights of minors. Also, it is necessary to continuously work on raising the awareness of the general public about the complexity and multidimensionality of the problem of juvenile delinquency, in order to reduce prejudice and increase support for restorative and alternative approaches in the social protection and justice systems. The application of such an approach is aligned with contemporary international standards and can contribute to building a fairer and more effective system for the protection of minors, with the long-term goal of reducing recidivism and better inclusion of young people in society. This research, despite various limitations, opens an important discussion on the need for a deeper understanding of social attitudes towards juvenile delinquency and juvenile offenders, and encourages further research aimed at developing fairer and more effective approaches in the treatment of juvenile offenders.

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BETWEEN HOME AND EUROPE: YOUTH POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION IN OVERLAPPING SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS

Radu Sorin TURCESCU*

Laurențiu PETRILA**

Abstract. Political socialization research has traditionally emphasized the formative roles of family, school, peers, and national institutions. Contemporary young people, however, also encounter political ideas and practices through migration, European integration, and digital communication. This conceptual article develops the notion of overlapping socialization environments to explain how these contexts interact in the formation of political orientations. Methodologically, the article employs an integrative, conceptually driven review of foundational political socialization theory and selected scholarship on Romanian migration, European identity, and digitally mediated youth participation. The proposed framework treats family relationships, educational institutions, migration experiences, European integration, and digital communication not as isolated or merely additive influences, but as interconnected environments whose effects may reinforce, modify, or challenge one another. Their relative importance varies across individuals and contexts and may change over time. The framework does not establish causal relationships; instead, it organizes complementary bodies of scholarship and identifies a research agenda for testing how interactions among socialization environments shape political knowledge, values, identities, and participation. This perspective offers a more context-sensitive account of youth political socialization in increasingly interconnected European societies.

Keywords: youth political socialization; migration; European integration; digital communication; transnationalism; political identity.

1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Political socialization has traditionally been understood as the process through which individuals acquire political knowledge, values, identities, and orientations. Classical research located much of this process within the family, school, peer groups, and national political institutions (Easton & Dennis, 1969; Jennings & Niemi, 1974). These perspectives remain fundamental for explaining how young people encounter political authority and develop dispositions toward citizenship and participation. They were also formulated in social settings in which political learning was largely embedded in relatively stable, nationally bounded institutions.

* PhD Candidate in Sociology, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Romania, E-mail: radu.turcescu.21@drd.snsa.ro.

** Ph. D, Lecturer, Faculty of History, International Relations and European Studies, Political Sciences and Communication Sciences, University of Oradea, E-mail: lauren.petrila@gmail.com, laurentiu.petrila@didactic.uoradea.ro.

The conditions under which young people form political orientations have since become more complex. European integration, educational and labor mobility, migration, and digital communication expose young Europeans to institutions, norms, and public debates originating in more than one national context. Political learning still occurs within families, schools, and local communities, but it may also draw on transnational family relationships, experiences of mobility, supranational institutions, and digitally mediated interaction.

Romanian scholarship provides particularly useful illustrations of this transformation. Research on Romanian migration documents the networks and transnational social spaces that connect communities of origin and destination (Anghel, 2013; Sandu, 2005, 2010). Studies of European integration and identity similarly show that national and European forms of belonging can coexist and be reinterpreted through institutional and social change (Brie et al., 2012; Ciot, 2023; Petrila & Brie, 2023; Sălăjan, 2018). Research on first-time voters further demonstrates that young Romanians' online campaign engagement is connected to political interest, information, and existing participation rather than to digital activity alone (Gherghina & Mitru, 2023). Taken together, these studies suggest that political orientations may develop through experiences that cross institutional, territorial, and communicative boundaries.

Yet these bodies of scholarship are usually organized around distinct questions. Political socialization research examines agents and processes of political learning; migration studies analyze mobility and transnational relationships; European studies focus on institutions, integration, and belonging; and digital communication research investigates media use and participation. Each tradition offers important insights, but considering them separately can obscure how their objects of study intersect in young people's everyday lives.

1.1. Research Purpose, Objectives, and Guiding Proposition

The purpose of this conceptual article is to develop an integrated framework for examining youth political socialization across interconnected national, transnational, institutional, and digital contexts. It addresses the fragmentation between political socialization research and scholarship on migration, European integration, and digital communication.

The article pursues four objectives. First, it revisits classical approaches to political socialization and identifies their continuing explanatory relevance. Second, it examines how migration, European integration, and digital communication extend the environments in which political learning takes place. Third, it introduces and defines the concept of overlapping socialization environments. Fourth, it develops methodological implications and an empirical research agenda for studying interactions among these environments.

The analysis is guided by the following research question: How can the interaction among family, educational, migratory, European, and digital environments be conceptualized in the study of youth political socialization?

Because the article is conceptual rather than empirical, it does not test a causal hypothesis. It advances instead the following guiding proposition for subsequent empirical testing (P1): the political significance of a socialization environment is conditioned by its interaction with the other environments present in young people's lives. Accordingly, family, education, migration, European integration, and digital communication should not be treated exclusively as independent or additive influences. Their interaction may reinforce, modify, translate, or challenge political knowledge, values, identities, and orientations.

1.2. Methodological Design and Levels of Analysis

Methodologically, the article employs an integrative literature review oriented toward conceptual synthesis and theory building. Unlike a systematic review designed to identify and evaluate all publications meeting predetermined criteria, an integrative review brings together theoretically relevant contributions from different research traditions in order to clarify concepts, identify relationships, and develop a new analytical perspective.

The reviewed literature consists of two main categories. The first includes foundational contributions concerning political socialization, primary and secondary socialization, political authority, socialization agents, and socially acquired dispositions. The second includes selected Romanian and comparative studies addressing migration and transnational relations, European integration and political belonging, and digitally mediated political participation. Sources are included for their conceptual relevance to the mechanisms, contexts, and interactions through which young people may acquire political orientations. The review is therefore purposive and conceptually driven rather than exhaustive.

The analytical procedure comprises three stages. First, the reviewed studies are organized according to the principal environment examined: family and education, migration and transnational relations, European integration, or digital communication. Second, the mechanisms associated with each environment are identified, including interpersonal transmission, institutional learning, cross-national comparison, identity negotiation, political information, and participation. Third, the analysis examines the points at which these mechanisms intersect, leading to the formulation of simultaneity, interaction, and variability as the defining characteristics of overlapping socialization environments.

The framework connects three levels of analysis. At the micro level, it concerns young people's political knowledge, values, identities, interpretations, and participation. At the meso level, it examines families, schools, migration networks, peer relations, and digitally mediated communities as social settings through which political meanings circulate. At the macro level, it considers national political systems, European institutions, migration contexts, and broader transformations in communication. The framework's central analytical interest lies in the connections among these levels rather than in the isolated effect of any single factor.

This design does not permit causal inference or estimates of the relative strength of different socialization environments. Its purpose is to construct a coherent conceptual framework and to derive questions and propositions that can subsequently be examined through comparative, longitudinal, network-based, or mixed-methods research.

The article proceeds in four further stages. Section 2 reviews classical perspectives on political socialization and scholarship on migration, European integration, and digital communication. Section 3 defines the conceptual framework and develops its principal characteristics and theoretical implications. Section 4 discusses the contribution, limitations, methodological implications, and empirical research agenda generated by the framework. Section 5 concludes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Classical Perspectives on Political Socialization

Classical research on political socialization sought to explain how individuals acquire orientations toward political institutions, authority, and citizenship. A central concern was the formation of political attitudes before individuals entered adult political life.

Easton and Dennis (1969) examined the development of political orientations during childhood, with particular attention to perceptions of authority and political legitimacy. Their work established that the relationship between individuals and the political system begins to take shape before the acquisition of formal electoral rights. From this perspective, political learning is not restricted to direct participation; it develops gradually through early encounters with political symbols and institutions.

Jennings and Niemi (1974) shifted attention toward adolescence and the agents involved in political learning. Their analysis considered families, schools, teachers, and peer groups, as well as variation across social categories and over the life cycle. Although the family occupied an important place in their research, it was not treated as the only source of political orientation. Political socialization was therefore presented as a process shaped by several social settings rather than by a single mechanism of parental transmission.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) did not formulate a theory of political socialization. Their distinction between primary and secondary socialization nevertheless offers a broader sociological basis for understanding how socially shared meanings are internalized. Primary socialization introduces the child to a social world through significant others, whereas secondary socialization involves the internalization of institutionally organized subworlds. Applied cautiously to politics, this distinction helps explain how understandings of authority, citizenship, and collective life become part of subjective reality.

Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus adds a further dimension. Habitus describes durable and transferable dispositions generated through social conditions and experience. These dispositions contribute to practices and representations without operating as explicit rules. Although Bourdieu does not address political socialization directly in this work, the concept offers a way to understand how socially acquired dispositions can inform later political perceptions and practices.

Together, these works provide complementary accounts of early political development. Easton and Dennis emphasize orientations toward authority; Jennings and Niemi identify agents and contexts of political learning; Berger and Luckmann explain the internalization of social reality; and Bourdieu draws attention to durable dispositions generated by social conditions. These perspectives remain essential, but their primary empirical and theoretical focus lies in identifiable institutions and predominantly face-to-face settings. They do not directly address political learning across migration networks, supranational institutions, and digital media. The following sections examine how these contexts extend the environments in which political orientations may form.

2.2. Migration and Transnational Social Environments

Research on Romanian migration demonstrates that migration cannot be reduced to the physical movement of individuals across borders. It also encompasses social relations, networks, communication, and practices connecting communities of origin and destination.

Sandu's (2005) analysis of temporary and circular migration from Romanian villages situates individual mobility within local communities, regional contexts, and migration networks. The study shows that migration is patterned by community characteristics and prior forms of mobility, rather than being solely the product of individual decisions. This perspective places social organization at the center of migration processes and helps explain how mobility is sustained over time.

Sandu (2010) develops this approach through the concept of the “social worlds” of Romanian migration. The volume analyzes life projects, remittances, communication, return, and transnational orientations across several levels of social organization, from individuals and families to communities and regions. Migration thereby appears as a social field connecting experiences abroad with relationships and expectations at home.

Anghel (2013) provides a complementary account through a comparative study of Romanian migrants in Germany and Italy. By examining migration, incorporation, social status, and transnational connections, the book shows how migrants' experiences are shaped by both destination-country institutions and continuing ties to Romania. Migration is not presented as a complete transfer from one bounded social world to another; it creates relationships and reference points that extend across national contexts.

These works do not explicitly formulate theories of youth political socialization. They nevertheless alter the conceptual map on which such theories operate. When family relationships, status comparisons, information flows, and life projects span more than one country, the experiences from which political meanings are drawn may also become transnational. Young people may encounter political institutions indirectly through relatives abroad, compare public services and democratic practices across countries, or interpret national politics through experiences circulated within migrant networks.

Migration should therefore be treated not as a substitute for primary socialization but as a context that can intersect with it. Transnational experiences may reinforce family narratives, introduce alternative standards of evaluation, or produce tensions between inherited norms and observations from elsewhere. This possibility leads to the next element of the framework: European integration as an institutional and symbolic environment that enables multiple forms of political belonging.

2.3. European Integration and Multiple Political Belongings

European integration is both an institutional process and a source of social interaction. In her analysis of Romania's accession, Ciot (2023) shows that preparation for membership involved not only governmental negotiation but also public institutions and civil-society organizations. Accession therefore broadened the range of actors involved in adopting and interpreting European norms and practices. Although this work is not a study of political socialization, it demonstrates how integration can reshape the institutional environment in which citizens encounter politics.

The implications of integration become more visible in research on identity. Brie et al. (2012) describe European cultural identity through the coexistence of unity and diversity. Their formulation of Europe as a “culture of cultures” does not require the disappearance of local, regional, or national identities. European integration instead creates a broader framework within which different cultural forms may coexist and interact.

Sălăjan (2018) traces the redefinition of Romania's Euro-Atlantic national identity during the period preceding EU accession. Her analysis treats identity formation as dependent on both domestic and international interaction and shows how political actors articulated multiple self-images in relation to Europe. For the present argument, the important point is that identification with Europe is not an automatic product of membership; it is interpreted and negotiated through discourse, institutional change, and historical experience.

Petrila and Brie (2023) further illustrate the variable relationship between national and European attachments. Their analysis of nationalism and Euroscepticism during successive European crises shows how uncertainty can increase the salience of national

narratives without eliminating European identification. National and European identities can thus operate as parallel frames whose relative importance changes across political circumstances.

This literature suggests that European integration creates an additional institutional and symbolic environment for political learning. It does not displace family, school, community, or national institutions. Instead, it introduces norms, rights, symbols, and comparisons that may be interpreted through those existing contexts. For young people, mobility programs, EU citizenship, cross-border travel, and public debates about Europe may become resources for understanding democracy and belonging. The socialization implications of European integration therefore lie not in a uniform “Europeanization” of political identity, but in the interaction between European reference points and other social environments.

2.4. Digital Communication and Political Socialization

Digital communication does more than add another source of political information. It connects people and experiences that originate in different social and territorial contexts, making it especially relevant to a framework centered on overlap.

Shah et al. (2009) conceptualize communication competence as a foundation for civic competence. Their model connects family communication, classroom deliberation, public-affairs news use, and interpersonal discussion. These processes allow young people to encounter ideas, interpret public issues, express opinions, and develop competencies associated with citizenship. The model is important here because it treats communication as a link among several sites of socialization rather than as an isolated media effect.

The expansion of digital media has increased the number and accessibility of such communicative opportunities. A meta-analysis of 106 survey-based studies found that positive associations between digital media and youth engagement depend primarily on directly political uses, including online news, blogging, and political discussion (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). The evidence also supports the possibility of reciprocal influence: political engagement can motivate politically oriented media use, while such use may be associated with further engagement. Digital activity in general should therefore not be equated with political socialization or participation.

Different forms of Internet use also have different relationships with public orientation. Using longitudinal data, Ekström et al. (2014) distinguish among online spaces oriented toward news, social interaction, games, and creative activity. Their findings emphasize the relevance of news and social-interaction orientations while cautioning against assuming uniformly positive effects from social media use. This differentiation is crucial for any framework that seeks to incorporate digital communication without treating it as a homogeneous influence.

Social and political context further conditions online participation. Allaste and Saari's (2020) comparison of Estonia and Finland shows how similar platforms become embedded in different participatory cultures and democratic histories. In Romania, Gherghina and Mitru (2023) find that first-time voters' engagement with preferred candidates on Facebook was associated with political interest, information, and other forms of participation. Online engagement was not random or reducible to habitual platform use; it extended political orientations and activities developed elsewhere.

Digital communication also reduces the territorial constraints on political attention. Himmelroos and von Schoultz (2023) show that, among Finnish external

citizens, following political news from the country of origin was associated with participation in origin-country elections. The relationship held for traditional media and social media, whereas following residence-country politics did not produce the same mobilizing pattern for origin-country voting. The content and territorial focus of media use therefore matter alongside format.

Taken together, these studies support three conclusions. First, political uses of digital media are more relevant than general use. Second, their significance depends on the surrounding social and political context. Third, digital communication can connect family discussions, educational experiences, migration networks, and political events across borders. Within the framework advanced here, digital communication is therefore both a socialization environment and an infrastructure through which other environments encounter one another.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: OVERLAPPING SOCIALIZATION ENVIRONMENTS

The literature reviewed above indicates that contemporary youth political socialization cannot be fully understood through a single context. Classical perspectives emphasize family and educational institutions, whereas migration research, European studies, and digital communication scholarship draw attention to transnational relations, supranational belonging, and mediated participation. These literatures address different questions, but together they show that young people's political orientations may form across multiple environments that are present at the same time and connected in practice.

3.1. Defining Overlapping Socialization Environments

In this article, *overlapping socialization environments* refers to the interconnected social and institutional contexts through which young people develop political knowledge, values, identities, and orientations. The concept focuses on interactions among family relationships, educational institutions, migration experiences, European integration, and digital communication. These environments are analytically distinguishable, but they are not necessarily experienced separately.

The term *overlapping* has three implications. First, several environments can be relevant simultaneously. Second, experiences from one environment can affect how messages from another are interpreted. Third, the environments need not point in the same direction. A family's political narratives may be supported by experiences communicated through relatives abroad, modified by formal education, or challenged by European and digital reference points.

The concept does not assume that all environments have equal influence or that their effects are uniform. Their relative importance may vary by age, family history, education, migration experience, media practices, and national context. The framework also does not presume that overlap is inherently democratic, integrative, or beneficial. Interactions can generate learning and participation, but they can also produce contradiction, withdrawal, polarization, or uncertainty. The central proposition is narrower: political socialization is more fully understood when the relationships among environments are examined rather than when each environment is analyzed in isolation.

3.2. Characteristics of Overlapping Socialization Environments

The first characteristic is simultaneity. Young people do not simply move through a fixed sequence in which family influence ends when schooling, mobility, or digital

communication begins. Earlier dispositions can remain active while new institutions and relationships become relevant. Political orientations may consequently reflect several contemporaneous sources of meaning.

The second characteristic is interaction. Experiences in one environment may reinforce, translate, modify, or challenge those acquired in another. A migrant relative's account of a host country's institutions can become part of family political discussion; an EU program can be interpreted through national narratives; and digital platforms can carry both classroom content and transnational political debate. Political socialization is therefore not merely the sum of separate effects. Its meaning is partly produced through the relationships among environments.

The third characteristic is variability over persons, contexts, and time. Direct migration experience will not have the same significance as indirect exposure through relatives; political news use differs from entertainment-oriented platform use; and European identification varies with social position and political events. The salience of each environment may also change as young people leave school, travel, vote for the first time, or enter new networks. The framework consequently treats political socialization as dynamic and context dependent rather than as a uniform pathway.

3.3. Theoretical Implications

The proposed perspective has several implications for political socialization research. Most importantly, it shifts attention from identifying isolated agents toward examining configurations of environments. This does not diminish the explanatory value of family, school, migration, European integration, or digital communication. It asks how their influence changes when they are connected to other contexts in young people's lives.

The framework also distinguishes interaction from accumulation. An additive approach would estimate the independent contribution of each influence. An interactional approach asks whether an experience in one environment changes the meaning or effect of another. This distinction can generate different research questions: whether transnational family ties alter the relationship between parental attitudes and youth orientations; whether educational mobility changes how national political narratives are evaluated; or whether politically oriented digital media connect migration experiences to electoral engagement.

Finally, the framework creates a common conceptual language for literatures that use different units of analysis. Political socialization studies often focus on individuals and agents; migration research examines networks and transnational spaces; European studies analyzes institutions and identity; and communication research studies media practices. Overlapping socialization environments does not replace these approaches. It offers a way to formulate hypotheses about their points of contact and to design empirical research around those interactions.

4. DISCUSSION

This article develops *overlapping socialization environments* as an integrated perspective on youth political socialization. Its contribution is not the identification of previously unknown agents. Family, education, migration, European integration, and digital communication are all established objects of research. The contribution lies in treating them as potentially interconnected contexts and in specifying simultaneity, interaction, and variability as properties that empirical studies should examine.

This perspective has methodological implications. Cross-sectional models that include several independent variables may identify associations but cannot, on their own, show how environments acquire meaning through one another. Research designs should therefore measure not only exposure to each environment but also the ties connecting them. Relevant indicators could include political communication within transnational families, the interpretation of mobility experiences, the territorial focus and political purpose of media use, and the ways in which national and European identities are discussed across home, school, and online settings. Mixed-methods research could connect such measures to the interpretive processes through which young people reconcile or contest competing messages.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the framework is conceptual and does not establish causal relationships. Second, the five environments discussed here are not exhaustive; peers, religious organizations, workplaces, parties, social movements, and major political events may also be important. Third, the framework does not specify the relative weight of different environments. Influence is likely to vary across individuals, generations, and national contexts. Finally, the integrative review is selective rather than systematic. It was designed to develop a conceptual synthesis, not to estimate the prevalence or strength of particular effects.

These limitations define an empirical research agenda. Comparative studies could examine whether particular configurations of environments recur across European societies with different migration histories and levels of integration. Longitudinal research could identify how the salience of environments changes around transitions such as leaving school, migration, return, or first electoral participation. Network analysis could map how political information travels across family and transnational ties, while interviews and digital ethnography could examine how young people interpret conflicting messages. A further task is operationalization: developing measures that distinguish exposure to multiple environments from meaningful interaction among them.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary youth political socialization occurs in societies where political experiences are rarely confined to one institution or territory. Classical agents remain important, but their influence may intersect with migration networks, European institutions and identities, and digital communication. Understanding these intersections is necessary for explaining how young people develop political orientations in an interconnected Europe.

The concept of *overlapping socialization environments* offers a framework for that task. It emphasizes that several environments can be simultaneously relevant, that experiences may reinforce or challenge one another, and that their importance varies across people, contexts, and time. The framework brings together complementary insights without claiming that all influences are equal or that overlap produces a predetermined political outcome.

The value of the concept will ultimately depend on empirical testing. Its immediate purpose is to make the relationships among socialization environments visible and researchable. By shifting attention from isolated influences to their configurations and interactions, the framework provides a basis for a more context-sensitive account of youth political socialization.

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CHALLENGES TO ROMANIA'S NATIONAL SECURITY IN THE CONTEXT OF RISING ADDICTIVE BEHAVIOURS: COMMUNITY-BASED INCLUSION IN A BORDER-STATE CONTEXT

*Laurențiu PETRILA**

Abstract. Globalisation, social change, technological transformation, and regional insecurity have expanded the range of vulnerabilities relevant to national security. This article examines addictive behaviours in Romania as a problem of societal and human security, focusing on alcohol and illicit substance use and on institutional capacity for prevention, treatment, recovery, and social reintegration. The analysis combines a review of academic and institutional literature with qualitative comparative analysis of three community-based recovery models documented in Romania: Teen Challenge România, the “Izvorul Tămăduirii” Centre, and the Romanian Blue Cross Association. The argument is that addiction becomes a security concern through cumulative effects on public health, human capital, family functioning, education, labour-market participation, community cohesion, and institutional trust. The article conceptualises recovery as an inclusion process involving treatment, recovery capital, social participation, and continuity of care. The three cases reveal recurring mechanisms: continuity of intervention, community as method, family involvement, meaningful occupation, peer support, reintegration, and cooperation between civil society and public institutions. The article proposes a community-based inclusion framework and clarifies the limits of the available Romanian evidence, distinguishing documented organisational practices from independently demonstrated treatment effects. Such a framework can contribute to societal resilience while avoiding the stigmatisation and marginalisation that may turn vulnerability into durable exclusion.

Keywords: Addiction; societal security; community resilience; social inclusion; Romania; drug policy.

1. INTRODUCTION

In classical approaches, national security was associated primarily with territorial defence and military threats. Human-security approaches broaden the referent object toward people and their capabilities (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 1994), while the Copenhagen School enables analysis of security across sectors, including societal security and social reproduction (Buzan et al., 1998). The article uses these perspectives to examine addiction as a cumulative societal vulnerability rather than as an existential threat.

Romania is a relevant case because it combines an external-border position within the European security architecture with internal inequalities in institutional and

* Ph. D, Lecturer, Faculty of History, International Relations and European Studies, Political Sciences and Communication Sciences, University of Oradea, E-mail: lauren.petrila@gmail.com, laurentiu.petrila@didactic.uoradea.ro.

service capacity. The article does not claim that addiction is inherently a border phenomenon or compare border and non-border communities. Instead, it asks how community-based addiction services may form part of societal-security infrastructure where access to services is uneven.

The argument proceeds from a relatively simple proposition. Addiction does not become a national-security issue merely because substances are illegal, because drug markets intersect with organised crime, or because substance use can generate public-order problems. It becomes a security issue through cumulative effects on the capacities through which a society reproduces itself: healthy and educated citizens, functioning families, productive labour, reliable institutions, social trust, and resilient communities. The World Health Organization's global reporting treats alcohol and substance-use disorders as major public-health concerns and links effective responses to prevention, treatment capacity, and policy implementation (World Health Organization [WHO], 2024). The European Union Drugs Agency likewise treats drug use, harms, treatment, and harm-reduction interventions as interconnected components of the contemporary European drug situation (European Union Drugs Agency [EUDA], 2025).

The Romanian case is particularly important because the public response combines coercive, medical, social, educational, and civil-society interventions. The National Drug Strategy 2022–2026 formally incorporates prevention, treatment, risk reduction, interinstitutional cooperation, and civil-society participation (Government of Romania, 2022). Yet the existence of a strategic framework does not automatically demonstrate implementation capacity. Hideg (2019), in an analysis specifically devoted to the Romanian National Anti-Drug Strategy, identified weaknesses in the conceptual and evaluative framework through which policy effectiveness could be assessed. This gap matters from a security perspective because a state cannot reliably strengthen resilience if it cannot determine which interventions work, for whom, under what conditions, and at what cost.

The article examines three community-based models documented in Romania: Teen Challenge România, the “Izvorul Tămăduirii” Centre, and the Romanian Blue Cross Association. Their programmes combine, in different ways, residential treatment, counselling, family involvement, peer support, spiritual practices, occupational activity, prevention, and reintegration. The analytical proposition is that such mechanisms may contribute to recovery capital and community resilience; the study does not test their effects through outcome data.

This approach is consistent with the broader focus of the Identity, Security and Inclusivity in Border Areas of South East Europe project. The article treats border relevance as a question of institutional and territorial capacity rather than as evidence that addiction itself is concentrated at borders. Security cannot be separated from inclusion, while inclusion cannot function without institutions and communities capable of recognising vulnerability without converting it into permanent stigma. Community-resilience literature emphasises networks and relationships, communication, health, governance, resources, preparedness, and social outlook as recurring dimensions of resilient communities (Patel et al., 2017). Recovery-capital research similarly highlights personal, social, and community resources as conditions that can sustain recovery (Laudet & White, 2008; White & Cloud, 2008). Addiction policy can therefore be integrated into a broader security agenda through a model that connects public authority with community-based capacities.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study uses qualitative document-based research combining policy analysis, literature review, and comparative case analysis. The primary materials are the conference article and the longer Romanian-language research document supplied for this project. The latter provides descriptive material on the three cases, including programme characteristics, institutional history, testimonies, therapeutic practices, and references to media and organisational sources. The research questions ask which mechanisms recur across the cases, how they relate to societal security and recovery capital, and what policy conditions would be required for wider adoption.

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, it reconstructs the relationship between addiction, societal security, human security, community resilience, recovery capital, and social inclusion. Second, it situates Romania within current public-health and drug-policy evidence. Third, it compares the three community-based models across seven dimensions: continuity; community as method; family and relational support; peer support; meaningful occupation; prevention; and institutional cooperation and reintegration. The comparison is interpretive rather than statistical. It identifies recurring mechanisms and differences between cases rather than estimating programme effects.

The documentary evidence concerning the three organisations is treated as case-study material rather than as independent evidence of clinical effectiveness. Organisational websites, media reports, testimonies, and programme descriptions can establish how an intervention is designed and represented, but they cannot by themselves establish causal effectiveness. This distinction is particularly important because systematic reviews of therapeutic communities have found promising but heterogeneous evidence and methodological limitations, with relapse and attrition remaining important concerns (Malivert et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2006). Accordingly, claims about outcomes reported by the organisations or their supporting publications are presented as documented organisational or journalistic claims and are interpreted alongside peer-reviewed evidence on therapeutic communities, peer recovery support, recovery capital, faith and recovery, occupational participation, stigma, and community resilience.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Addiction, vulnerability, and social exclusion

Addiction has historically been framed through competing medical, moral, criminal-justice, and social models. Contemporary public-health approaches increasingly understand substance-use disorders as conditions requiring prevention, treatment, and long-term support, while recognising the importance of social determinants and structural context (WHO, 2024). From the perspective of social policy, this means that the individual cannot be separated analytically from family relations, employment, housing, education, health services, and community networks.

The social consequences of addiction are therefore cumulative. They include direct health costs and indirect consequences such as educational disruption, family conflict, unemployment, violence, social isolation, and reduced productivity. Alcohol is particularly important because its cultural normalisation can obscure the magnitude of its social burden. Popova et al. (2007) demonstrated that Central and Eastern European countries have historically exhibited distinctive patterns of alcohol consumption, beverage preference, and drinking. The WHO's later global reporting confirms that alcohol remains a major source of disease burden and that treatment capacity and policy responses vary substantially across countries (WHO, 2024).

Illicit substances create a parallel but differently framed problem. Drug use is frequently connected to criminalisation, trafficking, organised crime, and public-order narratives. Yet a purely criminal framing can conceal the fact that people who use drugs may require health, social, psychological, and community support. The European drug-policy literature increasingly treats prevention, treatment, harm reduction, and social reintegration as interconnected elements of effective responses (EUDA, 2025). This is particularly important for younger populations, among whom early intervention can affect educational trajectories, family relationships, and future labour-market participation.

Stigma is a central mechanism linking addiction to exclusion. Link and Phelan (2001) conceptualised stigma as a process involving labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination within a context of power. Applied to addiction, stigma can turn a treatable condition into a durable social identity. Reviews of the evidence indicate that perceived and self-stigma can operate as barriers to treatment seeking, although their effects vary across populations and study designs (Hammarlund et al., 2018). Stigma also affects treatment environments and public discourse, including through language that frames people with substance-use disorders as morally defective or dangerous (Zwick et al., 2020). A security framework that ignores stigma therefore risks reproducing one of the mechanisms through which vulnerability becomes chronic.

3.2. Societal security and human security

The concept of societal security provides an analytical bridge between individual vulnerability and national resilience. Buzan et al. (1998) expanded security analysis beyond military threats and identified societal security as concerned with the maintenance of collective identities and patterns of social reproduction. Addiction fits this perspective when its effects accumulate across families, schools, communities, and institutions. It is not necessary to claim that addiction constitutes an existential threat in the same sense as war. The relevant argument is that persistent and inadequately managed addiction can weaken the social capacities upon which other forms of security depend.

Human security adds a complementary perspective. The UNDP (1994) famously reframed security around people rather than territories and emphasised economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security. Addiction intersects with several of these dimensions simultaneously. A person experiencing severe dependence may face health insecurity, economic insecurity, personal insecurity, and social exclusion at the same time. Families may experience financial strain and relational instability, while communities may experience reduced trust and increased demand for health, social, and policing services.

The combination of societal and human security avoids reducing the person to a security risk. A person affected by addiction is simultaneously vulnerable, a rights-bearing individual, and a potential participant in community recovery. This is a crucial normative and analytical shift. If the state responds primarily through coercion, it may address particular public-order problems while reinforcing stigma and marginality. A strategy combining prevention, treatment, harm reduction, family support, and reintegration can strengthen social security over the longer term (WHO, 2024; EUDA, 2025).

3.3. Community resilience and recovery capital

Community resilience is a useful concept for analysing how societies absorb and respond to chronic social vulnerabilities. Patel et al. (2017), in a systematic review of the concept, identified local knowledge, community networks and relationships,

communication, health, governance and leadership, resources, economic investment, preparedness, and mental outlook as recurring dimensions of resilience. Chandra et al. (2011) similarly connected community resilience to national health security, arguing that community capacities can contribute to preparedness and response.

Addiction recovery can be interpreted through the same lens. Recovery depends on supportive relationships, stable routines, meaningful activity, employment or education, and continuity of care. Recovery capital refers to the internal and external resources available to initiate and sustain recovery (White & Cloud, 2008); prospective research has linked it to sustained recovery, life satisfaction, and stress (Laudet & White, 2008), while community participation and recovery identity have been associated with retention (Bliuc et al., 2017).

Therapeutic communities are particularly relevant because they deliberately make social relations part of the treatment environment. De Leon and Unterrainer (2020) describe the therapeutic community as a social-psychological approach in which community functions as method. Group processes, peer interaction, mutual responsibility, structured daily life, and shared norms can therefore become mechanisms of change. At the same time, systematic reviews caution against treating the therapeutic-community model as uniformly effective: Malivert et al. (2012) found substantial heterogeneity in retention and outcomes, while the Cochrane review by Smith et al. (2006) concluded that evidence for superiority over other residential treatments was limited. The Romanian cases are therefore analysed as examples of potentially relevant mechanisms, not as proof of therapeutic-community efficacy.

3.4. Faith, meaning, and recovery

The three Romanian cases also raise the role of religious communities in recovery. Religious belief cannot simply be assumed to cause recovery, and faith-based organisations should not substitute for evidence-based care. Meta-analytic evidence on spiritual/religious interventions is mixed (Hai et al., 2019), and a review of Judeo-Christian interventions found a small, heterogeneous evidence base (Andrade et al., 2023). Grim and Grim (2019) nevertheless identify plausible pathways involving belief, behaviour, belonging, and social support.

The relevant mechanism for societal security is therefore broader than religious doctrine. A faith-based recovery programme may create social capital by providing a stable community, a narrative of personal transformation, and opportunities to assume responsibility. Former beneficiaries can become mentors or prevention workers, transforming a previous experience of vulnerability into a form of community competence. At the same time, a pluralist public-policy framework must guarantee voluntary participation and non-discrimination, particularly when publicly funded services are involved.

3.5. Meaningful occupation and reintegration

Occupational therapy and meaningful activity provide another bridge between individual recovery and inclusion. The American Occupational Therapy Association (2014) conceptualises occupational therapy through participation in meaningful activities and through attention to the interaction between person, environment, and occupation. This is directly relevant to addiction recovery because treatment often requires the reconstruction of daily routines and a sense of competence. The occupational dimension

should nevertheless be treated as a mechanism requiring evaluation rather than as an independently demonstrated causal treatment effect.

The Romanian Blue Cross material places considerable emphasis on gardening, animal care, cooking, maintenance, and other practical activities. Such tasks are presented as ways of developing responsibility, autonomy, teamwork, and self-esteem. Their relevance extends beyond therapy in the narrow sense. Meaningful occupation can create a bridge to ordinary social participation by giving individuals opportunities to contribute, complete tasks, and receive recognition. Reintegration is therefore partly constructed through ordinary practices of competence.

3.6. Evidence on continuity, peer support, and recovery environments

The broader evidence base supports the importance of continuity and social resources while cautioning against simple claims of efficacy. Peer-recovery support services are increasingly incorporated into substance-use-disorder care, and systematic reviews suggest that they can improve treatment engagement and retention, although evidence for substance-use outcomes is less conclusive (Reif et al., 2014; Eddie et al., 2019; Eddie et al., 2025). This is directly relevant to the Romanian cases because several programmes rely on former beneficiaries as mentors, prevention workers, or community participants. The mechanism is therefore theoretically and empirically plausible, while the local magnitude of the effect remains an open question.

Recovery housing provides another relevant comparison. A 2025 systematic review of randomized and quasi-experimental studies found that recovery-housing interventions can improve abstinence, income, and employment compared with usual care or no intervention, but the review also emphasised that only a small number of high-quality comparative studies were available and that effects varied across populations (Vilsaint et al., 2025). The finding supports the article's emphasis on continuing environments after formal treatment while reinforcing the need to distinguish a documented programme structure from a demonstrated outcome.

Therapeutic-community evidence is similarly mixed. Malivert et al. (2012) identified reductions in substance use across the studies reviewed but also substantial attrition and frequent relapse after treatment. The Cochrane review by Smith et al. (2006) concluded that evidence for therapeutic communities being superior to other residential treatments was limited. These findings do not invalidate community-based approaches; rather, they indicate that community should be studied as a bundle of mechanisms—social support, structure, peer influence, responsibility, and continuity—rather than as a single intervention whose effectiveness can be assumed.

This distinction strengthens the comparative logic of the present study. Teen Challenge, “Izvorul Tămăduirii,” and the Romanian Blue Cross Association are not treated as three proven interventions to be ranked. They are treated as three institutional configurations that make visible different combinations of recovery capital, peer support, family involvement, spiritual resources, occupational participation, and continuing care. Their comparative value lies in identifying mechanisms that can subsequently be tested through longitudinal evaluation.

4. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The article proposes a framework in which addiction becomes a societal-security concern through a chain of cumulative effects:

Addictive behaviour → individual and family vulnerability → social exclusion and institutional pressure → reduced community capacity → diminished societal resilience.

The reverse pathway is equally important:

Prevention and early intervention → treatment continuity → supportive community → restored competence and relationships → social participation → increased resilience.

This framework treats inclusion as a security mechanism. Inclusion does not mean the absence of boundaries, professional standards, or legal enforcement. It means the creation of pathways through which people affected by addiction can return to education, employment, family life, civic participation, and community belonging.

The framework has five components. First is prevention, including school-based education, public communication, family support, and culturally credible forms of awareness. Second is treatment continuity, meaning that detoxification or crisis intervention should be connected to longer-term therapeutic and social support. Third is relational recovery, in which family, peers, mentors, and community groups provide social resources. Fourth is meaningful participation, including occupational, educational, vocational, artistic, and civic activities. Fifth is evaluation, through which outcomes can be measured and potentially effective practices can become scalable public policies. The framework therefore distinguishes mechanisms from outcomes: a programme may contain theoretically relevant mechanisms without having demonstrated population-level effectiveness.

This framework also clarifies the role of the state and civil society. The state has responsibility for regulation, financing, standards, data collection, evaluation, coordination, and equitable access. Civil-society organisations can provide proximity, trust, flexibility, specialised community knowledge, and relational forms of support. The relationship should therefore be understood as institutional complementarity rather than substitution.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

5.1. Romania: alcohol, drugs, and vulnerability

The available evidence indicates a substantial burden of alcohol-related harm in Romania. The WHO global report provides the most recent international framework for interpreting alcohol consumption and treatment capacity and emphasises that alcohol-related harm should be considered together with policy responses and access to treatment (WHO, 2024). Earlier comparative research placed Romania within a Central and Eastern European pattern characterised by high levels of alcohol consumption and distinctive drinking patterns (Popova et al., 2007). The Romanian conference article correctly notes that alcohol requires methodological caution because total per-capita indicators can incorporate registered and unregistered consumption and adjustments related to tourism. The policy significance, however, remains clear: alcohol is deeply embedded in everyday social practices, which can make problematic consumption less visible than illicit drug use.

The drug situation has also changed. Health Systems and Policy Monitor data show increases in lifetime illicit-drug use among Romanian adults aged 15–64 from 6.6% in 2013 to 10.7% in 2019, last-year use from 2.5% to 6%, and last-month use from 1.1% to 3.9%. A later analysis reported that lifetime illicit-drug use rose from 10.7% in 2019 to 12.8% in 2024 among adults aged 15–64, while the corresponding figure among

people aged 15–34 increased from 16.9% to 18.2% (Scîntee & Vlădescu, 2023, 2025). These figures should be interpreted in relation to survey design, measurement, and changes in patterns of use. Current European evidence confirms that the drug situation is dynamic and that treatment, prevention, and harm reduction remain central components of policy (EUDA, 2025).

A major problem is the asymmetry in social perception. Illicit drugs are readily associated with deviance and criminality, whereas alcohol is frequently normalised. This distinction can distort resource allocation and public discourse. A security strategy that treats legality as the main indicator of risk may overlook the cumulative burden generated by legal substances. The relevant policy distinction is therefore between different patterns of harm and different intervention needs, rather than between “legal” and “illegal” substances alone (WHO, 2024; EUDA, 2025).

5.2. Public policy: strategic coordination and implementation deficits

Romania’s National Drug Strategy 2022–2026 provides a policy architecture that includes prevention, treatment, risk reduction, interinstitutional cooperation, and civil-society participation (Government of Romania, 2022). The strategy can therefore be read as an explicit recognition that addiction requires a multidimensional response. The Romanian Health Systems and Policy Monitor analysis also presents the strategy as part of a broader alignment with European and international approaches (Scîntee & Vlădescu, 2023).

The central difficulty is implementation and evaluation. Hideg (2019) argued that Romania lacked a sufficiently functional and rigorous framework for evaluating anti-drug public policy. This is more than a technical weakness. Evaluation is a security capability because it allows public authorities to distinguish between interventions that merely produce activity and interventions that produce durable outcomes.

The conference article identifies the same problem in practical terms: Romania does not lack strategies alone; it lacks stable mechanisms for determining what works, for whom, under which conditions, and at what cost. Effective policy requires longitudinal data, predictable financing, institutional cooperation, local implementation capacity, and transparent outcome indicators. Without these elements, national strategy can remain formal while pressure continues to accumulate on schools, families, hospitals, social services, and communities.

A more mature policy architecture should therefore measure at least six outcomes: retention in treatment, relapse patterns, health status, family functioning, educational or occupational reintegration, and community participation. These indicators would make it possible to compare public and civil-society interventions without reducing recovery to abstinence alone. Peer-recovery research suggests that lived-experience support may improve treatment engagement and retention, although evidence for substance-use outcomes remains less conclusive (Eddie et al., 2019; Eddie et al., 2025). Recovery-housing research similarly indicates potential benefits for abstinence, income, and employment, while emphasising the limited number of high-quality comparative studies (Vilsaint et al., 2025).

5.3. Case I: Teen Challenge România

Teen Challenge România represents a residential, long-term model of recovery with an explicitly Christian orientation. The organisation’s international network was founded in 1958, while the Romanian programme developed its first residential centre

for men at Grădiştea in 2007 and subsequently expanded to women and other locations (GiveFirst, 2019). The longer research document describes a model in which beneficiaries normally spend approximately one year in a structured residential environment involving education, personal-development activities, psychological and spiritual counselling, and practical work.

The significance of this model lies in the fact that recovery is framed as reconstruction of the person. The beneficiary is not treated only as a patient but as a member of a community learning again how to structure daily life, assume responsibility, cooperate, and develop healthy relationships. This corresponds closely to the therapeutic-community principle identified by De Leon and Unterrainer (2020), according to which community is part of the method of treatment.

The organisational material reports successful outcomes among programme graduates, including the claim that more than 80 participants in the Romanian centre completed the programme without subsequently returning to substance use (GiveFirst, 2019). Such a figure should not be interpreted as an independently validated success rate because the source is an organisational-support publication and the denominator, follow-up method, and verification procedure are not fully specified. Its value for the present study lies primarily in showing how the organisation defines and communicates recovery. The model is built around continuity, relational support, responsibility, and a strong narrative of transformation. These mechanisms are compatible with the literature on recovery capital and peer support, but their effects in this specific programme remain unmeasured (Laudet & White, 2008; Eddie et al., 2025).

Two former beneficiaries are particularly important as examples of recovery capital. The longer document presents Georgiana Drăgan Moldoveanu and Andrei Ştefan as individuals who moved from severe addiction to roles involving the support of others. In the case of Moldoveanu, the documentary account describes a progression from adolescent drug use and severe social and health deterioration to long-term recovery and leadership within House of Joy. In the case of Ştefan, the material describes recovery from long-term heroin addiction followed by involvement in prevention activities and peer support. These cases are not clinical outcome studies, but they illustrate a mechanism of social reintegration: the former beneficiary becomes a resource for current beneficiaries.

Teen Challenge also extends its intervention from treatment toward prevention. The “Ecouri Sonore, Aripa Libere” project, developed by New Hope Orchestra in partnership with Teen Challenge Romania, used classical music, testimony, specialist discussion, and youth engagement to address alcohol and drug risks in five Romanian cities in 2025 (nONGUvernamental, 2025; Radio România Muzical, 2025). The project is analytically important because it changes the communicative environment of prevention. Instead of relying exclusively on warnings or punitive messages, it creates a cultural setting in which adolescents encounter information, testimony, and discussion.

5.4. Case II: “Izvorul Tămăduirii”

The “Izvorul Tămăduirii” Centre in Bacău represents a second community-based model, combining social and therapeutic services with a Christian institutional environment. The day centre was established in 2011 and provides prevention, evaluation, and counselling services for alcohol, drugs, tobacco, gambling, internet use, and other addictive behaviours (Burlacu, 2018). The organisation later developed a

residential centre intended as a more intensive stage of treatment (Arhiepiscopia Romanului și Bacăului, 2019).

The model described in the source document integrates psychological counselling, family involvement, occupational activities, and spiritual support. Its therapeutic programme draws on the Minnesota model. The Minnesota approach has a long history within addiction treatment and emphasises abstinence, education, group support, family involvement, and interaction between professionals and people in recovery (Anderson et al., 1999). Research on adolescents treated through a Minnesota/12-Step-oriented model found differences between treatment completers, non-completers, and those awaiting treatment, while also demonstrating the importance of treatment completion and follow-up (Winters et al., 2000). The Winters study concerns a U.S. treatment setting and does not evaluate the Romanian centre; it is therefore used here as contextual evidence about one Minnesota-oriented model rather than as evidence of the effectiveness of “Izvorul Tămăduirii.”

The Romanian centre adapts this model to a local religious and community context. The source document describes partnerships involving Alcoholics Anonymous, social services, the school inspectorate, and a hospital. This network is significant because it demonstrates that resilience is generated through institutional connection. The centre’s intervention reaches beyond the individual by involving family members and engaging in school-based information activities.

The centre’s residential component also illustrates the principle of continuity. Treatment is presented as a process that includes physical, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions and that aims toward new life skills, professional orientation, reinsertion, and social reintegration. This is consistent with the broader literature on recovery as a multidimensional process, but the Romanian centre has not been evaluated in the sources reviewed through a controlled longitudinal design. The article therefore treats its programme characteristics as documented mechanisms rather than demonstrated outcomes.

5.5. Case III: Romanian Blue Cross Association

The Romanian Blue Cross Association provides a third model with a longer historical trajectory. The international Blue Cross movement originated in 1877 through the initiative of Swiss pastor Lucien Rochat and developed as a Christian response to alcohol dependence and family suffering. The Romanian organisation has an earlier history but was reactivated after 1990 in an ecumenical environment. It operates the Nazareth community in Șura Mică for men and the Insula Speranței centre in Șelimbăr for women (International Blue Cross, 2024; Asociația Crucea Albastră România, 2025).

The therapeutic model is explicitly community-based. It includes group therapy, individual counselling, family counselling, occupational activities, and structured daily life. The longer research document describes the recovery environment as a “school of life,” in which beneficiaries learn to assume responsibility without shame. The annual “Open Doors Day” brings together former beneficiaries, families, and community members and includes religious, artistic, social, and group-therapy components. Such events can be interpreted as public rituals of reintegration because they make recovery visible and socially legitimate.

The most distinctive feature of the model is occupational activity. Gardening, animal care, cooking, maintenance, and other forms of practical work are integrated into daily routines. The purpose is described as restoring competence, responsibility,

initiative, and participation. This corresponds to the occupational-therapy literature, which conceptualises meaningful activity as a pathway toward health, wellbeing, and participation (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014). The case material nevertheless cannot establish that these activities independently reduce relapse; their analytical value lies in showing how a treatment environment can connect recovery to everyday participation.

The importance of this approach is particularly clear when addiction is understood as a disruption of everyday life. Severe dependence can reorganise time around the acquisition and use of a substance, weakening employment, family roles, and ordinary routines. Therapeutic work reconstructs time around meaningful tasks. The person receives an opportunity to complete activities, contribute to others, and experience competence. Such practices can therefore function as micro-level mechanisms of social inclusion.

The Romanian Blue Cross case also illustrates the importance of family and peer relations. The organisation's stated mission includes supporting autonomy, strengthening communication and crisis-management skills, consolidating family and social relationships, and preparing beneficiaries for post-treatment life. The post-care phase is particularly important because relapse risk does not disappear when residential treatment ends. Continued contact with support groups and psychosocial counselling can maintain the social resources necessary for recovery.

The source material reports substantial numbers of people served and significant reintegration. These figures should be treated as organisationally reported evidence unless independently evaluated. The defensible conclusion is that the model has institutional continuity, a stable community infrastructure, and explicit reintegration practices. Research on recovery housing and therapeutic communities supports the relevance of continuing social environments while emphasising heterogeneity and the need for stronger comparative evaluation (Malivert et al., 2012; Vilsaint et al., 2025).

5.6. Current developments and the problem of policy continuity

The Romanian policy environment has continued to evolve since the adoption of the 2022–2026 strategy. A 2025 analysis by the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies reported that lifetime illicit-drug use among Romanian adults aged 15–64 had risen from 10.7% in 2019 to 12.8% in 2024, while the corresponding figure among people aged 15–34 increased from 16.9% to 18.2% (Scîntee & Vlădescu, 2025). The same analysis notes that Romania has begun moving toward a more preventive and medical approach, including a new legal framework for mental-health and addiction-prevention centres. The policy problem is therefore not static: institutional reform is occurring, while its outcomes remain difficult to assess.

5.7. Comparative synthesis of the three models

The three cases can be compared across six dimensions: continuity of intervention; community as therapeutic mechanism; family and relational support; meaningful occupation and responsibility; prevention and public communication; and institutional cooperation and reintegration. Teen Challenge places particular emphasis on long-term residential community, spiritual transformation, personal responsibility, and testimony. "Izvorul Tămăduirii" combines the Minnesota model with psychological, medical, family, social, and spiritual interventions and has developed both day and residential services. The Romanian Blue Cross places strong emphasis on therapeutic community, group work,

family relations, occupational activity, and post-care. All three therefore address the problem through a combination of individual and relational mechanisms.

The first shared mechanism is structured time. Residential treatment creates an environment in which daily routines are intentionally reorganised. This matters because addiction can produce highly disorganised temporal patterns. Structured schedules can support treatment adherence, group participation, and practical responsibility. In therapeutic-community terms, ordinary daily behaviour becomes part of the learning environment (De Leon & Unterrainer, 2020).

The second mechanism is relational accountability. Participants interact with other people, discuss difficulties, and assume responsibilities. The group becomes a space in which behaviour receives social feedback. Such processes are compatible with therapeutic-community literature and with community-resilience research emphasising relationships and communication (De Leon & Unterrainer, 2020; Patel et al., 2017).

The third mechanism is the reconstruction of social identity. The dependent person enters treatment carrying labels associated with failure, danger, irresponsibility, or shame. The three organisations provide alternative identities: participant, resident, family member, believer, worker, mentor, or prevention advocate. This is significant in light of stigma theory because it creates opportunities to reverse status loss and social separation (Link & Phelan, 2001).

The fourth mechanism is the development of competence. Education, occupational activities, practical work, counselling, artistic activities, and vocational orientation create opportunities to perform tasks successfully. The Blue Cross emphasis on occupational activity is especially clear, but the same principle is present in Teen Challenge and at “Izvorul Tămăduirii.” Meaningful activity can therefore function as a bridge to ordinary social participation (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014). The analytical claim concerns the mechanism of participation; the study does not estimate its independent effect on relapse or abstinence.

The fifth mechanism is the extension of recovery beyond the treatment centre. Prevention campaigns, peer testimony, family counselling, alumni relationships, support groups, and post-care services connect treatment with the wider community. Peer-recovery research indicates that support delivered by people with lived experience can improve engagement and retention, although the evidence base remains heterogeneous (Eddie et al., 2019; Eddie et al., 2025). Recovery is therefore strengthened when pathways lead into family, work, education, and community participation, but the Romanian cases require longitudinal evaluation to establish the magnitude of these effects.

5.8. A proposed policy model for Romania

The findings support a five-level community-based inclusion model for Romanian addiction policy.

Level 1 is community prevention. Prevention should be local, continuous, age-sensitive, and culturally credible. School programmes should involve families, teachers, counsellors, and young people rather than relying solely on one-off lectures. Cultural projects such as “Ecouri Sonore, Aripa Libere” illustrate the potential of using art and testimony to create spaces for dialogue (nONGuvernamental, 2025; Radio România Muzical, 2025).

Level 2 is accessible assessment and early intervention. Screening, counselling, mental-health services, and referral should be available without requiring prior involvement with the criminal-justice system. The 2022–2026 strategy and subsequent

reforms provide a basis for this approach, but access needs measurable indicators (Government of Romania, 2022; Scîntee & Vlădescu, 2023, 2025).

Level 3 is integrated treatment. Medical, psychological, social, and voluntarily chosen spiritual resources can be combined. The Minnesota model demonstrates the value of professional care, recovering peers, family involvement, education, and structured treatment (Anderson et al., 1999).

Level 4 is community recovery and reintegration. Treatment should be followed by post-care, peer support, vocational orientation, family counselling, and meaningful occupation. Evidence from peer-support and recovery-housing research supports the importance of continuity and social resources while also indicating that effects vary by intervention and population (Eddie et al., 2025; Vilsaint et al., 2025).

Level 5 is evaluation and learning. Publicly supported programmes should report common indicators covering retention, relapse, health, family functioning, education, employment, housing, and social participation. Longitudinal evaluation is essential given the limitations identified by Hideg (2019).

5.9. Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, the case analysis is based primarily on documentary evidence rather than interviews, participant observation, or administrative treatment datasets. The findings therefore concern institutional models and documented mechanisms rather than independently measured causal effects. Second, much of the evidence about individual outcomes in the Romanian cases is reported by organisations themselves or by journalistic sources. Such material is useful for reconstructing institutional practices and perceptions, but it should not be treated as equivalent to controlled clinical evidence.

Third, the three cases are all strongly connected to Christian organisations. This provides a coherent comparative field, but it limits generalisability to secular or state-run services. The purpose is not to claim that Christian community models are universally superior. Rather, the cases make visible a form of community infrastructure that is already active in Romania and that deserves to be analysed within the broader policy system.

Fourth, the concept of societal security itself carries a risk of over-securitisation. If addiction is treated primarily as a threat to the state, vulnerable people can become objects of surveillance and control. The human-security perspective is therefore necessary as a normative constraint. The person affected by addiction must remain the referent of care and rights, while criminal enforcement is directed toward harmful markets and associated offences.

Finally, the study does not provide a cost-effectiveness analysis. Future research should compare the costs of different treatment pathways with outcomes in health, employment, family functioning, and relapse over several years.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1. Five principles of community-based inclusion

The comparative analysis identifies five recurring principles: continuity, community as method, multidimensional recovery, complementarity between state and civil society, and evaluation. These principles describe mechanisms and institutional requirements; they should not be interpreted as proof that the three organisations have superior outcomes.

First, continuity of intervention is essential. Detoxification or crisis intervention is not sufficient. Recovery requires time, a stable environment, supportive relationships, and long-term monitoring. The three models differ in theology, organisation, and therapeutic practice, but each places substantial emphasis on sustained engagement. This corresponds to the broader literature on therapeutic communities and continuing recovery environments, although systematic reviews caution that evidence remains heterogeneous (De Leon & Unterrainer, 2020; Malivert et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2006).

Second, community can function as method. In these models, community is not merely the setting in which therapy happens. It is part of the therapeutic mechanism. Groups provide reflection, support, accountability, belonging, and opportunities for interpersonal learning. Recovery-capital research and peer-support reviews provide a broader empirical basis for considering social relationships as recovery resources (Laudet & White, 2008; Eddie et al., 2019; Eddie et al., 2025). For people who have experienced isolation and stigma, the restoration of belonging may therefore be an important mechanism, although the present study does not measure it directly.

Third, recovery must address multiple dimensions of the person. Physical health, psychological wellbeing, family relationships, education, work, spirituality, and social participation interact. A narrow intervention that addresses only substance use may leave the conditions associated with relapse unchanged. The holistic emphasis found in the three Romanian cases is therefore analytically significant, even though the specific components require independent evaluation.

Fourth, the state and civil society should operate through complementarity. The state is responsible for equitable access, standards, regulation, evaluation, and predictable financing. Civil-society organisations can contribute trust, proximity, flexibility, volunteer networks, peer knowledge, and community legitimacy. The public-policy challenge is to create mechanisms through which these capacities reinforce each other.

Fifth, evaluation must become a central component of addiction policy. Hideg's (2019) critique of the Romanian evaluation framework remains highly relevant. Community-based models should be encouraged, but their outcomes should be measured systematically. Indicators should include treatment retention, abstinence and relapse trajectories, mental health, family functioning, education, employment, housing stability, and community participation. Peer-support and recovery-housing research demonstrates that meaningful outcome measurement is feasible but that the evidence base still contains substantial heterogeneity (Eddie et al., 2025; Vilsaint et al., 2025).

6.2. Inclusion as a security capability

The central contribution of this article is to interpret inclusion itself as a security capability. Traditional security policy often begins with threats and asks how institutions can neutralise them. A community-based security approach begins with vulnerabilities and asks how institutions can prevent those vulnerabilities from becoming chronic sources of instability.

This is particularly important when policy is transferred to border and peripheral regions. The article does not establish that such regions have higher addiction prevalence, nor does it claim that border proximity itself causes substance-use problems. The policy concern is territorial capacity: communities with fewer specialised services, longer travel distances, weaker referral networks, or fragmented institutional coordination may have greater difficulty translating national strategies into accessible recovery pathways. A border-state security framework should therefore include questions of service

accessibility, institutional continuity, and local resilience alongside conventional border-security concerns.

The connection between addiction and border security should nevertheless be formulated carefully. There is a risk of securitising vulnerable people by associating them automatically with trafficking or organised crime. Such an approach would undermine the inclusive dimension of security. The relevant distinction is between criminal markets and the people affected by substance-use disorders. Enforcement should target trafficking and organised crime, while health and social policy should provide accessible routes to treatment and reintegration for people experiencing addiction. This distinction is particularly important in a border-state context because the security vocabulary attached to borders can otherwise intensify stigma.

6.3. From coercion to an integrated security architecture

The analysis does not imply that law enforcement is unnecessary. Drug trafficking, exploitation, violence, and organised criminal activity require appropriate enforcement. The problem arises when coercion becomes the dominant logic through which addiction is interpreted. Stigma research indicates that negative social representations can discourage treatment seeking and damage treatment environments (Hammarlund et al., 2018; Zwick et al., 2020). An integrated security architecture therefore requires both enforcement against harmful markets and accessible health and social pathways for people experiencing substance-use disorders.

An integrated architecture contains at least four levels. The first is prevention, particularly among adolescents and young adults. The second is accessible treatment, including medically appropriate care, psychological support, and family intervention. The third is community-based recovery, where people can rebuild relationships, routines, skills, and belonging. The fourth is reintegration into education, employment, and civic life. Each level requires coordination and data.

The Romanian examples suggest that civil-society organisations can provide important capacities at the third and fourth levels. Yet they cannot carry national responsibility alone. Their geographic coverage is limited, their financing can be unstable, and their outcome data may be inconsistent. Public institutions therefore need to create a framework for accreditation, referral, financing, monitoring, and evaluation.

6.4. Faith-based organisations and pluralist public policy

The prominence of Christian organisations in the Romanian cases raises a broader issue concerning the role of religion in public services. Faith-based organisations can mobilise volunteers, donations, social networks, and narratives of meaning. The literature supports several plausible mechanisms, but the empirical evidence is mixed: Grim and Grim (2019) identify pathways involving belief, behaviour, and belonging, while Hai et al. (2019) found uncertain overall effects of spiritual/religious interventions and Andrade et al. (2023) concluded that the Christian/Judeo-Christian intervention literature remains small and heterogeneous. At the same time, the state must ensure that participation is voluntary, services meet professional standards, and access remains non-discriminatory.

The appropriate policy approach is therefore neither exclusion of faith-based actors nor uncritical delegation of public responsibilities to them. Instead, public authorities should evaluate services according to transparent standards while allowing different organisations to preserve their institutional identity. This is particularly relevant in Romania, where religious communities remain significant providers of social solidarity.

6.5. Meaningful work and social reintegration

The occupational component of the Blue Cross model also points toward a broader policy insight. Reintegration requires opportunities to act as a competent person. Employment, vocational training, volunteering, household responsibilities, sport, artistic activity, and community service can all contribute to this process. The AOTA framework is useful here because it understands participation as an interaction between the individual and the environment rather than merely as an individual skill (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014). The policy implication should therefore be framed as a testable hypothesis: treatment centres that establish stronger links with education, employment, and meaningful activity may create more favourable conditions for reintegration, but this requires outcome evaluation.

The implication for Romanian policy is that treatment centres should develop stronger partnerships with schools, vocational institutions, employers, and local authorities. A person who completes treatment but remains excluded from education or employment remains socially vulnerable. Conversely, meaningful participation can consolidate recovery and strengthen community ties.

6.6. Former beneficiaries as community resources

One of the most significant mechanisms identified across the case material is the transformation of former beneficiaries into active participants in prevention and support. The stories of Georgiana Drăgan Moldoveanu and Andrei Ștefan illustrate this possibility. Their value is not simply symbolic. Former beneficiaries may possess experiential knowledge that professionals and institutions do not have. Systematic reviews of peer-recovery support suggest potential benefits for treatment engagement, retention, relationships with providers, and social support, while the evidence for substance-use outcomes remains less conclusive (Eddie et al., 2019; Eddie et al., 2025). The Romanian testimonies are therefore illustrative examples of a mechanism that has independent support in the wider literature, rather than proof of programme effectiveness.

This suggests a policy model in which recovery capital is reinvested into communities. Former beneficiaries could be formally incorporated into prevention programmes, peer-support networks, advisory boards, and community education, subject to training, supervision, and appropriate safeguards. Such participation can also reduce stigma by demonstrating that addiction does not define a person's entire social identity. The proposal is consistent with recovery-capital theory, but its implementation in Romania should be evaluated through measures of retention, service engagement, peer-provider wellbeing, and community participation (White & Cloud, 2008; Laudet & White, 2008).

6.7. Implications for Further Research

Research should also investigate territorial inequalities. The availability of addiction services should be mapped against population size, socioeconomic indicators, transport accessibility, border proximity, and patterns of drug use. The resulting analysis should distinguish actual differences in prevalence from differences in service access and reporting. Finally, research should examine institutional trust. People who have experienced addiction may have previous negative interactions with police, health services, schools, or social institutions. Trust may therefore be a mediating variable between formal service availability and actual service utilisation. These questions require empirical testing rather than assumption.

7. CONCLUSION

Addictive behaviours represent a major challenge for Romania not only through their medical effects but through their social, educational, familial, and institutional consequences. In a geopolitical context marked by regional instability, national security must be understood in multidimensional terms. The analysis does not establish that addiction is itself an existential threat or that border proximity causes higher prevalence. It establishes a more limited proposition: where substance-use disorders generate cumulative pressures on health, families, education, employment, social participation, and institutions, they become relevant to societal resilience and therefore to the broader security architecture.

The analysis shows that addiction can be conceptualised as a societal-security problem when its cumulative effects weaken social cohesion, human capital, institutional trust, and community resilience. The three Romanian models examined here—Teen Challenge România, the “Izvorul Tămăduirii” Centre, and the Romanian Blue Cross Association—document different pathways through which community-based inclusion may support recovery. Their common mechanisms include continuity, community as method, family and peer support, meaningful activity, responsibility, prevention, and reintegration. The evidence supports the analytical relevance of these mechanisms; it does not establish that the three organisations have independently demonstrated superior clinical outcomes.

The article therefore proposes a public-policy model linking security to inclusion. Romania would benefit from predictable financing for recovery services, transparent partnerships with civil-society organisations, stronger service provision in underserved areas, prevention programmes in schools and communities, systematic outcome evaluation, and structured participation of former beneficiaries as peer resources. The purpose of such a policy is not to remove the state from addiction governance. It is to create a more capable security architecture in which public institutions and communities reinforce one another. In a border-state context, this architecture should also be assessed for territorial accessibility and continuity of care, especially where local service capacity is uneven.

Security is not only the capacity to protect society against external threats. It is also the capacity to prevent internal vulnerabilities from becoming permanent forms of exclusion. The contribution of this study is to identify mechanisms visible in three Romanian community-based models, connect them to established recovery and resilience literature, and specify the evaluations required before they can be treated as scalable security policy.

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