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Editors

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Ciprian Alupului • Mihaela Clincu • Daniela-Andreia Damian
- editors -

Building tomorrow's Europe - strategies for integration, growth, and resilience



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IN URBANISATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

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**Building tomorrow's Europe -
strategies for integration, growth, and
resilience**

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Editorial: Building tomorrow's Europe - strategies for integration, growth, and resilience

 **Ciprian Alupului,  Mihaela Clincu,  Daniela-Andreia Damian**

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As we introduce this volume of proceedings from the EURINT 2025 International Conference, „Building Tomorrow's Europe: Strategies for Integration, Growth, and Resilience,” we find ourselves reflecting on a *Europe at a crossroads*. „Europe at a crossroads” - it’s an often-used expression, but it still seems more current than ever. The continent continues to navigate a shifting political landscape, widening social and territorial inequalities, facing demographic challenges, new security pressures, the climate emergency, and the rapid transformations brought about by digitalisation (Fouquet & Johansson, 2008; van Nimwegen & van der Erf, 2010; Simonazzi & Villa, 2016). In this context, the conference sought not only to analyse Europe’s evolving challenges but also to imagine, together, a Europe that remains cohesive, competitive, and resilient.

The 14th EURINT conference was notable for the Centre for European Studies at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University in Iași, marking 25 years of teaching quality, scholarly work, along with international cooperation. That quarter-century point gave deeper meaning to the gathering, showing how insights develop within networks; it also highlighted campuses as places where discussion, inquiry, together with teamwork continue being relevant.

The chapters collected here show different views from the talks at the conference. These talks followed key questions meant to mix perspectives from various fields. One question asked how Europe might balance rising economies with growing public demands. Another explored what inclusion really looks like, given that gaps between areas and age groups are increasing. A third considered ways for Europe to regain strength in a global setting marked by constant change.

We thank everyone involved - contributors, reviewers, partners, and attendees - for their effort and commitment to making *EURINT 2025* happen. It is hoped these papers provide useful perspectives while encouraging more discussion about Europe’s path ahead, rooted in equity, strength, and self-assurance. One conclusion stands out from the event: shaping Europe’s tomorrow means reimagining outdated frameworks, adapting to emerging conditions, and collaborating beyond fields, organizations, and national lines.

We encourage you to examine this book as an academic work - as well as proof of a group striving for Europe’s future with care, drive, and shared effort.

A large part of the book focuses on building inner strength - both in organizations and society - across EU countries and those hoping to join. Instead of

just linking systems, it looks at how strong institutions combined with tech progress can improve governance; Spătaru and Popescu show that better digital tools lead to clearer, more efficient government functions in the EU27. Alongside this view, García highlights a different angle: using structured public discussions in legislation, especially now, when technology changes how laws are made. She insists such practices should become official procedures to keep decision-making inclusive and democratically stable.

Resilience to risks gets examined across different layers. In his work on crisis communication in Romania, Lucian Barbacaru reviews existing research and data patterns, pointing out weak understanding of how local institutions manage emergencies - this suggests room for homegrown response frameworks. Moving focus to legal structures, Iulia-Marilena Sbârcea looks into *Venice Commission* guidelines alongside Romania's party setup, discussing rigid mandates and dominance by majority groups, assessing whether national rules match broader European benchmarks on fair governance, party oversight, and safeguarding dissent.

Berit Ebert looks into the durability of EU principles - Article 2 TEU - and local resistance to gender policies in Poland. Instead of broad enforcement, she examines how regional pushback shapes responses from central EU bodies like the Commission or the Court of Justice when countering democratic decline.

Some studies look at growth and integration through economics, movement between countries, or cultural resources. Instead of focusing on broad trends, Oana-Maria Cozma examines personal outcomes in her work *Happier abroad? Insights into the wellbeing of Romanian emigrants*. Her analysis asks if Romanians living in other EU nations feel better off - especially in income and standing - after relocating, thus showing how foreign environments affect life quality. On another note, Andres Matti Lembit Tomingas explores inclusion difficulties using real-life examples from vocational training programs. In his paper *Integration of Rwandan crafts students in Germany: a case study*, he outlines barriers encountered by Rwandan trainees during internships while suggesting practical solutions to strengthen support systems.

Economic models play a key role in Jingxin Hu's study on what shapes trade between Romania and top partner countries - using panel data assessed through the GLS gravity approach. Results show national income levels along with physical distance strongly influence exchange volumes; at the same time, shared regulations together with capital movement further boost commercial ties across these nations.

Beyond standard economic indicators, Ludmila Lazarev's work examines culture as a key resource for the EU - showing how involvement in cultural activities supports democracy, strengthens communities, and builds shared identity, drawing evidence from Moldova. Meanwhile, Grygorii Moschak's chapter looks at ways to enhance eco-friendly river transport across European cities, emphasizing its role in achieving emission-free mobility networks.

Looking at world imbalances and past developments, Ana-Estera Oanta together with Gabriela-Carmen Pascariu examine *Europe's colonial history*

alongside urban change and economic progress. The lasting effects, along with repeating structural trends, in nations after independence are also discussed. They show how different forms of foreign rule deepened social divides within cities while weakening governance systems across poorer regions; grasping such impacts matters when designing fair development paths to narrow gaps between wealthy and less-wealthy areas.

In another study, Rodica Pisica evaluates tax changes using data from Moldova - specifically its shift toward a uniform income levy in 2018 - and finds this move led over time to greater earnings disparity, reducing taxes' ability to balance incomes.

Andreea Cosmina Foca examines current risks tied to Europe's cyber defenses alongside existing policy weaknesses. Estonia's approach to digital security is considered here. This analysis assesses how the EU handles cybersecurity after COVID-19, pointing out split responsibilities across levels of governance - both top-down and cross-sector - as key structural issues, using insights gained from Estonia's system.

The difficulties linked to expansion and regional strategies are explored by Ana Paula Tostes together with Yasmin Renne in Moldova plus Ukraine's route toward EU entry: is there a fresh approach to Europeanization or just deeper alignment? They study how fast-track joining procedures changed after Russia's 2022 attack, asking if this marks real shifts in standards or repeated structures under unusual political timing.

On another note, Irina-Maria Cosma looks at an enduring ally through her piece titled The Turkish view on European integration: beliefs and societal reasons behind staying apart. Her work investigates values, traditions, identity factors, along with power dynamics shaping Turkey's prolonged distance from full EU inclusion.

The studies in this collection shed light on key areas - integration, development, and adaptability - offering useful insights for researchers and decision-makers shaping future European policies. Essentially, the findings suggest a strong Europe needs clear institutions and digital readiness; at the same time, it requires solid democratic practices with active public involvement.

Strong European futures depend on institutional resilience combined with active participation (Zielonka, 2014) and enhanced adaptability in governance driven by communicative practices that shape legitimacy and trust (Schmidt, 2020). Fair progress matters - not just GDP-focused results. On the global stage, firm action near its borders is necessary, yet balanced interactions with intricate allies remain crucial. From a geopolitical viewpoint, external engagement and strategic decision-making among member states are central for effective action near Europe's borders (Moravcsik, 2018). Moving ahead won't be simple, still, these academic inputs deliver critical data and guidance to tackle obstacles effectively while building tomorrow's Europe.

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Crisis communication in Romania, concepts & models. A literature review and bibliometric analysis

 Lucian Barbacaru 

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Abstract: This paper aims to identify current crisis communication themes for Romanian organisations facing a crisis and if they could use a domestic, tailored, crisis communication management model. Hundreds of articles have been published worldwide, but few related to Romania. The literature review and bibliometric analysis are used to identify the interest in Romanian literature for crisis communication. Twelve articles were selected on Scopus database using PRISMA methodology, on criterions like publication's rating, cite score, maxim percentile, SNIP and SJR. They were used for a qualitative text analysis and coding using software like Atlas and Bibliometrix. The theoretical framework offers solutions for crisis scenarios, considering that reputation, emotional engagement and a dedicated workflow for social media crisis are success factors. There is a knowledge gap about how Romanian organisations are reacting in crisis scenarios. This is an opportunity to develop future studies and tailored crisis communication strategies, adapted for Romania.

Keywords: crisis communication, Romania, bibliometric analysis

Introduction

The public perception or reputation of an organisation directly influences the purchasing decision of current or prospective customers and other stakeholders to initiate, to develop or to cancel business relationships. It is difficult to quantify the financial value of a company's reputation, but in a crisis, its reputation becomes a success factor for its' resilience. The organisation that communicates first in a crisis usually sets the tone, pace and key messaging.

Companies like Volkswagen have effectively managed the diesel gate scandal (Hotten, 2015), while Danone lost market share in Romania (Stoica, 2008) following suspicions that several batches of fruit yoghurt had higher amounts of dioxin than limits (European Food Safety Authority, 2025), leading to an 8% market share drop of the Romanian yoghurt market between August - September 2007 (Stoica, 2008).

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In the wood processing industry, Holzindustrie Schweighofer Romania has been repeatedly accused of illegal logging by associations like Agent Green (Peter, 2015), World Wide Fund for Nature and the Environmental Investigation Agency (Environmental Investigation Agency, 2015), that determined the Forest Stewardship Council to withdraw the company's FSC certification (For the nature, 2016). Holzindustrie Schweighofer went through a rebranding process becoming HS Timber but finally, the company decided to sell its Romanian operations after suffering financial losses (Profit, 2023).

Although some organisations have been seriously affected by crises in Romania, there are few studies or articles published in peer-reviewed journals covering crisis communication topics. Probably the biggest private companies work with communication & public relations agencies and have developed crisis communication scenarios but is almost impossible to know if they are developed based on experience, competences or theoretical concepts.

The main research objective is to identify if a theoretical crisis communication model was developed for this country's private sector and if the topic has been already studied in the academic literature. It starts with a literature review on crisis communication theories, concepts and models to define the theoretical framework, continues with a content analysis of a list of 12 articles selected using PRISMA methodology and makes a qualitative analysis. In the methodology section are described the coding schemes and thematic categories; followed by the results and the conclusions.

1. Literature review

The process of communication is fascinating and has been described in various but similar terms; to communicate means to exchange information, ideas or send a message. The Oxford English Dictionary describes communication with 16 meanings in fields like telecommunications, liturgical, rhetoric, literature, military or freemasonry. One definition that cover most fields presents communication as „the transmission or exchange of information, knowledge, or ideas through speech, writing, mechanical means, or electronic means” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). The National Communication Association in the US has a dual perspective about communication. It is „the way people use messages to generate meaning within and across contexts, and it is the discipline that studies all forms, modes, media, and consequences of communication through humanistic, social scientific, and aesthetic research” (National Communication Association, 2024). Over the years, 126 definitions of the concept of communication have been published (Webb & Thompson-Hayes, 2002), they are similar and reflect the same concept, that communication is an exchange of words, ideas, symbols, messages, opinion or emotions and that involves at least two communication partners; the exchange happening in both ways. Looking the definitions one can easily notice that the

communication process involves also understanding the information transmitted/received.

One of the well-known communication processes is the Shannon-Weaver model (Shannon & Weaver, 1998). The process begins with the source, where the encoded message originates in the form of a „signal” that may be distorted by noise, passes through a communication channel and is decoded to reach the receiver. This model has become the main definition used in communication sciences. To analyse a communication process, it needs to be placed within a context: social or business interaction, political, economic, military and so on otherwise, the results will not be relevant. Crisis communication intervenes when something has happened, an event that changed the normal, daily activities of the organisation.

Crises are often described as complex situations that disrupt stability and create important uncertainty levels (Lerbinger, 1997). Crises emerge unexpectedly and require immediate reaction due to their endangering attributes (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2010). During crisis, the organisation's reputation is at risk (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). The Romanian Language Dictionary defines crisis as a phase in the life of a society or organisation, marked by major difficulties (economic, political, social, etc.); a period of tension and challenges. There are several ways to examine a crisis based on the type of it or sectors affected. It can impact business organisations, communities, individuals or different groups. Authors have published various concepts and models for crisis communications.

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) provides a framework for understanding how crisis communication can be used to protect the reputation (Institute for PR, 2007). It states that primarily, the threat towards the organisation increases if stakeholders are attributing the crisis responsibility to the organisation. In the second stage the crisis history and company's reputation are factors that could increase or reduce the impact. The crisis response strategy must be tailored specifically, being aware that the organisational reputation influences the perceived level of crisis responsibility. The type of emotions, positive/negative, recorded by the stakeholders will determine their attitude and behaviour towards the organisation.

A new vision of crisis communication is proposed via the Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) model, that analyses the role of emotions in crisis responses (Jin et al., 2012); counting on a public-base, emotion-driven perspective and using various crises that are mapped on two continua, „the organisation's engagement in the crisis and primary public's coping strategy”. Testing revealed that organisations and stakeholders have similar reactions, rational and emotional ones. The high level of engagement of an organisation with its stakeholders during a crisis could be a solution to connect with a public that may experience a variety of emotions, including anger or anxiety. The ICM matrix proposes to consider the primary publics' emotional reaction as a key element to be used for crisis communication.

Information is available almost instantaneously and can reach millions of people at any time. Technology has influenced the communication and has offered

new platforms and channels, available on smart, mobile devices. This has led to a new concept for managing crisis communication, in an online environment. The model of Socially Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) (Liu et al., 2012), is the first theoretical framework describing the relationships between organisations, online and offline audiences, social media, traditional media, and word-of-mouth communication before, during, and after a crisis (Austin et al., 2012).

Nowadays, the main focus is social media communication most probably also because the COVID-19 pandemic crisis has forced organisation to invest their communications efforts in online news outlets and social media channels. Interesting is that a few years before this pandemic Möller et al. (2018) introduced the Social Media Disaster Resilience (SMDR) model, a theoretical framework that explores how social media can be leveraged to enhance community resilience during and after disasters. It integrates concepts from disaster management and resilience literature, emphasizing the role of social media in improving communication, information dissemination, and stakeholder engagement during crises. SMDR model is based on the revised 3Rs resilience framework (Robustness, Rapidity, Redundancy) and highlights the critical role of social media for information dissemination, stakeholder engagement and resource allocation. Looking backwards at the pandemic, it seems that SMDR model has been used by state authorities and private organisation to communicate during the lockdowns. The same pattern for crisis communication can be identified in the way Romanian authorities and some companies have communicated in that period. A study inspired by social media communication during COVID-19 pandemic investigates its role in crisis communication and its impact on public resilience (Bukar et al., 2021). The study builds on several theoretical frameworks, including the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication model, that emphasizes the importance of crisis response strategies, stakeholder emotions, and social interaction in crisis management. The authors reference the Social Media Disaster Resilience model, which highlights social media's role in improving community resilience through robustness, rapidity, and redundancy in information dissemination.

All theories presented could be implemented by organisations operating in Romanian, in a crisis context. Are they preparing in advance using theoretical models or they just react to a situation? At this point, the academic literature does not provide answers for this question.

2. Content analysis

Research was necessary to identify current trends and themes for crisis communication in Romania. Scopus database was used for basic search and PRISMA methodology (Haddaway et al., 2022) for narrowing and obtain relevant results. Articles published after 2019 were filtered initially, considering that COVID-19 pandemic has redefined crisis communication management worldwide. The

initial aim was to select only articles published for Romania organisational crisis communication topics but had to be expanded due to lack of valid results. Because most articles published covered this pandemic and were not relevant, the search interval was extended, and several keywords were used. Several filters were applied to identify articles in English and/or Romanian language, published in European states; the new results offered papers published between 2005-2024. The final list included 12 articles that met all criterions; being selected after reading the abstracts and considering publication's rating, cite score, covering a knowledge gap or were accessible without additional costs. The selection procedure is described in the Methodology chapter.

Crisis communication strategies recommend avoiding publishing negative information about itself, to protect brand reputation. A different perspective is presented in the „stealing thunder” strategy: the company should disclosure proactively negative information about itself, before being revealed by other sources (Arpan et al., 2005). This approach has been tested in an experiment and results showed that when the organisation has disclosed the information first, it reduced perceptions of crisis severity and have led to higher credibility ratings and positive perceptions. The theory has been tested with specific stakeholders, who knew the company and its products and their previous experience with the organisation was used as a key predictor. This strategy, applied for well-known stakeholders, could help organisations manage crises effectively by controlling the narrative and reducing negative media coverage.

Stakeholders' reaction to communication strategies has been tested in an experiment with 162 students; using SMCC model components (Liu et al., 2011). The aim was to explore how the interplay of information forms (traditional media, social media, word-of-mouth) and source (third party, organisation) affects publics' acceptance of crisis response strategies and crisis emotions. Findings indicated an organisation should coordinate crisis information form and source to achieve desired communication outcomes.

A new concept in crisis management focuses on the reputational threat. Paracrisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2012) is defined as a publicly visible crisis threat characterised by charges of irresponsible or unethical organisational behaviour. Paracrisis is visible during prevention stage, when stakeholders petition the organisation by presenting requests or expectations to change its attitude or behaviour. Paracrisis is considered unique due to their public nature caused by the petitioning. Especially on social media, other stakeholders may observe the petition, third parties who can monitor the situation, focus on results or ignore it. The authors propose three primary communication response strategies for managing paracrisis: refute (management reacts and fights the challenge/petition defending the organisation), reform (make necessary organisational changes to reflect the demands), and refuse (management ignores the petition and does not respond public to it, but it is focusing on messages to boost its reputation). The choice of strategy

should be guided by an evaluation of the organisation's core values, strategic objectives, and the trajectory of stakeholder opinions.

It is difficult to analyse large volumes of digital information available online during crises. A study explores the integration of automated content analysis into crisis communication research. The paper provides an overview of automated tools that researchers can use to analyse crisis communication and large-scale datasets (van der Meer, 2016). There are three main tools for classifying texts and identifying frames: the dictionary method, supervised and unsupervised method. Automated content analysis represents a valuable tool for crisis communication research but one must be aware that no single method is universally superior; selecting one depends on research objectives and data availability. The selection should be made after the researcher considers the input data to be used.

A study applies the SCCT investigating how large Australian organisations use social media for crisis communication (Roshan et al., 2016). Analysing 15,650 Facebook and Twitter messages across 17 organisations from banking, retail, telecommunications, and transport, the research highlights a tendency among organisations to not respond to stakeholder messages, choosing response strategies that could elevate reputational risks. Results showed that most organisations failed to fully engage with stakeholders on social media, often providing only one-way communication rather than responding to concerns. Contrary to SCCT recommendations, organisations frequently used apologies and compensation strategies, even where they had limited responsibility. The organisations overlook the social media potential for crisis communication, do not provide crisis or status updates, or do not interact with stakeholders. When dealing with stakeholders on social media, seven types of messages have been gathered: questions, information-sharing, suggestions, humorous messages, objections, appreciations, comparisons with others or competitors. Many organisations used repetitive, automated responses rather than personalized engagement, leading to stakeholder dissatisfaction. Companies are using social media just to publish status updates, instead of responding to stakeholder messaging. The paper concludes that organisations are not aware of social media's potential for crisis communication.

Trust is an asset the organisation may lose during or after a crisis and rebuilding or regaining trust could be a long and difficult journey. A study tested how different organisational responses - apology, excuse, and refusal - influence stakeholders' perceptions of trust, investigating how organisations can repair trust through communication after an integrity-based trust violation (Brühl et al., 2018). The experiment developed on the attribution theory shows how responsibility and credibility may be used for rebuilding trust. The study used a randomized experimental design with three treatment groups (apology, excuse, refusal): participants read a corporate integrity scandal scenario and had to analyse the corporate statement corresponding to one of the three trust repair strategies. They rated their trust in the organisation considering judgments of responsibility and

credibility. The conclusion: apologies are the most effective strategy for long-term trust repair and credibility plays an essential role. Organisations should integrate transparency, corrective actions, and stakeholder engagement into their apology strategies to maximize credibility and trust recovery.

Crisis communication within a community was studied in students' campus, investigating how the community responds to crises (Xu, 2018). The research used a mixed-method approach, combining insights from chaos theory (Seeger, 2002), uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) and sensemaking theory (Heverin & Zach, 2012), to examine the role of a campus community in dealing with various campus crises. It identifies a crisis-induced community-building model and provides instruments to measure crisis and community functionalities. This encourages members to exchange information, share experiences, developing a shared understanding of the crisis, which leads to a bonding community.

Understanding and managing crises in online environments could be possible using social media listening (SML) tools and methods. Research involving two Romanian private healthcare organisations during COVID-19 pandemic, explores the relationship between stakeholder expectations, brand promise and crisis communication strategies, analysing social media conversations and sentiments (Buzoianu & Bîră, 2021). The findings highlight the usefulness of social media listening tools in identifying crisis timelines, understanding communication networks, and predicting potential brand controversies. It enhances SML potential to identify triggers for brand controversy and anticipate stakeholder engagement in online conversations, ultimately contributing to more effective crisis communication and management strategies. The paper concludes there is a literature gap regarding predictive models in online crisis communication.

Reputational risk of Romania's financial institutions and link between reputational risk management and public disclosure of a company's social and environmental impact were analysed in a paper that examined how they conceptualize and manage this type of risk. The survey has included five Romanian banks that together owned over 60% of the total assets (Tăchiciu et al., 2020). The survey conducted on Romanian financial institutions has revealed that 71% of them perceive reputational risk as being an independent one and 64% include this type of risk into their inventory. The findings suggest that Romanian financial institutions had difficulties understanding reputational risk, and that their corporate policies regarding environmental impact were not aligned with the business models.

Social media crisis management is an emerging research theme. The conceptual model of Social Media Crisis Communication was used to investigate the role of social media in crisis communication and its impact on building public resilience (Bukar et al., 2021). The study aims to develop a preliminary model that integrates crisis communication, stakeholder responses, and resilience-building strategies. One key topic is understanding how social media facilitates crisis communication and how the social interaction may lead to resilience. The new

concept proposes a model where crisis response and social media are mediating the relationship between crisis events and public resilience; confirming that crisis response and social media interaction play a crucial role in enhancing public resilience during crises. By integrating crisis response and social media interaction, organisations can build stronger, more resilient communities.

Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model could be an important asset for managing social media crises, to build relationships and trust between organisations and the public (Hamid et al., 2023). The search for crisis-related information through social media on mobile platforms is high during the crisis due to the speed, convenience, ease of access, compared to traditional media. Social media plays an important role when a crisis occurs due to its interactive nature and organisations need to be prepared with strategies or action plans. By leveraging social media influencers, engagement strategies, and rapid response mechanisms, organisations can enhance their crisis communication efforts and mitigate reputational damage.

Another study focused on corporate reputation and crisis communication during COVID-19 pandemic, analyses how interactive marketing may shape stakeholder perceptions (Nuortimo et al., 2024). The authors combine a literature review with opinion mining and classification analysis of media communication from companies listed on the NASDAQ Helsinki stock exchange. The research identifies critical components of crisis communication - monitoring, responding, and response management - and synthesizes linkages between them, crisis communication theories, and corporate reputation. The study recorded minimal reputation damage for proactive companies, who have implemented rapid crisis response strategies, such as flexible operations and digital transformation. Social media played a crucial role in shaping public perception, with companies leveraging it for transparency and engagement. Corporate reputation, crisis communication and interactive marketing are interconnected, while interactive marketing plays a vital role by enabling transparent and timely communication, fostering stakeholder engagement, and helping to restore trust.

Social media crisis could lead to financial losses. Six out of ten companies active in Romania registered financial losses caused by crises amplified on Facebook: loosing up to 30% of market value (Business Forum, 2024). A crisis could have a different source from social media, but is quickly amplified on this type of channels, information spreads in real-time, having the power to prolong the crisis up to 90 days or more.

New research examines the evaluation of crisis statement essentials by Gen Z stakeholders and crisis communication practitioners (Karishnak et al., 2024), analysing which statements resonate with Gen Z stakeholders and how these preferences align with the views of communication professionals. The research identified three key functions: informing stakeholders, taking a stance, and assuring stakeholders and propose 11 elements that practitioners should consider for crisis statements. They are statement of the crisis, expert quote, timeline, parties involved,

crisis history, further Information, attribution, apology, leadership, mission statement and organisational values, action steps. While transparency, empathy and corrective actions remain essential for crisis statements, practitioners must tailor their messaging to resonate with Gen Z's digital fluency and values. Results show that current practices are generally meeting Gen Z expectations.

Table 1. Crisis communication models identified in literature review

Crisis communication models	Concept	Author
Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)	<i>The threat towards the organisation increases if the stakeholders are attributing the crisis responsibility to the organisation</i>	Coombs W., 2007
Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) model	<i>Analyses the role of emotions in crisis responses</i>	Jin et al., 2012
Socially Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC)	<i>The first theoretical framework to describe the relationships between organisations, online and offline audiences, social media, traditional media, and word-of-mouth communication before, during, and after a crisis</i>	Liu et al., 2011
The Social Media Disaster Resilience (SMDR)	<i>Theoretical framework that explores how social media can be leveraged to enhance community resilience during and after disasters</i>	Möller et al., 2018
Social Media Crisis Communication	<i>Investigates the role of social media in crisis communication and its impact on public resilience and demonstrates that crisis, crisis response, and social media interaction significantly impact resilience.</i>	Bukar et al., 2021

Source: author's representation

Social media plays an important role during crises due to its interactive nature compared to traditional media and organisations should be prepared. U.S. companies are not prepared for crisis communications, according to Capterra 2023 Crisis Communications Survey. Only 49% of companies surveyed have a formal crisis communications plan while 28% have an informal, undocumented crisis communications plan, and nearly a quarter (23%) have no plan at all - or are not sure they have one. Findings show that 98% of business leaders who used their crisis communications plan say it was effective and 77% say it was very effective (Capers, 2023).

Any user of a smartphone and a social media account can broadcast live during a crisis on social media channels, acting like a reporter on site. Social media and instant messaging applications are the most downloaded mobile apps worldwide in 2024, TikTok ranks first (825.48 million downloads) followed by Facebook (817.49 million downloads) and Instagram (597.87 million downloads) (Statista, 2024 a; b). Globally, 6 out of 10 people are using social media channels (62.2% worldwide average). There are 5.17 billion people active on social media worldwide and on average, each user has accounts on 6.7 social media platforms (Backlinko, 2025).

An article from 2021 talks about the importance of „listening” social media channels for crisis communication management and proposes new methods and practices for crisis observation, analysing the situation when Romanian healthcare companies (Sanador & Medlife) have faced crises (Buzoianu & Bîră, 2021). Specific online monitoring tools were used to collect and analyse data from online media, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Results show social media listening tools are useful in exploring attitudes, emotions and conversations as they relate to stakeholders’ brand expectations, especially when these expectations are close to brand promises.

Online crisis management has become a key capability for managing major reputational issues and organisations need to identify and prepare for communication during a crisis. Few Romanian authors have studied crisis communication in Romania organisations, except COVID-19 related topics. According to a recent study, there are seven industries in Romania exposed to reputational crises: energy, oil and gas, finance and banking, technology and communications, insurance, labour market services and real estate (Rogalski Damaschin, 2025). Other economic sectors could also be affected by the crisis due to interconnectivity with the industries at risk. If the organisation is unable to manage and control crisis communication, could face major financial and material losses, including its brand reputation.

3. Methodology

The focus is on finding research articles on crisis communication topic in general and papers valid for Romania’s organisations. The literature review section mentioned basic processes of communication and three distinctive models to be used for crisis communication. An organisation could apply the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Integrated Crisis Mapping model or the Socially Mediated Crisis Communication. These models could be used together or in pairs, depending on the context, the experience of communication and PR professionals, and in correlation with management’ decisions.

A qualitative analysis is necessary to identify most cited and relevant academic articles on communication topics and to analyse text data. The content

analysis was chosen on the presumption that in communication, wording is an asset, and a simple analysis of the word-frequency would reveal a communication trend and a link between theoretical concepts and some of the greatest concerns in this field. Other types of qualitative research methods are using ethnography, grounded theory, narrative or phenomenological research. The aim of a content analysis is „to offer knowledge and understanding of the studied phenomenon” (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314). Qualitative analysis is used to examine the language and wording of scientific articles written on communication and crisis communication topics to categorize similar text data and to identify related content, additional connections or analytics approaches.

The content analysis presented below is focused on 12 scientific articles that have been identified using Scopus data base after applying several filters and PRISMA methodology.

Figure 1. Scopus initial results after database interrogation for „crisis communication”

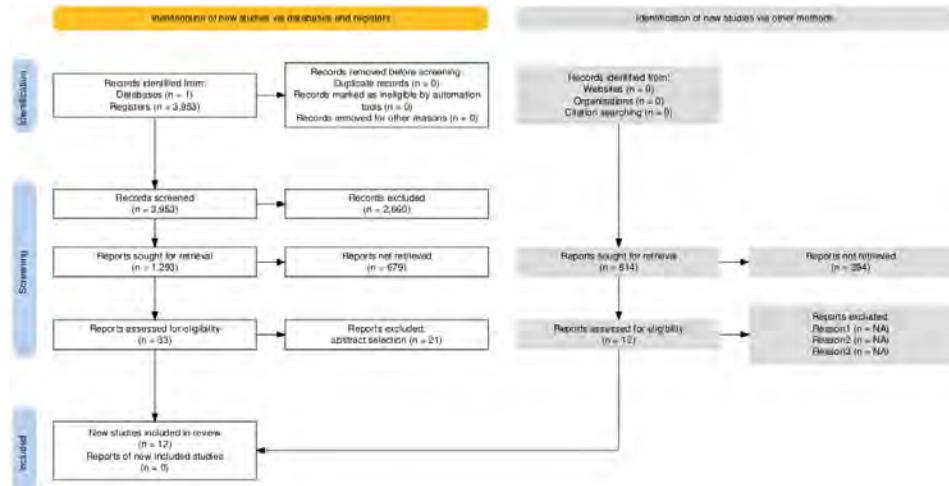


Source: author's representation based on data extracted from Scopus

The research was made on Scopus database. Initially, the keywords used were „crisis communication”, which generated a result of 3,953 documents published between 1968 and 2025. A classification of documents by subject area shows that 33.9% are for Social Sciences and 20.3% for Business, Management and Accounting areas. PRISMA methodology has been used to narrow the research results and to obtain relevant articles and studies for crisis communication topics. The new keywords used were *crisis communication*, *crisis management*, *public*

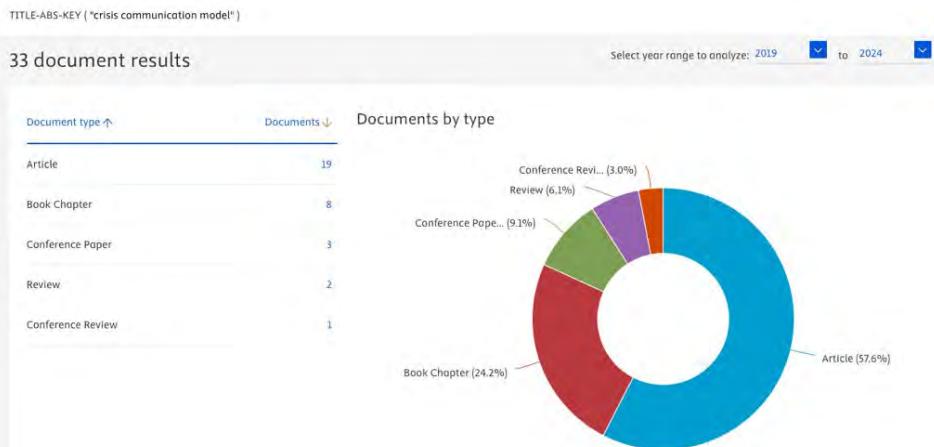
relations, social media, social media crisis, perception, crisis communication model, mass media, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Romania.

Figure 2. PRISMA diagram



Source: author's representation based on PRISMA workflow diagram

Figure 3. Types of documents selected for the short list to be analysed



Source: author's representation extracted from Scopus

Table 2. Publication's rating in alphabetical order

Source title	CiteScore	Highest percentile	% Cited	SNIP	SJR	Publisher
Accounting and Business Research	4,3	61.0%	80	1,212	0,852	Taylor & Francis
AIP Conference Proceedings	0,5	10.0%	23	0,204	0,153	American Institute of Physics
Amfiteatru Economic	4	79.0%	74	0,551	0,399	Bucharest University of Economic Studies Publishing House
European Management Journal	14	92.0%	93	2,458	1,913	Elsevier
International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction	8,5	95.0%	81	1,57	1,194	Elsevier
Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management	4,1	58.0%	60	1,187	0,658	John Wiley & Sons
Marketing Intelligence and Planning	8,7	78.0%	79	1,41	1,245	Emerald Publishing
Public Relations Review	7,7	93.0%	84	1,701	1,352	Elsevier
Social Media and Society	9,2	99.0%	75	2,622	2,169	SAGE
Sustainability (Switzerland)	7,7	90.0%	84	1,113	0,688	Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute (MDPI)

Source: author's representation based on data extracted from Scopus

Additional filters were applied to find scientific articles, conference papers, books or chapters, published between 2019 – 2025, in Romanian/English language, published in European states with and marked with „Open Access”. These filters have reduced results from 3,953 to 1,293 documents and narrowed down to 614 results, then to 220 documents obtaining a final list of 54 documents.

A new filter was applied, for materials published between 2019 - 2024 for the keywords „crisis communication model”, reaching 33 results. The final list of 12 articles has been selected by reading abstracts and on criteria like publication’s rating, cite score, maxim percentile, SNIP and SJR using Scopus.

CiteScore metrics was launched by Elsevier aiming to „provide comprehensive, transparent, current insights into journal impact” (Zijlstra & McCullough, 2016) and are used to „measure the citation impact for journals, book series, conference proceedings and trade journals”. Elsevier defines Source Normalized Impact per Paper (SNIP) as a metric that measures „contextual citation impact and enables direct comparison of journals in different subject fields, since the value of a single citation is greater for journals in fields where citations are less likely, and vice versa” (Elsevier, n.d.).

The other metric, SCImago Journal Rank (SJR) is designed with similar concept to Google PageRank algorithm. „SJR weights each incoming citation to a journal by the SJR of the citing journal, with a citation from a high-SJR source counting for more than a citation from a low-SJR source” (Elsevier, n.d.).

The aim was to select the most relevant materials and newest articles available that provide updates on crisis communication models and theories, including possible studies specific for Romania.

The 12 articles have been centralised in a table with references about the publication year, title, author, name of the journal and its editor. They were used to create a theoretical frame in a qualitative text analysis and to identify the current themes and topics for crisis communication.

4. Results

The literature review is essential to identify the key wording and concepts used in scientific articles to describe various approaches, theories or models related to crisis communication, social media and company’s reputation. Several qualitative data analysis software like Atlas.ti or Bibliometrix were used to make the text analysis for the 12 article and to identify the relevant topics in communication and crisis management. The final list included 14 documents published in the last 19 years (2005 – 2024), in 10 different sources like journals or conference papers. The annual growth rate shows the average annual interest for the topic and means that yearly, the number of articles has grown with 5.95% and that on average, a document has been cited 62.71 times.

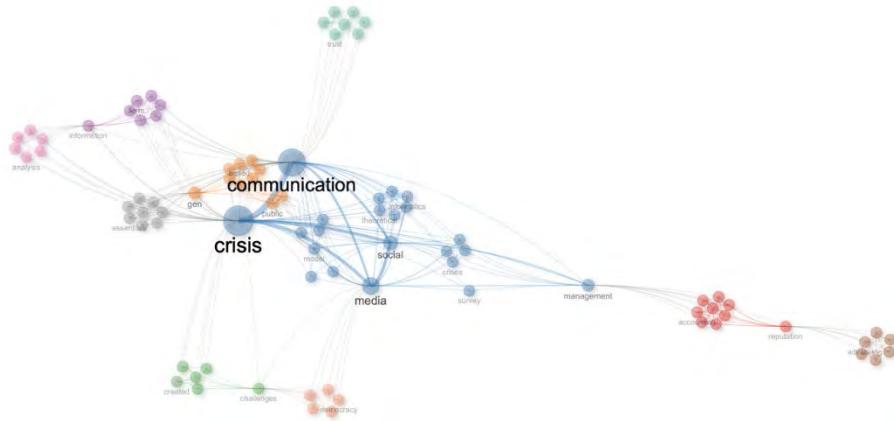
Figure 4. Bibliometric summary for the 12 articles



Source: author's representation

A Thematic map was used to highlight the connections of authors' keywords, article titles and abstracts. Clusters for specific key words have been analysed to show the relationship between topics.

Figure 5. Thematic network regarding articles' titles



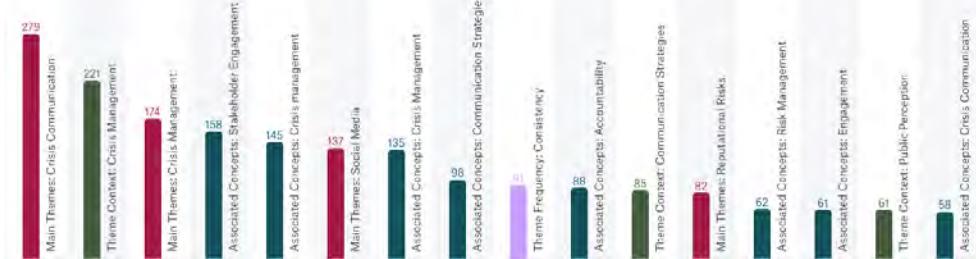
Source: author's representation

The thematic network has been generated considering the titles of the articles analysed. Communication is the main node hub of this network, being connected with other two dominant nodes like crisis and media, all coloured in blue. These are core concepts used to link a variety of topics like social and theoretical aspects, different analysis and information or reputation management. The thickness of the connection lines represents a solid or a weak relationship between concepts. The map shows an overview on the complexity of crisis communication elements used in this

field and how public trust; media relations and media strategies have their own role in managing a crisis.

AI automated coding was used in Atlas.ti software to ensure impartiality from eventual biases of the researcher. The aim was to analyse the frequency of themes or concepts presented in the articles. The red columns of the graph show that crisis communication, crisis management, social media, reputational risks and risk management are the main themes; being central research areas. The green columns show the main themes included in literature, particularly in crisis management in communication contexts. Stakeholder engagement, crisis management, communication strategies and accountability are the associated concepts underlined by the blue columns.

Figure 6. Key topics of the articles, analysed by coding them in Atlas software



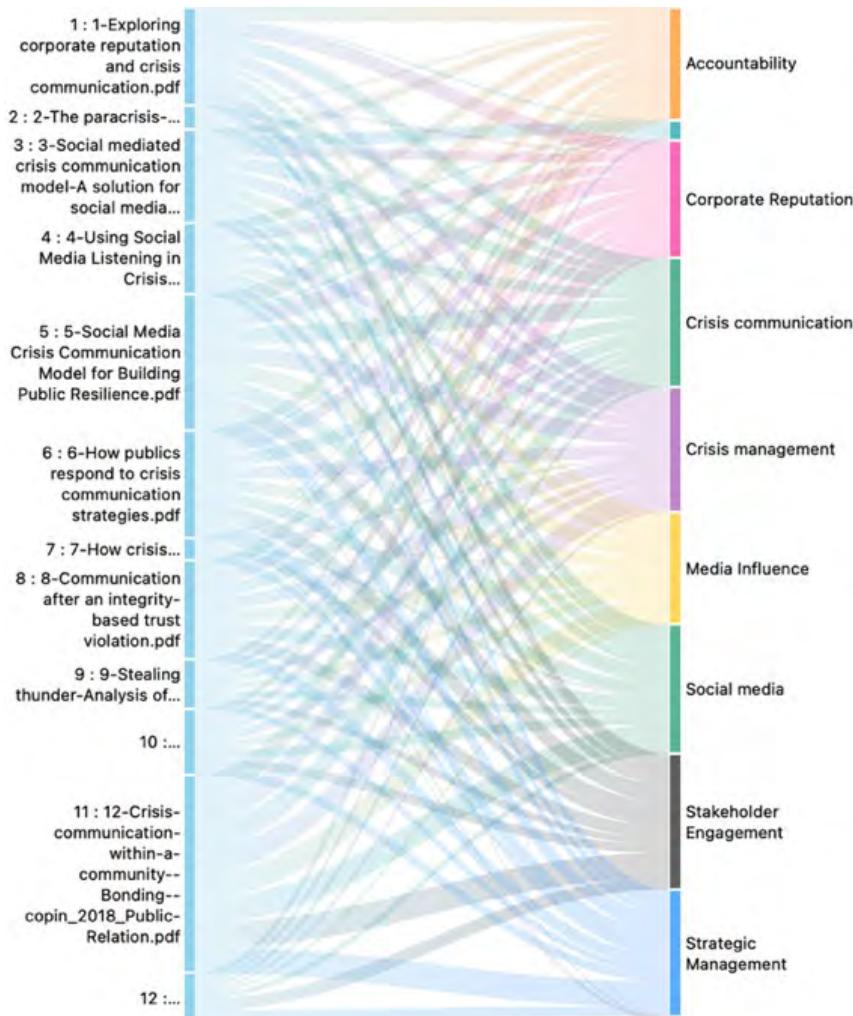
Source: author's representation

Figure 7. Word cloud



Source: author's representation

Figure 8. The Sankey diagram shows the flow of information between articles and topics covered



Source: author's representation

Another option to analyse the importance of frequency of wording referring to a specific theme or topic is making a word cloud graph. Using this visual representation of text data, a result is generated focusing on the size of terms. The bigger the words are, the higher is their relevance in the texts.

Crisis communication dominates the word cloud, being associated with social media themes and crisis management. These form the central thematic

cluster, while words in similar colours are part of similar clusters; allowing to identify most frequent topics used in literature and the correlations between them.

A Sankey diagram generated in Atlas.ti was selected to underline a connection between articles and specific topics of interest. The connection lines of the 2 columns show the contribution of an article towards a theme, while the width of the flow underlines a powerful connection with that topic. Some of the documents are overlapping, meaning that they are contributing to multiple categories. For example, an article that links both crisis communication and social media most probably is emphasizing the role of social media in crisis communication management.

5. Discussion

Crisis communication is a topic covered extensively in international literature but is a theme almost invisible for papers studying organisations operating in Romania. It could be a lack of interest or a superficiality of Romanian organisations in preparing for crises, in general. Studied about the motives behind this literature gap are also missing, being hard to tell if having a crisis communication and PR strategy is not part of business or domestic companies are not interested in preparing for crisis management.

In this context, companies operating in Romania could enter a crisis scenario at any time, seven industries presenting higher risks. Additionally, the number of working accidents and their regional distribution has increased with almost 50% between 2014 - 2024 according to data published by Romanian Work Inspection Agency (Duca, 2025) while the National Employment Agency estimated that in the first five months of 2025, in Romania 3,072 employees will be fired in collective layoffs (Crăciun, 2025) and almost 2,800 firms have declared insolvency (Roșca, 2025). A study about current Romanian business environment analysed the answers of 1,450 respondents from different sectors and estimates that 160,000 companies, who employ a total of over 650,000 persons, are dealing with major problems (Sierra Quadrant, 2025) and some of their vulnerabilities include weak financial reserves and the lack of liquidities for medium and long term.

Conclusions

The theoretical framework offers solutions for the common crisis scenarios, considering that reputation, emotional engagement and a dedicated workflow for social media crisis are success factors. Most articles do not cover topics valid for the Romanian organisations and only one of them explores a relevant crisis situation.

The literature review conducted established an international theoretical framework that organisations operating in Romania could use for crisis management. There are three main concepts that can be used and adapted for the Romanian market:

- The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) could be used for anticipating stakeholders behaviour during crisis and could predict the way people will react to the crisis response strategies. The response must be tailored specifically, being aware that organisational reputation has the power to influence the perceived level of crisis responsibility of the company. The type of emotions, positive/negative, recorded by the stakeholders will determine their attitude and behaviour towards the organisation. This theory could be used by organisations with an excellent reputation and without a crisis history as a first reaction to a crisis; and with preparations in advance. Crisis simulations and scenarios are highly recommended to be practiced a priori.
- An Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) model can be used to analyse the role of emotions in crisis responses. Testing revealed that organisations and stakeholders have similar reactions, rational and emotional ones. The ICM model would be useful in a crisis with a high emotional impact on stakeholders, with human or animal victims, or specific communities that are affected. The sincere empathy could be a good start in this case.
- The Socially Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) model is the first theoretical framework used to describe the relationships between organisations, online and offline audiences, social media, traditional media, and word-of-mouth communication before, during, and after a crisis. Researchers have explored how the form, factors, type of crisis, and history of crisis information might influence audiences' crisis responses (e.g., influential social media content creators, followers and inactive users); as well as how types of organisations (e.g., corporations and governments) can effectively respond to audiences by adopting different crisis communication strategies. Online crisis management need special attention because the organisation is highly exposed, and the number of reactions or stakeholders involved in discussions is higher than the resources organisations usual have. It is recommend using online content monitoring tools and to collaborate with a specialised and experienced agency in this case.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework covers and offers solutions for the most common crisis scenario, considering in essence that reputation is a key factor. Together, emotional engagement and a dedicated workflow for social media crisis, are success factors in crisis management. The crisis communication literature offers excellent resources for practitioners, who might not be aware of the recent theories or models; missing a good chance to transform a crisis into an opportunity.

Social media plays an important role when a crisis occurs due to its interactive nature compared to traditional media, and organisations need to be prepared for crises with strategies or action plans to deal with crises. Romanian organisations will benefit of the future papers covering crisis communication topics for his market and will probably notice the need of having a PR and crisis communication strategy that will guide them in business turbulences.

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The Turkish perspective on the European integration: ideological and social motivations of non-integration

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Abstract: The Republic of Türkiye is the state that has the longest EU candidature, due to several events and policies that led to the prolongation of the process. The country's internal and implicitly external profile have faced significant changes from the 1923 moment when the Republic of Türkiye was founded, having a great impact on the Turkish society. We shall focus our attention on the ideological dimension, i.e. extendedly the set of ideas – social, cultural and political – that motivate Turks' non-integration. These aspects are related to: doctrines, identity, religion, political ideology. The main objective of this paper is to present and analyse some of the most important ideological motivations from the Turkish perspective regarding the European integration. We shall, therefore, present not only why Türkiye is not a member state, but also and most importantly, the way in which the motivations are rooted in the Turkish perception.

Keywords: Türkiye, ideology, social motivations, EU, integration, non-integration

Introduction

The European Union is a very complex structure, defined differently regarding the perspective from which it is seen and perceived or understood. Technically, it is an organisation of twenty-seven countries, coming together due to the alignment of their values and objectives as state entities and accepting to limit their national competences in some areas and transmit those competences to the European Union exclusively. One of the very first moments marking the existence of the European Union was 1951, when the European Coal and Steel Community was founded, based on the Schuman plan (History of the European Union 1945-59, n.d.).

The Treaty of Lisbon „clarifies which powers belong to the European Union, which powers belong to the member states of the European Union and which powers are shared” (Founding Agreements). This creates a very complex structure of the European apparatus, where, to some extent, countries remain separated from each other and from the European institutions by differences of tackling certain aspects,

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while in other aspects, all countries act the same due to the exclusive competences of the European Union.

The Republic of Türkiye is often called a Eurasian country, due to its geographical and geopolitical profile present in both Europe and Asia. „According to the Turkish constitution, the word <<Turk>> as a political term includes all citizens of the Republic of Türkiye” (Dewdney & Yapp, 2025). The latest fundamental law was established in 1982, stipulating that: „The State of Türkiye is a Republic. Its language is Turkish. Its capital is Ankara.” (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey), but the capital was changed in 1924, being already stipulated in that constitution (1924 Anayasası, n.d.), after the capital had been in Istanbul for a very long time.

The Republic of Türkiye represents one of the most important state actors in relation with the European Union, due to multiple factors: its geopolitical and geostrategic position at the bridge between the East and the West, but also due to its historical ties and interactions with various peoples, especially in the Ottoman era. In the present, Türkiye’s candidature is considered to be the longest candidature, the country gaining the „candidate country” status in 1999.

The term „ideology” comes from the Greek „idea” and „logia” – the study of ideas. According to its linguistic origins, the term ideology is related to ideas in general: „a system of ideas that aspires to explain the world”, later on becoming „a form of social or political philosophy” (Cranston, 2025).

Our understanding of „ideology” is not limited to political attributes, but rather it refers to the set of ideas, i.e. motivations found in the Turkish collective mind or ideological environment that have been settled and are not questioned, but rather act like an engine, setting the directions of Turks’ actions.

1. Motivation for the paper

The Republic of Türkiye might be, in very many cases, taken as a *(geo)political given*, that is – its *actions* are more discussed than its *motivations*. The necessity of understanding not only *what*, but more precisely *why* it acts in a certain way would provide an answer to „*Why is Türkiye not a member state?*” from the Turkish perspective.

One of the most discussed topics regarding the European integration, especially in the case of the Republic of Türkiye, refers to the Copenhagen criteria (*Accession criteria*), especially in terms of democracy and human rights – but what is not tackled is the aspect that all of these have a Eurocentric ideological background. In other words, the meaning of democracy, the meanings of human rights or the understandings differ, being defined according to the socialisation in the European environment. This can be understood as a consequence of different communities understanding the same concepts differently, being filtered by their own cultural background.

Türkiye does have a different understanding in terms of certain political concepts, there is a Turkish democracy, a Turkish way of tackling the question of rights and obligations, the matter of principles etc. That is what makes the case of Türkiye *sui-generis* (unique in its own way). In other words, the case of Türkiye can be understood as complex, due to the oscillation between the some Occidental and some Oriental elements and the combination between the two poles in some aspects.

This originates from a very strong national feeling and sense of unity, inherited from the pre-state Turkic tribes.

As we mentioned, our focus on *ideology* in its inclusive meanings of not only political, but social, psychological *motivations* in general, we can state the importance of understanding a state from its own perspective and own sense of identity, especially when talking about states that are *not completely European* – geographically and geopolitically.

In this understanding, ideological motivations explain not only *what* happens or happened in the case of the relations between the Republic of Türkiye and the European Union, but also and most importantly *why* those aspects happened in the way they did: extendedly, the tackled aspects are the *motivations of the motivations* – a continuum of aspects determining each other in the background of what is seen: the *un-observables*.

1.1. Objectives

While there are various discussions about why the Republic of Türkiye cannot enter the European Union – from a Eurocentric perspective, we shall analyse this case from the Turkish standpoint, more precisely following the ideological dimension of Turks and the ideological prescriptions that hold the state back from becoming a European Union member state. In other words, the main focus of this analysis is the Turkish perspective: how is the matter of the European integration seen from the Turkish lenses.

We shall guide our analysis by the following research question: „*What are the main aspects in terms of ideological motivations that contribute to the Turkish non-integration?*”.

The research methodology is qualitative, more specifically following the analytical and interpretative framework. Our choice of methodology is based on the benefits this methodology offers: one of the most important aspects is the possibility of not only presenting events and ideas, but offers us the possibility to generate hypotheses. This approach is suitable for this specific subject, since we analyse the case of the Turkish non-integration from the Turkish perspective, which appears to be different from the European perspective on the matter of integration.

In order to provide a comprehensive answer to the research question, we shall focus our analysis on the following aspects forming the social and ideological motivations of non-integration: *nationalism, populism, language, identity, political*

profile and policies (neo-Ottomanism and faith-based diplomacy), *religion – society* binomen and *Eurasianism*. These aspects are not meant to present an exhaustive view of the discussed matter, but are rather significant because they allow us to present this subject from various perspectives which are subject to analysis and generating hypotheses upon. In other words, we consider these aspects relevant and suitable for the qualitative research methodology.

As we mentioned, there is a Turkish perspective on all these aspects: the Turkish nationalism is formed around a sense of belonging to the Turkish state, understood and perceived as a protector of the people, whose continuity is crucial for the common good. One of the most important element of the Turkish nationalism is Turkish language, with a tendency to purify i.e. to *Turkify* the language starting from the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye. Populism is represented by a form of non-elitist discourse minimising the gap between the people, members of the society, and the leaders.

The Turkish identity is formed around the characteristics of a *collectivist* culture, where the *individual* is tackled *collectively* and the community is of great importance – contrasting with the individualist culture of the European environment, which focuses on the individual rather than on the community. Another contrasting point is Türkiye's *Eurasian* profile, which makes Türkiye the meeting point between the East and the West.

In the Turkish society, there are certain aspects that govern the way it functions and have religious origins – therefore, they are perceived as natural or normal, while the members of other cultures might perceive them differently.

1.2. Limits

When it comes to the limits of this paper, the first aspect to be taken into consideration is the fact that ideology and ideological motivations are wide concepts, therefore including several dimensions. This analysis shall not be exhaustive, but rather *comprehensive*, attempting to present and analyse the Turkish standpoint regarding the question of integration. The comprehensive (and not exhaustive) character is assured by the nature of the analysis rather than by the number of the aspects analysed.

Another aspect to be taken into consideration is the fact that events cannot be isolated or treated (analysed) regardless of the context. In other words, the integration process is vast due to the very many aspects of the international community, each having a different impact on it and on its development.

Furthermore, we shall present the Turkish perspective, but from an external, exogenous origin; due to our *socialisation* (education) in a European environment, some elements might be filtered and interpreted accordingly. This is because of a lack of full access to the Turkish cultural and political environment, with incursions in the field by means of specialised literature.

2. Historical background of the relations

Türkiye is a very well welded, one of the most homogenous state entities in the international community, according to its uninterrupted history and strong national identity, supported by the idea of unity, strongly felt among people in the Turkish society.

When it comes to the European Union, it is an agglutination of states, working uniformly only in certain areas of competence, while in the others, each state acts according to their own internal status quo.

There is a long history regarding the relations between the European Union and the Republic of Türkiye, one of the first aspects that can be mentioned is the Ankara Agreement, signed in 1963 and implemented in 1964, establishing the foundation of the relations between the two entities, with emphasis on the economic dimension of their cooperation, but also mentioning that the final objective of this agreement is for Türkiye to become a full member of the European Union (Türkiye-AB İlişkilerinin Tarihçesi, 2024). The president of the European Commission, Walter Hallstein then said that „Türkiye is part of Europe”, after the association agreement being signed (Liboreiro, 2023), therefore underlying its European profile.

„The official application was first submitted in 1987, even though the GDP per capita was not as good as other countries’, therefore Türkiye was expected to carry out additional reforms so that the criteria for integration would be met” (Liboreiro, 2023) The Republic of Türkiye became a candidate state officially in 1999, but one of the important stalemates was the year 2005, when the *framework for negotiations* was adopted, stating that „the shared objective of the negotiations is accession”, but also that „if Türkiye is not in a position to assume in full all obligations of membership, it must be ensured that it is fully anchored in the European structures” (Liboreiro, 2023). In other words, the European perspective is that even though the candidate state cannot meet the criteria, the relations between the two entities should be maintained tight.

The following years were marked by changes not only in Türkiye, but also in the region. One of the most impactful moments was the migration crisis from 2015 (Liboreiro, 2023), which showed the geopolitical and strategic importance of Türkiye between the Middle East and Europe.

3. Ideological dimensions in Türkiye. Ottomanism and Kemalism

Before the Ottoman Empire’s replacement with the republic, the Ottoman-Turkish ideology was based on *Ottomanism*, a doctrine stating the importance of the Ottoman state per se, diminishing the importance of the loyalty towards the persona of the sultan himself (Ottomanism, n.d.). This importance of the state is later on translated into the Turkish nationalism, formed from the need to *protect the state* because the state *protects the people*.

The very first moment from which we shall begin our analysis is the 1923 moment – the profound shift in the Turkish politics, immediately after establishing the republic, which replaced the empire. After the First World War, the Turkish state was not among the victorious states, therefore the Ottoman territories were endangered to be divided by the Great Powers. The shift in the domestic politics, but also in the social and psychological fields was as great as the crisis which the state was facing. We are talking about a multi-dimensional change in ideological terms, which implicitly had social effects. Moreover, we can analyse the *psychological impact* of this event: Turks' territories threatened by the Europeans can be translated into the idea that the Western powers might endanger the internal status quo.

When Mustafa Kemal Atatürk became the first president of the newly established Republic of Türkiye, he also imposed a number of reforms, all of them shaped around *Kemalism*, the new state ideology, based on six fundamental pillars: *reformism (revolutionism)*, *republicanism*, *statism*, *nationalism*, *secularism* and *populism*. The pillar of *reformism* was meant to change the aesthetics of the internal profile of the country, in order to bring some changes for the development of various aspects: social life (family names, attire), language, institutions etc. *Republicanism* and *statism* emphasised the importance of the Republic of Türkiye as an institution meant to protect the continuity of the Turkish state entity. *Nationalism* underlined the importance of the Turkish nation and language, „glorifying the Turkish past” (Dewdney & Yapp, 2025). *Secularism* was formed in the direction that religious institutions were under the state's authority, while *populism* can be considered the pillar that supported all of the above; in other words, it was a pillar meant to legitimise the newly formed republic and reforms for the Turkish population by means of discourse.

4. Ideological motivations of non-integration

4.1. Turkish nationalism

When it comes to nationalism, we can state that from the Turkish perspective, this pillar is one of the strongest, most deeply and profoundly rooted in the collective mind, but also in the political area. The importance of the Turkish state, its unity, its continuity and its *glory* are one of the most present elements in the case of Turkish nationalism.

When it comes to its origins, some scholars tend to frame it in the *Tanzimat* period – the reforms from the XIXth century decadent Ottoman Empire, meant to support the Ottoman state in improving its administrative system (Tanzimat, n.d.). „*Nationalism*” comes from „*natio*” – being *something that is born*. In other words, we may admit that Turkish nationalism sprang from a feeling of fear not to lose the state apparatus, perceived therefore as a *protector* of the people.

One of the most important aspects of the Turkish nationalism is language, that is why one of the most important reforms of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was based on purifying the Turkish language and *Turkifying* it, trying to draw it as far away from Arabic or Ottoman Turkish as possible.

Nationalism is very contrasting when it comes to the often used „European family” phrase, where the focus is supposed to be on *the whole* more than on the integrant parts. That is because the term „European family” is implicitly a plural, invoking a focus on the entire European community rather than a specific country. This linguistic expression is used among the European Union member states, referring to the European community as a „family”, which places the emphasis on the member states together, not separately.

In order for this to be compatible with the European Union, Turks would have to transfer the above-mentioned feeling of protection felt in regard with the Turkish state towards the European apparatus.

4.2. Populism

The very pillar of support when it comes to nationalism is *populism* – the discourse supplementing the emotional dimension, the most important one to further support the national feeling – *nationalism*.

Turkish populism is the *macro* exposition of the *micro* elements, for „populism” comes from „*populus*”, meaning „*people*” – family, common good, using accessible, everyday vocabulary so that it can stick to the mass – the society in its entirety.

Even though certain perceptions on populism might place it in a position which is not always compatible with the European sense of democracy, some scholars believe that „populism is an extension of democracy itself” and not „a deadly challenge to democracy” (Giraudi, 2018), as some might tend to perceive it.

4.3. Language

Another crucial pillar of the Turkish nationalism is Turkish language. This was present from the very beginning of the republic, through the reforms of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, meant to purify the language and detach it from Arabic or Persian as a symbol of distance from the East and closeness to the West. He declared: „I want to address the very matter that is the foundation of each development” (Harf ve Dil Devrimi, 2023) – *the language*. The shift from the Arabic alphabet to the Latin alphabet was motivated through a rather populist discourse, by appealing to the masses: „It is as clear as day how easily Turkish children learnt how to read and write, in cities and in villages”; „The great Turkish nation can only avoid ignorance with such an instrument (*i.e. the new writing system*) that fits our beautiful and noble language.” (Harf ve Dil Devrimi, 2023). Therefore, the reform was necessary in

order to assure the continuity of the Turkish language, but also in order to help the education of people.

In other words, Turkish language represents the *sine qua non* condition of existence for *Turkishness* – i.e. the *Turkish element*, being the mirror of Turks' identity, acts and politics. That is one of the reasons for which in 2021, the international name of the country changed from the English „*Turkey*” to the original Turkish version – „*Türkiye*”. The change became official in the United Nations, after the country's request (The United Nations Changed the International Name of *Türkiye*, 2022). This change can be perceived in terms of transparency: „there is only one *Türkiye*”, (Cosma, Turkish Identity. Ethnic and Cultural Characteristics and Identity Formation, 2024, p. 294), but also of nationalism: „*Türkiye* cannot be completely and fully internationalised” (Cosma, Turkish Identity. Ethnic and Cultural Characteristics and Identity Formation, 2024) – therefore this is „*an international transparency reform*”, showcasing the unity of the country, internally and internationally (Cosma, Turkish Identity. Ethnic and Cultural Characteristics and Identity Formation, 2024).

Turkish is part of the Turkic family, very different from any European language, mainly due to its grammar and the construction of phrases. The Turkic languages belong to the Altaic language group, with different branches having different characteristics. Nevertheless, one of the shared characteristics is that they are *agglutinative* languages – suffixes can be added to a word in order to form a new one (Johanson, 2025). Due to this difference, but also to the difference in pronunciation, some foreign terms are either replaced with their equivalent in Turkish, or *Turkified* in order to make them easier to be pronounced.

From the above-mentioned aspects, we can deduce that there is a tendency to Turkify the external borrowings, rather than the opposite which would be to *internationalise* certain Turkish terms.

Therefore, the linguistic barrier would be an important aspect to be taken into consideration, due to the importance of language as an instrument, especially in the case of international organisations, where a mutually shared and understood instrument of communication is of great importance.

4.4. Identity

The question of identity is very complex, for (national) identity is a marker made up of multiple dimensions: geographical, cultural, ideological, political – all interrelated so that they form the coherent *sense of self*. Therefore, the complexity of elements forming an identity explains its importance not only for the members of a society (people), but also for the macro level of the state apparatus, inter-state relations and interactions and international organisations.

In etymological terms, „*identity*” comes from the Latin „*identitas*”, which comes from „*idem*”, meaning „*the same*”, underlying the idea of *similitude*. Isolated,

identity may refer to *similitude to self* (the idea of being identical to oneself), but when placed in the context of interactions, identity may also refer to *similitude to the other*, implying the paradox of being *similar* to something *different* from us. This explanation provides the image of a distance between two entities, which might be bigger or smaller. The bigger the distance, the smaller the similitude and vice versa. Therefore, identities are crucial especially in the relations between a state and an organisation (here, the European Union), being able to bring them closer or impose a distance.

To begin with, Turkish identity is an entirety formed of ethnic characteristics and supported by ideological attributes. When it comes to the ethnic characteristics, today's Turks are the successors of the pre-societal Turkic groups, a migratory people having a rudimentary tribal organisation, which laid at the basis of the Ottoman Empire, a multi-continental state with a military elite and religious-infused ideology (Cosma, Turkish Identity. Ethnic and Cultural Characteristics and Identity Formation, 2024, pp. 204-293).

We can also talk about a sense of *Turkic superiority*, coming from the Islamic philosophy sphere, more specifically from the *Theory of Seven Real Climates*, stating that there are seven climates from which the fourth and fifth climate are *the most privileged*, due to them having a good climate, water, temperature etc., thence people living there are the most educated people on Earth, according to Kâtib Çelebi. Anatolia, the geographical area where Turks formed themselves as a people is part of those privileged areas, therefore Turks themselves belong to a privileged group of people (Cosma, Turkish Identity. Ethnic and Cultural Characteristics and Identity Formation, 2024, pp. 298-299).

In terms of cultural and ideological attributes, the idea of *unity* and *continuity* is what helped Turks always organise and re-organise so that the *auto-preservation* and *state preservation* would be unaltered (Cosma, 2024, pp. 298-299).

These attributes were maintained and are still present till today, but have had an increased importance when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk founded the republic, wanting to re-establish a pure Turkish identity to support the state organisation and institution. To some extent, identity is nowadays perceived as the *protector* of Turkishness, of internal stability and of perpetuation of values, traditions and customs.

When talking about the European Union, we have to consider not only the technical and strictly political aspects, but also the cultural and psychological ones – the *supranational* state or feeling. Some scholars define it as „*Europeaness*” – the conception of a European identity (European Identity, n.d.). The European identity is defined as „the sense of belonging and shared cultural consciousness that *individuals* within the European Union strive to develop, transcending their national identities (European Identity, n.d.). In other words, the European identity is something that goes beyond the national identity or surpasses it.

There are two main questions in order for this to be applied to Turks: the first one is the situation of *individual(s)* – the Turkish identity is *collective*, even though it is *one*, it is one for all and cannot be fractioned in the case of each member of the society.

The second one is the matter of surpassing the national dimension or level. Even if Turks think regionally or internationally, the national level can hardly be surpassed. In their case, it is the national level and the regional level or the international level, not in a hierarchy, but rather placed *horizontally* in the field of perception. Thence, the Turkish identity is so strong that there is no place left to be filled with anything that is supranational in terms of identity or culture.

The *family analogy* can provide a more complete explanation of this phenomenon – family is considered to be the fundament of the Turkish society (Kafesoğlu, 2020, pp. 219-220). Extendedly, the Turkish society is a *macro family* in general understandings, due to the strong ties among the members of the society and the collectivist culture. This macro family is governed by the Turkish identity, which can be understood as *the family name* – therefore, another family name (like the European one) would be quite difficult to find its place so that the balance is maintained.

4.5. Neo-Ottomanism and faith-based diplomacy

The Kemalist revolution represented a profound social change meant to diminish the Ottoman inheritance and a „re-constitutive process of the Turkish state into a new construction in order to respond to the evolutive necessity” (Cosma, Faith-based Diplomacy and Neo-Ottomanism, 2025, p. 166). Kemalism opposed the previous state doctrine especially due to its *secular* dimension, but also to its Occidental approach, considered to be a model of development and modernisation. Due to its rapid and drastic character in terms of change, the collective mind later on faced a form of nostalgia towards the Ottoman period, which had been settled in Turks psychology. Due to these aspects, neo-Ottomanism and faith-based diplomacy appeared as a doctrinal jump to the pre-Kemalist period (Cosma, Faith-based Diplomacy and Neo-Ottomanism, 2025, p. 170).

Neo-Ottomanism is characterised by three main aspects: the Ottoman Empire is seen at the origins of civilisation, it is an Islamic empire, but also a multicultural empire. Türkiye is, therefore, the heir of the Ottoman Empire, having the moral duty to cultivate, perpetuate and promote the Ottoman cultural legacy (Wastnidge, 2019, p. 4). At the level of diplomacy, this is done by promoting certain aspects of the Ottoman culture.

Faith-based diplomacy refers to policies supported by religious teachings and principles, such as reconciliation, solidarity towards the poor, prayer and fasting (Philpott, 2010, pp. 32-34) concrete example is the reinforcement of the role of *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, the *Directorate of Religious Affairs*, an institution that

gained power regionally by offering humanitarian aid, religious courses and building mosques in the region (Muhasilovic, Turkey's Faith-based Diplomacy in the Balkans, 2018, pp. 63-64).

4.6. Religion and society

One of the oldest ties in the history of humanity is the tie between the material and immaterial – between the *sky* and the *earth*. This is what gave people a sense of belonging both to each other and to a superior entity governing their actions. In other words, people started to govern their lives according to their beliefs, which were shared between the members of the community in which they were living. As much as these gave them a sense of cohesion, it also created a difference between them and other communities guided by different beliefs.

As times evolved, the religious teachings reflected in societies directly and indirectly: from the way the society is shaped, the human relations, laws and principles of the state apparatus (the *macro* sphere) till the personal choices, attire, deeds, conducts and ways of behaving (the *micro* sphere). These aspects can be better understood starting from the etymology of the term „*religion*”, which is the Latin „*religio*”, meaning „*obligation*”, „*reverence*”. This establishes a triple obligation: the first one is the obligation between the individual and the deity (the obligation towards the *immortal*), the second one is the obligation between the individual and himself/herself (the obligation towards the *self*) and the third one is the obligation between the individual and the people (the obligation towards the *alterity*).

Even though in its political fundaments, the Turkish state is a secular one, everyday life is marked profoundly by religious values, reflected in people's way of conducting their lives and behaving.

Religion marks, therefore, Turks' understanding of values and even political norms, human rights, democracy etc. In order to provide a concrete example, we shall analyse the status and roles of people in a society, starting from its nucleus – the *family*, where the later politically defined „*gender roles*” emerge.

Generally, it is believed that *the man* is the „*head of the family*”, who should, therefore, take care of the woman and children. The very origin of these social attributes lays in religious teachings. For example, in the Quran, there is a verse stating that „*Men are the caretakers of women*” (Coranul și traducerea explicativă, 2015).

Therefore, the fact that some women in the society do not go to work and do not have a job is translated and interpreted in the Eurocentric understanding as oppressive, while in the Turkish culture, it might be perceived as the normal course of events and share of roles between men and women within a society – in some areas or groups.

The idea of entirety and wholeness in the Turkish culture is therefore, based on *separation* i.e. differentiation of roles – people have different roles that work

similarly to the pieces of a puzzle – when put together, they form a cohesive and coherent entirety. In other words, cohesion is given by differences – that is the paradox of the Turkish society – its unity is given by people having different roles.

4.7. Eurasianism

Culturally speaking, the Turkish society is more inclined towards a *collectivistic Asianism*, in a way that the group, the community, the society is placed higher in the hierarchy rather than the individual separately. The European culture in these terms and especially the culture of the European Union is mainly based on individualistic values – many aspects being focused on the individual. In the case of Turks, the individual must be placed within a larger entity and cannot be treated independently, neither when it comes to societal rights, obligations, nor when speaking about personal life – since *personal* life is, up to a certain degree, *collective*.

The integration to such a distinct cultural environment would force Turks to become more focused on *one*, rather than on *the many*, which would be extremely difficult, if not impossible: the Turkish identity of one is defined in rapport with the identity of all, therefore such separation would create an immense unbalance in the collective mind: Turks would have to define themselves in regard to their own selves and to limit this definition so that it does not expand to the community in its entirety.

Another very important element to be taken into consideration is that Türkiye is not at the cross point between the East and the West, but rather represents the cross point itself. Thence, its European integration would somehow unbalance the equilibrium, because Türkiye would have to diminish some of its ties with the East. This aspect would be, nevertheless, culturally almost impossible, due to its *genetic* belonging to Eurasianism or even Asianism, Turks being the heirs of the migratory tribes and of the later tri-continental Ottoman Empire.

The aspect of Eurasianism is, therefore, one of the most important aspects in the case of Türkiye, combining elements from both cultural spheres: European and Asian. In this way, the country becomes „*not completely European*” and „*not completely Asian*” – a *sui generis* character formed due to its geographic and cultural characteristics acquired over time. It is to be mentioned than more than it is geographical, it is cultural: there are „*different grades of inferiority and power offered*” to define the border between the East and the West, leading to „*an imaginary and geographical division between the East and the West*” (Said, 2018, p.279). The idea of imaginary division is similar to the one of „*mental maps*” used by people in their everyday life to place countries or cultures in proximity or far from each other, operating more with what they think (opinions, perceptions – informal knowledge or generalisations) rather than with what there is (geographical reality) – informal knowledge or generalisations

Conclusions and perspectives

One of the main characteristics of the field of international relations is *dynamicity*, due to the shift to multipolarity, where there are „multiple powers having similar capabilities, but also being in a competition in changing configurations” (Atudorei, 2022, p. 176) – on-going events, either regional or international can affect directly or indirectly other events, precipitate integration or on the contrary, inhibit the process and lead to its prolongation. As a consequence, it is quite difficult to attempt to predict if Türkiye will become a member state and when that shall happen or under what circumstances. This is not solely related to the development of the relations between Türkiye and the European Union, but it is rather related to multiple factors: international and regional events, but also national.

There is a Turkish understanding of values, norms, principles, that is very deeply settled in the collective subconscious that when facing the *alterity* (i.e. the European understanding), it might cause a cultural clash that distances the two entities. This explains that apart from the strictly (geo)political events and developments, the *psychological* aspects are also important when it comes to the integration process. In other words, it is important to analyse to what extent the collective subconscious is shaped in the European direction (in the case of Turks), but also in the Turkish direction (in the case of the European apparatus).

In order to provide an answer to the research question „What are the main aspects in terms of ideological motivations that contribute to the Turkish non-integration?”, we analysed different social and ideological dimensions of Turks’ motivations for non-integration: nationalism, populism, language, identity, political profile and policies (neo-Ottomanism and faith-based diplomacy), religion – society binomen and Eurasianism.

Regarding the aspect of nationalism, one of the most important aspects that impede the European integration is the contrast between the „European family” (where the focus is on the entirety, i.e. the European Union per se) and the Turkish nationalism, formed around a strong sense of belonging and trust towards the Turkish state. Populism is one of the strongest pillars of support for this sense of belonging, by means of discourse – a form of non-elitist language bringing people and leaders together.

Language is also an important aspect in the process of integration: Turkish is different from the European languages due to its belonging to the family of Turkic languages. The matter of identity and self-perception is crucial for two main reasons: one of them is the difference between the Turkish identity, which is collective and the European perspective, where identity is mainly formed as individualistic; the second one is related to the field of perception, where the Turkish identity is so strong that it is difficult to be surpassed. On the etymological line, the term „identity” can be related to the term „similitude”: in the case of the European integration, the matter

of identity being therefore treated as similitude not only to oneself (sense of self), but also to the other (the alterity).

In terms of the actual profile (internal and external) of Türkiye, we mentioned two main aspects: *neo-Ottomanism* as a doctrine formed around nostalgia towards the Ottoman past and *faith-based diplomacy*: diplomatic practices inspired from teachings of good deeds, helping the poor, conciliation etc., being rather contrasting with the secular profile of the European apparatus. Moreover, through these practices, Türkiye's role in the region increases.

The *religion – society* binomen is understood as social practices having religious origins. One of the explanations provided for this aspect is the difference of roles in the Turkish society, perceived as a natural means of completing the societal puzzle, which might be perceived differently from the European perspective. One of the most complex matters is the aspect of *Eurasianism*, combining both cultural-ideological and geographical attributes: in the case of Türkiye, the country represents the bridge between the East and the West, therefore having a *sui-generis* character and equilibrium between the two.

When it comes to *perspectives* regarding the relations between Türkiye and the European Union, but also the integration process of Türkiye to the European Union, one of the most important aspects to be taken into consideration is the need for a middle ground, i.e. an altered understanding of values and norms: either the European Union is willing to look through Türkiye's lenses so that it accepts their understanding of the above mentioned elements, or the Republic of Türkiye adapts some elements and understandings to the European perspective.

In order for this to happen, not only a lot of time is needed, but also an impactful societal change coming from a strong psychological and ideological background. If the Kemalist moment was the solution for saving a decadent state, then Neo-Ottomanism is a jump to the pre-Kemalist period, we could prospect that in order for things to change in the European Union's direction, a jump to the *pre-Neo-Ottomanist*, i.e. to the Kemalist period would be needed.

As things tend to form a circle in the psychology of a people, we could expect this to happen in the future, based on the experience of the above mentioned development of perceptions in the collective mind, but a precise outcome cannot be provided, due to the dynamicity of the international events.

Nevertheless, perspectives regarding the relations between Türkiye and the European Union imply the necessity of bringing together the past, the present and the future, while the past happened, the present is on-going and the future is unknown. A specific type of scenario related to the evolution of the interactions between the two entities would limit and thence exclude all the other alternatives, due to the fact that it would mainly be based on the events which happened in the past. This explains that the present is, in fact, even more unpredictable than the future.

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Happier abroad? Insights into the wellbeing of Romanian emigrants

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Abstract: Wellbeing is a multidimensional concept addressed across psychology, sociology, political science, and economics. From an economic perspective, it is typically linked to income, poverty, access to basic needs, and employment. This paper investigates whether Romanian emigrants working in EU countries perceive an improvement in their wellbeing after migration, particularly regarding wages and social status, compared to their situation in Romania prior to emigration. It also examines whether perceptions differ across socio-demographic groups defined by age, gender, education, marital status, medium of origin, and country of destination. This paper is based on quantitative methods, using data from a structured questionnaire completed by 100 Romanian emigrants who currently live abroad or have returned from migration. By exploring the relationship between migration and perceived wellbeing, the paper contributes to a broader understanding of how economic and social conditions abroad shape individual experiences. It adds to both migration research and wellbeing studies, highlighting the role of subjective and objective factors in shaping quality of life. The findings provide useful insights for academic debates and policy discussions on the integration and wellbeing of mobile workers in the European Union.

Keywords: wellbeing, migration, Romanian emigrants, European Union

Introduction

The concept of wellbeing is relatively recent and has become a focus of study across various academic disciplines. Psychologists, sociologists, health professionals, and economists all seek to define, analyse, and explain this phenomenon, aiming to develop strategies and solutions to enhance individuals' overall wellbeing. Being a dynamic construct that encompasses individuals' evaluations of their lives and their psychological functioning, the concept of wellbeing is commonly divided into two broad dimensions (1) hedonic well-being, which emphasizes pleasure, happiness, and life satisfaction, and (2) eudaimonic

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well-being, which focuses on meaning, personal growth, and authenticity (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 1995). These dimensions highlight both the emotional experience of feeling good and the deeper sense of living a meaningful life. Moreover, wellbeing is not static, as it fluctuates over time due to various factors including work conditions, interpersonal relationships, and personal resources. These fluctuations can occur over both short-term intervals and long-term trajectories (Sonnenstag, 2015). Importantly, well-being not only reflects individuals' current experiences but also predicts important outcomes such as job performance, motivation, and health-related behaviours (Sonnenstag, 2015). The concept of well-being has gained wide applicability across disciplines and contexts, supported by the development of generic and cross-contextual measurement tools like the WHO-5, which are validated for use in both clinical and general populations (Topp et al., 2015). This universal relevance underlines well-being as a central construct in understanding human functioning and societal progress.

The concept of economic well-being has evolved beyond traditional measures such as gross domestic product (GDP), prompting scholars and policymakers to seek more comprehensive indicators that better reflect human and societal progress. Increasingly, researchers argue that GDP fails to account for essential dimensions of well-being, including the value of leisure, environmental sustainability, income distribution, and economic security (Osberg & Sharpe, 2002). As a result, alternative frameworks have emerged to capture a fuller picture of prosperity, particularly within the context of growing concerns over inequality, environmental limits, and subjective well-being. One such framework is the wellbeing economy, which proposes a shift away from growth-centered economic models toward systems that prioritize human flourishing, ecological stability, and sufficiency. Advocates of this approach argue that in high-income nations, continued economic expansion yields diminishing returns in terms of happiness and well-being, and may exacerbate ecological degradation and social disconnection (Hayden, 2024). This post-growth orientation challenges the long-standing assumption that economic growth is synonymous with societal improvement, advocating instead for policies that focus on equity, health, and environmental integrity. Empirical evidence supports this perspective. A meta-analysis by Howell and Howell (2008) found that the relationship between economic status and subjective well-being (SWB) is strongest in low-income countries, particularly when well-being is defined in terms of life satisfaction. However, in more affluent contexts, this relationship weakens, reflecting the phenomenon of diminishing marginal utility and suggesting that once basic needs are met, additional income contributes little to overall happiness. These findings bolster need theory, which posits that economic resources have the greatest impact on well-being when they help fulfil essential physical needs.

In parallel, the concept of the happiness economy has gained popularity. It promotes a multidimensional vision of development that values social inclusion, environmental stewardship, and psychological resilience. This paradigm seeks to

measure success through indicators of well-being rather than material production alone, aiming to create economic systems where people's quality of life takes precedence over income growth (Agrawal et al., 2024). International institutions such as the OECD and WHO, along with national initiatives like the Wellbeing Economy Governments (WEGo), are increasingly adopting these approaches to guide policymaking (Hayden, 2024). Together, these developments signal a growing consensus that economic well-being must be understood not merely in financial terms but through a holistic lens that includes health, equity, sustainability, and subjective life satisfaction.

Understanding how wellbeing changes through the process of emigration offers key insights into how emigrants adapt, integrate, and find satisfaction in their new environments. The literature shows that migration significantly affects the wellbeing of people who leave their home countries. While migrants often experience improved incomes and material conditions after relocating, changes in subjective wellbeing (SWB), including life satisfaction, happiness, and emotional health, are more nuanced. For example, migrants from Tonga to New Zealand saw gains in income and mental health, but reported declines in happiness and social status due to shifts in reference groups (Stillman et al., 2015). Cultural integration plays a central role in shaping migrant well-being. A flexible, adaptive approach that allows individuals to retain aspects of their identity while integrating into the host culture is positively linked to SWB. This process is strengthened by the subjective significance of identity, the psychological importance of maintaining a valued sense of self which supports confidence and resilience (Wang & Giovanis, 2024). Social networks are another key factor of wellbeing in the process of migration. Migrants with supportive community ties, especially within culturally familiar groups, tend to report higher well-being. In Israel, North American immigrants felt more satisfied despite lower labour market outcomes, largely due to strong social support and religious motivation for migration (Amit & Riss, 2013). Pre-migration conditions also matter. Migrants who had supportive environments and clear motivations before moving generally adapt better and experience greater post-migration well-being (Amit & Riss, 2013; Nikolova & Graham, 2015). Moreover, many migrants report increased freedom and autonomy, which enhances well-being even when material gains are modest (Nikolova & Graham, 2015). However, migration also brings challenges such as identity conflict, cultural dislocation, and emotional stress, especially when expectations are unmet. These findings highlight the need for policies that support both the economic and psychological integration of migrants (Wang & Giovanis, 2024; Stillman et al., 2015).

Analysing the concept of well-being in the context of migration is a two-way process: on one hand, it offers valuable insights into the complex experience of migration by highlighting how emotional, social, and economic dimensions shift before and after emigration. On the other hand, examining the lived experiences of emigrants' challenges and deepens our understanding of well-being itself, pushing

us to consider it not as a static or universal condition, but as something deeply shaped by context, identity, and mobility. In this way, migration studies not only benefit from the lens of well-being but also contribute to refining and expanding its conceptual framework. The aim of this paper is to investigate how Romanian emigrants working in EU countries perceive changes in their wellbeing after migration, with particular attention to differences across socio-demographic groups such as age, gender, education, marital status, medium of origin, and country of destination. Romania represents a particularly relevant case, as it is one of the largest sources of labour migration within the European Union, and the scale of this mobility raises important questions about integration, social positioning, and quality of life abroad. Methodologically, the paper relies on a structured questionnaire completed by 100 Romanian emigrants, both current residents abroad and returnees. Responses were analysed in IBM SPSS Statistics 20, combining descriptive statistics, a composite wellbeing index, and inferential techniques (independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA with Tukey post hoc tests) to assess variations in perceived wellbeing across groups. This design directly addresses the paper's aim and provides robust evidence on how migration shapes subjective wellbeing. The remainder of this paper is organised in the following manner: Section 1 explores a brief literature review on the wellbeing of Romanian emigrants; Section 2 presents the used data and methodology; Section 3 outlines the results and conclusions. Some final remarks conclude the paper.

1. A brief literature review on the wellbeing of Romanian emigrants

Research on the wellbeing of Romanian emigrants reveals a complex picture shaped by economic gains, cultural integration, discrimination, and evolving personal aspirations. While migration often improves objective indicators such as income and access to services, its effects on subjective well-being are far more complex and context-dependent. The academic literature specifically focused on the wellbeing of Romanian emigrants is still relatively limited and emerging, particularly in comparison to broader migration and well-being studies. Although there is a growing body of work examining Eastern European migration and its socio-economic outcomes, focused, longitudinal, or comparative studies that assess Romanian emigrants' subjective well-being across diverse host contexts remain sparse. Much of the existing research relies on cross-sectional data and case studies in specific countries such as Belgium, Spain, and Italy. This indicates a clear need for more systematic and long-term studies that include psychological, economic, social, and intergenerational dimensions of well-being in Romanian migrant populations.

Studies that are available highlight key insights. Romanian emigrants often experience an overall increase in quality of life in host countries, particularly in terms of job satisfaction, financial stability, healthcare, and educational access. However,

these gains are tempered by persistent ties to value systems from Romania, which shape perceptions of success and influence both personal and professional aspirations abroad (Mocanu et al., 2020). For instance, Romanian white-collar migrants in Brussels report improved living standards but also demonstrate diverse integration strategies and complex feelings of identity and belonging, reflecting their transnational lifestyle (Nicola et al., 2021).

At the psychological level, perceived discrimination has emerged as a key factor undermining wellbeing. Romanian migrants in Spain who report higher levels of discrimination, particularly in employment and healthcare, also show lower levels of self-acceptance, an important component of psychological well-being. Social support, however, significantly buffers this relationship, highlighting the protective role of strong interpersonal networks (Fernández et al., 2014). Wellbeing also varies across generations and life stages. Romanian adolescents living in Italy display lower life satisfaction and more psychosomatic complaints than their peers in Romania, with first-generation migrants reporting the highest levels of dissatisfaction. These outcomes are attributed to factors such as acculturation stress, disrupted family dynamics, and social exclusion (Charrier et al., 2023). Meanwhile, longitudinal data show that while migration can lead to significant gains in income and perceived freedom, it does not always result in greater happiness. In some cases, return migrants in Romania report lower happiness than those who never migrated, suggesting that unmet expectations and reintegration difficulties can offset the potential well-being benefits of migration (Bartram, 2013).

On a broader scale, Romanian migrants from post-transition countries generally report improvements in subjective well-being and satisfaction with freedom after migrating, particularly when migration leads to greater autonomy and opportunity (Nikolova & Graham, 2015). However, this effect varies depending on the social and policy environment of the host country, emphasizing the importance of institutional support and integration pathways.

In sum, the wellbeing of Romanian emigrants is influenced not only by economic outcomes but also by cultural identity, perceived inclusion, and access to supportive social networks. While the existing literature offers valuable insights, there remains significant potential for deeper and more comparative research to better capture the diverse realities of Romanian migrant wellbeing across countries and generations.

2. Data and methodology

This article is based on a subsample of 100 respondents drawn from a broader dataset currently being compiled as part of my PhD research project on Romanian labour migration. The data used for this paper were collected between July 2024 and February 2025 through an online questionnaire distributed via social media platforms and diaspora networks, using a snowball sampling method. While this

approach does not yield a representative sample, it is appropriate for reaching mobile and dispersed populations such as emigrants and allows for the collection of diverse responses from various EU countries. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and all respondents were informed about the purpose of the research and gave their informed consent.

The questionnaire included several sections, but this paper focuses on selected variables relevant to the analysis of perceived wellbeing following emigration. Specifically, the variables considered were: age, gender, level of education, marital status, medium of origin (urban or rural), and country of destination. The key dependent variable in this analysis is the respondent's subjective evaluation of their job abroad compared to the one they had in Romania prior to migration. To measure this, participants were asked to select one of five statements on a Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), describing their perception of both remuneration and social status associated with their job abroad, in comparison with their previous employment in Romania. The response options were as follows:

Question: *Compared to the job you had in Romania prior to migration, how would you evaluate your job abroad in terms of remuneration and social status?*

Response Statement

options

1	<i>The job I have/had on the European labour market is/was better paid and has/had a higher social status than the one I had in Romania.</i>
2	<i>It is/was better paid but has/had a lower social status than the one I had in Romania.</i>
3	<i>It is/was worse paid and has/had a lower social status.</i>
4	<i>It is/was worse paid but has/had a higher social status.</i>
5	<i>It is/was similarly paid and with a similar social status.</i>

The data were processed and analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 20. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample and response distributions. To assess the overall perception of Romanian emigrants regarding their labour market integration and social positioning abroad, a composite index was constructed based on five Likert-scale items. These items captured self-assessed differences in both remuneration and social status between the job held abroad and the one previously held in Romania. Each item was rated on a 5-point scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), reflecting increasing agreement with positive evaluations of their situation abroad. A new variable, labelled „Perceived Wellbeing Index”, was created in IBM SPSS Statistics 20 using the MEAN function, which computed the average score across the five items. This method allowed for partial item responses to be included, provided that at least one of the five questions was answered. The resulting index offered a

continuous measure ranging from 1 to 5, with higher values indicating more favourable perceptions of occupational and social improvement after emigration.

This composite score served as the dependent variable in subsequent inferential analyses, including t-tests, one-way ANOVA, to examine how perceived wellbeing varied across sociodemographic characteristics such as gender, age, education level, marital status, urban/rural origin, and country of emigration. Independent-samples t-tests were used for binary categorical variables, such as gender and urban/rural origin, because these variables divide respondents into two distinct groups, and the objective was to compare the mean values of the Perceived Wellbeing Index between them. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed for independent variables with more than two categories, including age group, education level, marital status, and country of emigration. This test allows for the comparison of mean wellbeing scores across multiple groups simultaneously. Where the ANOVA results indicated significant differences, Tukey post hoc tests were applied to identify which specific groups differed from each other.

3. Results and discussions

3.1. Descriptive analysis of the sample

The sample used in this study consists of 100 Romanian emigrants currently or formerly residing in various EU countries. The analysis of sociodemographic characteristics reveals a relatively diverse, though non-representative, profile of respondents.

The majority of respondents (58%) are between 18 and 35 years old, indicating a young and potentially more mobile segment of the Romanian population. Another significant share (23%) falls within the 36–45 age range, while smaller percentages are distributed across older age groups: 10% are between 46–55, 5% between 56–65, and only 4% in other intermediate brackets.

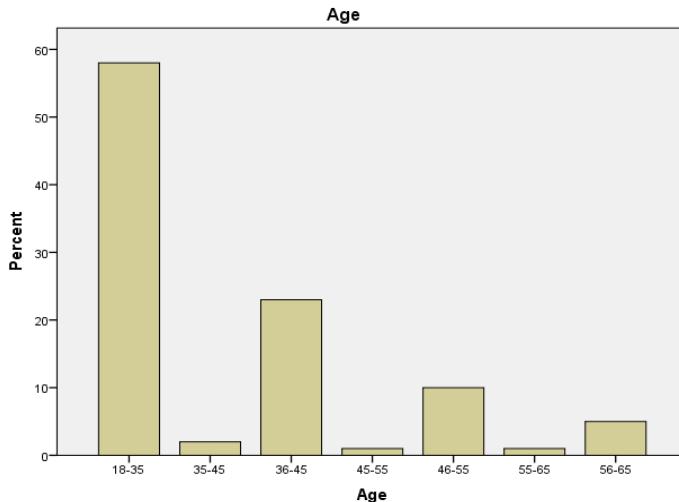
Out of the 100 participants, 57% are female and 43% are male. This gender imbalance may reflect higher response rates from women in online surveys or possibly indicate a greater willingness among female emigrants to participate in research.

A notable majority of respondents (61%) come from rural areas, with 39% from urban environments. This is a particularly interesting finding, as it highlights the importance of migration for individuals from rural Romania, who may seek better employment and living conditions abroad. This also aligns with broader national migration trends, where rural populations face fewer local economic opportunities.

The educational background of the sample is relatively high: 25% of respondents hold a Master's degree, 16% have a Bachelor's degree, and 12% have completed post-secondary education (non-university). A significant portion (33%) completed high school, while a smaller percentage have vocational education (9%)

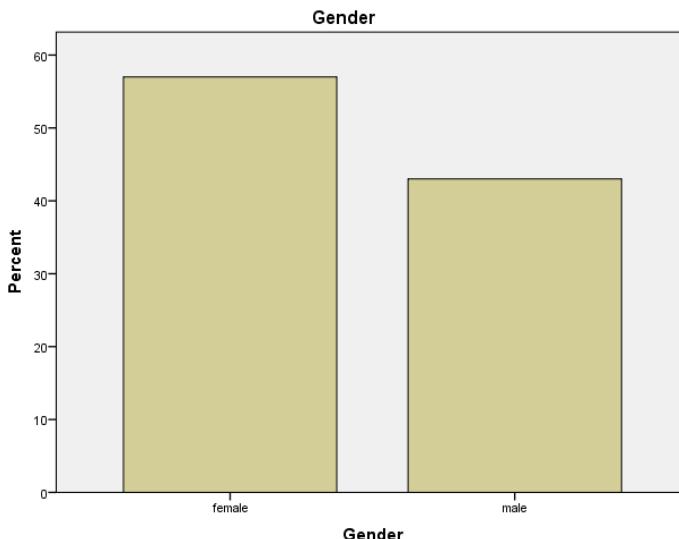
or a doctoral degree (4%). Only 1% of respondents had education limited to middle school level.

Figure 1. Age distribution of the Romanian emigrants

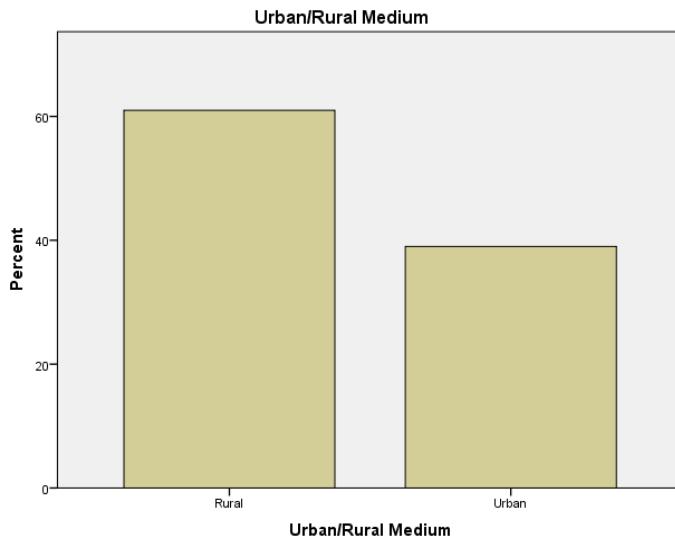


Source: made by author in SPSS, sample size =100

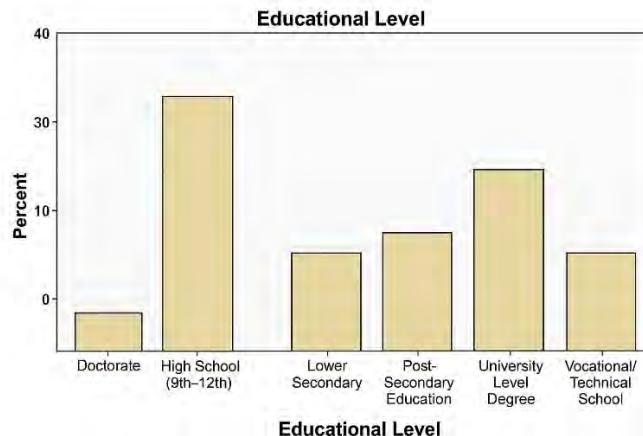
Figure 2. Gender distribution of the Romanian emigrants



Source: made by author in SPSS, sample size =100

Figure 3. Medium distribution of the Romanian emigrants

Source: made by author in SPSS, sample size =100

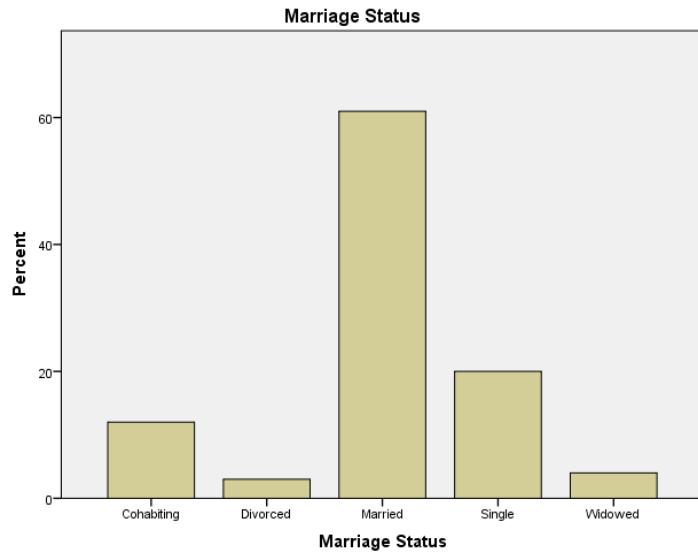
Figure 4. Educational level of the Romanian emigrants

Source: made by author in SPSS, sample size =100

The majority of respondents (61%) are married, with an additional 12% cohabiting and 4% widowed, indicating a sample largely composed of individuals in stable personal relationships. Only 20% identified as single, and 3% as divorced. This may suggest that Romanian emigrants who are married or in relationships are

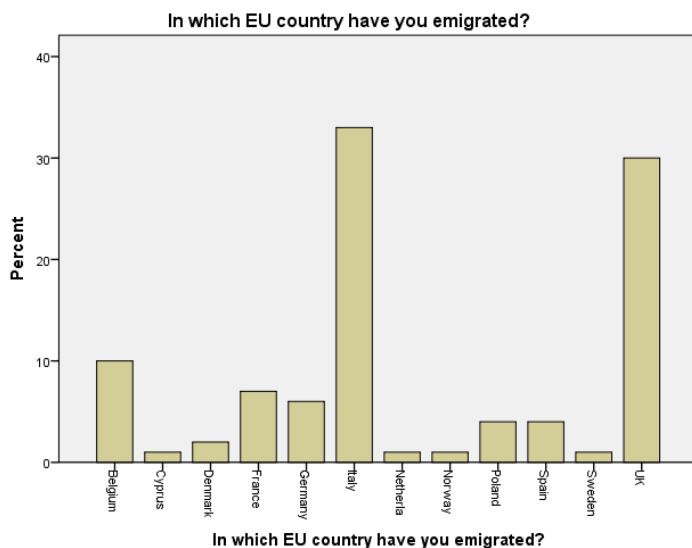
more settled or perhaps more motivated to reflect on their post-migration experiences.

Figure 5. Marriage status of the Romanian emigrants



Source: author's representation made in SPSS, sample size =100

Figure 6. Country of emigration of the Romanian emigrants

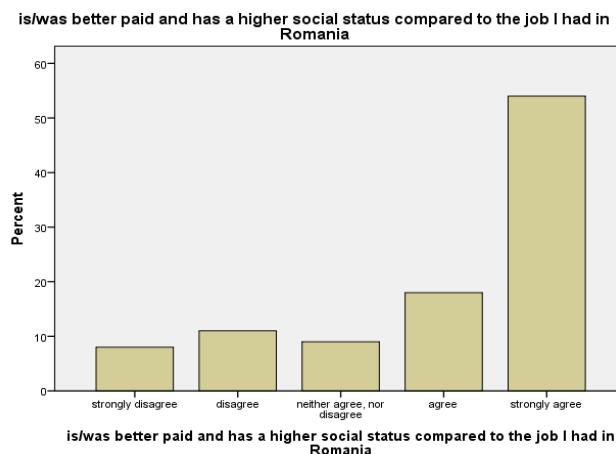


Source: author's representation made in SPSS, sample size =100

The most common countries of emigration were Italy (33%) and the United Kingdom (30%). These two destinations alone account for over 60% of the sample. Other destinations included Belgium (10%), France (7%), and Germany (6%), with smaller numbers in Spain, Poland, and Northern European countries such as Denmark, Sweden, and Norway.

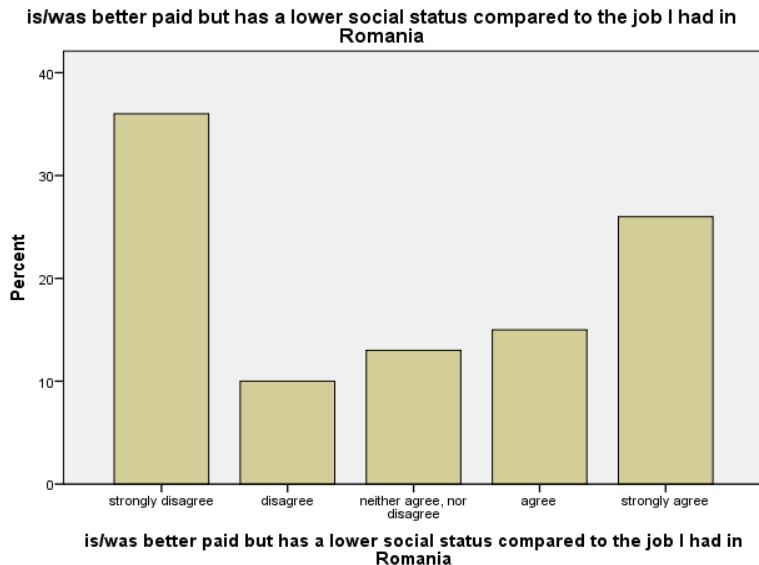
The analysis of respondents' answers to the question „The job I currently hold / have held in the European labour market in the country I emigrated to...” reveals significant variation in how Romanian emigrants perceive changes in both remuneration and social status when comparing their job abroad to the one they had in Romania. The most positively perceived outcome was that employment abroad is both better paid and of higher social status, with 72% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing, supported by high central tendency values ($M = 3.99$; median = 5.00; mode = 5). In contrast, the statement that jobs abroad are better paid but of lower social status divided opinions: 36% strongly disagreed while 26% strongly agreed, suggesting that some migrants may accept socially inferior or overqualified positions in exchange for higher wages. The idea that jobs abroad are both lower paid and of lower status was overwhelmingly rejected (78% disagreement, $M = 1.80$), confirming that migration is rarely associated with a downward trajectory. Similarly, few respondents agreed that their jobs abroad offer higher status but lower pay ($M = 1.97$), indicating that income remains the decisive factor in how migrants evaluate outcomes. Finally, the perception that jobs abroad are equivalent in both pay and status to those in Romania was also dismissed by the majority (61% strongly disagreed, $M = 1.91$), reinforcing the notion that migration represents a significant break from previous employment rather than a mere continuation.

Figure 7. Respondents' views: job abroad better paid and higher social status than in Romania



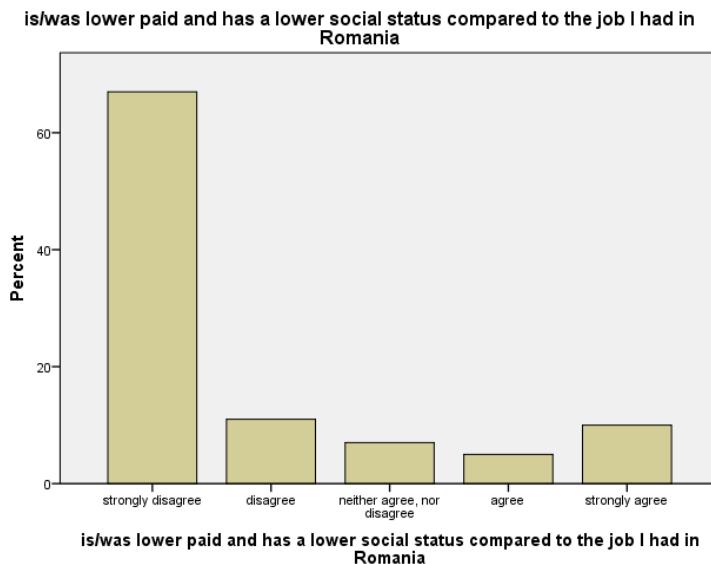
Source: author's representation made in SPSS, sample size =100

Figure 8. Respondents' views: job abroad better paid but lower social status than in Romania



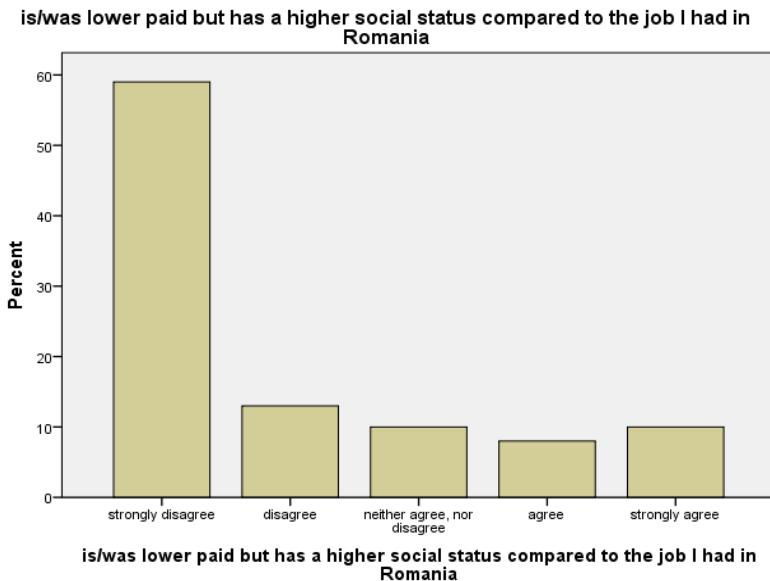
Source: author's representation made in SPSS, sample size =100

Figure 9. Respondents' views: job abroad lower paid and lower social status than in Romania



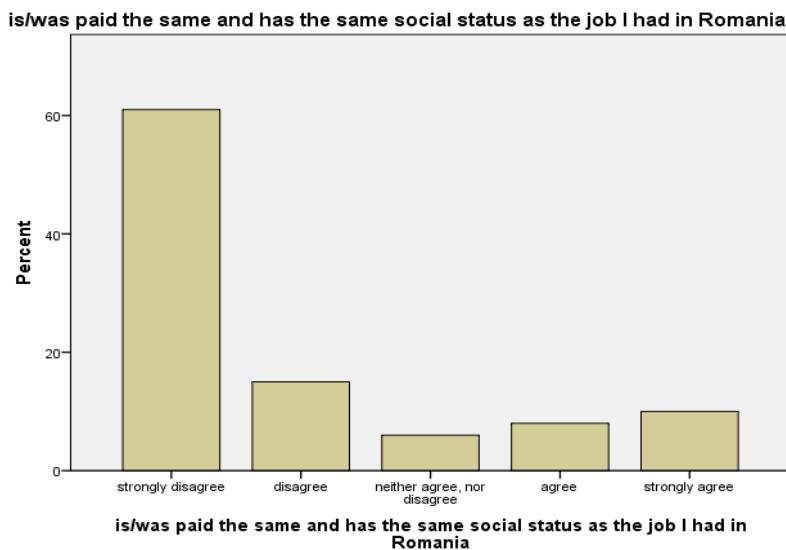
Source: author's representation made in SPSS, sample size =100

Figure 10. Respondents' views: job abroad lower paid but higher social status than in Romania



Source: author's representation made in SPSS, sample size =100

Figure 11. Respondents' views: job abroad equally paid and same social status as in Romania



Source: author's representation made in SPSS, sample size =100

3.2. Inferential Statistical Analysis

An independent-samples t-test was performed to explore whether perceived wellbeing differed significantly between male and female respondents. The results showed no statistically significant difference between the two groups, $t(98) = -0.177$, $p = .860$. On average, men reported a slightly higher Perceived Wellbeing Index ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.84$) compared to women ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 0.82$), but the difference was negligible. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference $[-0.36, 0.30]$ includes zero, indicating that any observed difference is likely due to chance. These findings suggest that gender is not a determining factor in how Romanian emigrants evaluate their job-related and social outcomes abroad.

Another independent-samples t-test was also conducted to assess whether the perceived wellbeing of Romanian emigrants differed based on their place of origin — urban or rural areas. The results indicated no statistically significant difference between the two groups, $t(98) = 0.360$, $p = .720$. Respondents from rural areas reported a slightly higher average Perceived Wellbeing Index ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 0.78$) compared to those from urban areas ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 0.90$), but the mean difference of 0.06 was not statistically meaningful. The 95% confidence interval for the difference $[-0.28, 0.40]$ includes zero, further supporting the conclusion that urban/rural background is not significantly associated with differences in perceived wellbeing among Romanian emigrants.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine differences in perceived wellbeing across age groups. The results indicated that the effect of age on perceived wellbeing was not statistically significant, $F(6, 93) = 2.103$, $p = .060$. Although the result did not meet the conventional threshold for significance ($p < .05$), it was marginally close, suggesting a possible trend that may warrant further investigation with a larger and more evenly distributed sample. The highest average wellbeing scores were observed among respondents aged 35–45 ($M = 3.00$) and 45–55 ($M = 4.20$), while lower scores were reported by those in the 46–55 and 56–65 groups. However, due to the small number of participants in some age categories (particularly those with only one respondent), post hoc tests could not be conducted to further explore specific group differences.

One more one-way ANOVA was conducted to assess differences in perceived wellbeing across levels of educational attainment. The results revealed a statistically significant effect of education level on perceived wellbeing, $F(6, 93) = 2.369$, $p = .036$. This indicates that the way Romanian emigrants perceive their occupational and social outcomes abroad differs depending on their educational background. The highest levels of perceived wellbeing were reported by respondents with vocational secondary education ($M = 3.04$) and lower secondary education ($M = 3.60$), while those with a doctorate degree reported the lowest wellbeing scores ($M = 1.90$). However, due to the small number of participants in some categories, post hoc comparisons could not be performed, and these trends should be interpreted with

caution. A more balanced sample across education levels would be needed to confirm which specific groups differ significantly.

Furthermore, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether perceived wellbeing differed according to marital status among Romanian emigrants. The analysis revealed no statistically significant differences between groups, $F(4, 95) = 0.273, p = .894$. Although small variations in mean scores were observed, with widowed respondents reporting the highest average wellbeing ($M = 2.75$) and cohabiting respondents the lowest ($M = 2.40$), these differences were not statistically meaningful. The results of the Tukey post hoc test further confirmed that none of the pairwise comparisons between marital status groups reached significance, and all categories fell within the same homogeneous subset.

Another one-way ANOVA was performed to examine whether perceived wellbeing among Romanian emigrants varied by destination country. The results showed no statistically significant differences, $F(11, 88) = 1.667, p = .094$, though the p-value approached the conventional threshold for significance. While some variation in mean scores was observed, for instance, the highest wellbeing was reported by respondents in Cyprus ($M = 4.20$) and Norway ($M = 3.80$), while the lowest was reported in Denmark and Sweden ($M = 1.60$), these differences were not statistically meaningful based on the available sample. Moreover, due to small group sizes (some with only a single respondent), post hoc comparisons could not be conducted, and results should be interpreted with caution.

3.3. Discussions

The results of the descriptive analyses suggest that for most Romanian emigrants in this sample, migration has led to a perceived improvement in both material and social dimensions of life, which are key components of subjective wellbeing. The strong agreement with the statement „my job abroad is/was better paid and has/had a higher social status compared to the job I had in Romania”, chosen by 72% of respondents, indicates that a large share of migrants associate their employment abroad with upward mobility and a better life overall. This perception aligns with theories of subjective wellbeing that go beyond economic indicators to include aspects like social recognition, occupational prestige, and personal dignity. A job that is not only better paid but also enjoys higher status in society likely contributes to migrants’ self-worth, sense of accomplishment, and life satisfaction, all core elements of wellbeing in both psychological and sociological literature. At the same time, the noticeable split of opinion regarding the statement „better paid but lower social status” (with 36% strongly disagreeing and 26% strongly agreeing) reveals a more complex reality for some migrants. For this group, although the economic benefit of migration is clear, the loss of social standing may temper their overall wellbeing. This is often the case for skilled migrants who experience occupational downgrading, where their qualifications are underutilized or

unrecognized in the host country. Such situations may lead to feelings of frustration or marginalization, despite financial improvement. Even more telling is the near-universal rejection of the scenarios in which jobs abroad are perceived as worse paid or equivalent to those in Romania, regardless of social status. These responses suggest that Romanian migrants do not view their migration experiences as neutral or negative; they tend to associate emigration with meaningful and positive change, especially in economic terms. However, the fact that social status alone was rarely seen as a compensating factor for lower pay highlights the primacy of economic stability and income in shaping perceptions of wellbeing among this group.

In sum, the findings indicate that subjective wellbeing among Romanian emigrants is largely influenced by a combination of higher wages and enhanced social status, with material gain playing a slightly more dominant role. The role of symbolic rewards, such as prestige or social recognition, is significant but insufficient by itself to ensure positive wellbeing outcomes. Thus, migration is perceived as beneficial when it delivers both economic and social validation, contributing to an integrated sense of improved quality of life.

The inferential statistical analyses aimed to explore whether Romanian emigrants' perceived wellbeing, measured through a composite index reflecting changes in occupational pay and social status abroad, differed across key sociodemographic characteristics. Overall, the findings suggest that most sociodemographic factors showed no statistically significant influence on perceived wellbeing after emigration. Independent-samples t-tests revealed no significant differences in perceived wellbeing based on gender or urban/rural origin. Male and female respondents, as well as those from urban and rural areas, reported very similar average wellbeing scores, suggesting that gender and place of origin are not differentiating factors in how migrants perceive their integration abroad. One-way ANOVA tests were used to assess differences across variables with more than two categories, including age group, educational level, marital status, and destination country. Among these, only educational level showed a statistically significant association with perceived wellbeing ($p = .036$). Respondents with vocational or lower secondary education tended to report higher perceived wellbeing compared to those with post-secondary or doctoral degrees. However, post hoc comparisons were limited by the uneven distribution of participants across categories, particularly in the highest and lowest education levels. No statistically significant differences were found across age groups ($p = .060$), marital status ($p = .894$), or country of emigration ($p = .094$), though the latter two p-values were relatively close to the threshold of significance and may warrant further exploration in larger or more balanced samples. Although no statistically significant differences were found across destination countries ($p = .094$), some variation in average wellbeing scores was observable. Migrants in Western and Northern European countries (e.g., Germany, UK, and the Nordic states) tended to report slightly higher wellbeing, reflecting both better wages and stronger institutional protections, while those in Southern Europe (e.g., Italy,

Spain) showed more mixed perceptions, likely due to occupational downgrading despite wage improvements. These tendencies, while not conclusive, suggest that the institutional and economic contexts of destination countries may subtly shape migrants' evaluations of their job outcomes and wellbeing, a finding that could be explored more robustly in future studies with larger or more evenly distributed samples. The lack of significance in these variables may suggest that perceived wellbeing is not strongly shaped by demographic profiles alone, but may be more closely related to individual work experiences, motivations for migration, or subjective expectations.

Conclusion

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Romanian emigrants perceive their post-migration wellbeing, emphasizing the mixed roles of economic advancement and social recognition. The findings show that most migrants associate emigration with improved material and symbolic outcomes, particularly through better-paid jobs and higher occupational status. While perceived wellbeing does not significantly vary across most sociodemographic categories, educational level emerges as a relevant factor, suggesting that expectations and outcomes may diverge depending on one's prior qualifications. One of the strengths of this research is the use of a composite measure that combines perceptions of both financial gain and social status change, providing a broader view of subjective wellbeing than income alone.

Beyond the descriptive and inferential results, the study highlights several implications for policy. In Romania, persistent wage disparities and limited career opportunities remain important push factors for migration. Addressing these structural drivers requires more than short-term solutions. Sustainable wage increases, investments in productive sectors, and comprehensive career development programs are necessary to create incentives for workers to remain in the country. Moreover, policies that improve mechanisms for skills recognition and reward merit could encourage not only retention but also return migration, particularly among skilled workers. For destination countries, the findings underscore the importance of improving systems for recognizing foreign qualifications and reducing occupational downgrading. Many Romanian emigrants experience a mismatch between their training and the jobs they obtain abroad, which undermines their social status even when income improves. Better alignment of migrants' skills with host-country labour market needs would enhance wellbeing outcomes while simultaneously increasing economic efficiency. This could be achieved through streamlined recognition procedures, targeted training programs, and active labour market policies designed to maximize the use of human capital. At the European level, the findings highlight the importance of preserving the free movement of labour as a central mechanism for market adjustment. Wage differentials between East and West

largely reflect differences in productivity, capital accumulation, and institutional quality, and migration represents an efficient response to these disparities. Rather than attempting to administratively engineer wage convergence, European policy should focus on reducing frictions that prevent labour from being allocated where it is most valued. Measures such as improving the portability of social rights, facilitating the recognition of qualifications, and ensuring transparent labour market information can enhance the efficiency of mobility without distorting underlying price signals. In this sense, migration should be viewed not as a challenge to be managed but as a process through which individuals respond to incentives, contributing to overall economic dynamism within the Union.

From an academic perspective, this research demonstrates the value of combining material and symbolic indicators when evaluating migration outcomes. While economic stability remains the most decisive determinant of perceived wellbeing, social recognition plays an important supporting role. Future studies should build on this approach by employing larger and more balanced samples, especially across different educational levels and destination countries. Longitudinal designs would allow researchers to track how wellbeing evolves at different stages of migration, from initial settlement to longer-term integration or potential return. Comparative studies with other Central and Eastern European countries would help determine whether the Romanian experience is unique or representative of broader regional patterns. Qualitative approaches could also complement statistical findings, capturing migrants' lived experiences of occupational mobility, identity, and recognition in host societies. In conclusion, Romanian labour migration emerges as a phenomenon broadly perceived as transformative, with the clearest benefits achieved when both income and social status increase at the same time. Economic advancement appears as the most decisive factor, yet symbolic rewards such as prestige and social recognition are indispensable to achieving a holistic sense of wellbeing. By addressing both material and social dimensions, policymakers and scholars can contribute to shaping a European labour market in which mobility is not merely an economic necessity but a genuine opportunity for improving quality of life.

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The resilience of the European Union's values: article 2 TEU and subnational gender dissidence in Poland

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Abstract: The values of the European Union (Art. 2, TEU) protect Member States against democratic backsliding with a strong focus on the rule of law. In Poland, the Law and Justice (PiS) party, in power from 2015-2023, threatened the rule of law and gender equality, while advocates for gender equality fought to safeguard these principles. Using this example, this article explores structural and social-normative factors that enable or hinder gender concerns' access to the EU, starting at the subnational level. Gender representation and policies in Poland's 2018 local elections and their bottom-up translatability to EU institutions show that the resilience of EU values depends on national provisions. Furthermore, the role of the European Commission and the Court of Justice of the European Union in supporting gender equality and the rule of law display how bottom-up dissidence and top-down EU approaches interact in developing resilience against democratic backsliding in EU Member States. These dependencies show that Member States have a responsibility in providing the conditions for gender dissidence to flourish. This can be achieved through the promotion of educational diversity and the development of legal frameworks that allow traditional gender norms to be challenged at the local, regional, and national levels.

Keywords: subnational dissidence, multilevel governance, European Union, gender equality, rule of law, Poland

Introduction

The conversation about threats to democracy worldwide is currently at a pinnacle. Democratic backsliding, defined as the „deliberate, intended action designed to gradually undermine the fundamental rules of the game in an existing democracy, carried out by a democratically elected government” (Bakke & Sitter 2022), constitutes an example. The resilience against democratic backsliding resonates with the core values of the European Union (EU), today fortified in Articles 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (CFR), and the Copenhagen Criteria. In 1951, the Schuman Plan stated:

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The pooling of coal and steel production should immediately provide for the setting up of common foundations for economic development as a first step in the federation of Europe [...]. The solidarity in production thus established will make it plain that any war between France and Germany becomes not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible (Schuman, 1950).

The individuals¹ shaping this new war-preventing entity were impacted by the Second World War, its preceding rise of nationalism and protectionism. Member countries of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) would collectively delegate sovereignty to a High Authority, known today as the European Commission. A complex system of supranational governance was developed with the goals of „eliminating the barriers which divide Europe” (European Economic Community, 1957) and „improving the living and working conditions of their peoples” (*ibid.*). Its founding principles – liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as the rule of law – gained importance as the block set itself apart from communist Eastern Europe with the normative aspiration to be a Union of democratic Western Europe (Manners, 2002). These values were embraced by the Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia when they joined the EU in 2004, as well as by Romania, and Bulgaria in 2007. To implement these principles, the Union’s system was designed to connect the European level with national and subnational governance levels endowing individuals with participatory agency against authoritarian governments while protecting their democratic, fundamental rights². But does this framework also work when states are affected by democratic backsliding and threaten Union values as well as those communities that support them?

This article will answer this question by using the example of the Republic of Poland and the policies of the democratically elected Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), which was in power from 2015-2023. Under the leadership of the PiS misogynist, homophobic policies targeted at excluding marginalized groups were implemented, and core principles of democratic government such as the rule of law were threatened. After years that were characterized by democratic backsliding, the Polish electorate finally outvoted the PiS on October 15, 2023, when

¹ Among them Konrad Adenauer, Walter Hallstein, Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman, Paul-Henri Spaak, Altiero Spinelli, and Alcide de Gasperi.

² The Union’s fundamental rights oblige Member States to adhere to human rights when implementing Union law (Art. 51, Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU; Pernice, 2008). Although Poland signed the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU with an opt-out protocol, the CJEU held that in instances where a legislative file, judicial case, or factual situation falls within the scope of binding EU law, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU is applicable and may be invoked before national authorities, including the opt-out provisions of the Charter for Poland (C-411/10) (CJEU, 2011).

Poland saw the highest turnout (74.4%) in a parliamentary election since the end of the Cold War. The three main opposition parties, the liberal, catch-all Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska)³, the liberal-conservative Third Way (Trzecia Droga)⁴, and the social-democratic New Left (Nowa Lewica)⁵ altogether won 248 seats in the 460-member Sejm, which now comprises the highest number of Polish female politicians ever (29.6 percent of all MPs). A growing number of Poles support same-sex civil partnership, marriage, and adoption (Notes from Poland, 2023a, 2023b).

Using women's rights and gender advocacy in Poland as an example of EU law-aligned subnational dissent operating in a national context of democratic backsliding, this article scrutinizes a) how gender concerns translate into the European level and b) how the EU does protect them. National dissidents, in such context, are considered actors that operate within the legal framework of the EU and advocate for the resilience of its policies and values. Gender concerns constitute the respective example. In order to scrutinize the bottom-up and top down dynamics that inform gender dissidence, this article, first, contextualizes social norms within Multilevel Governance (MLG) theory to set the framework for the analysis of the impact social norms for the fluidity of gender concerns. This is followed, second, by an analysis of the bottom structures in which social norms were or were not able to transfer to the Union level. This will be done by looking at gender concerns in Poland and their translatability to the European level will be examined via the Committee of the Regions (CoR), the institution specifically established to represent subnational authorities by the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992. Its composition before the 2023 Polish Parliamentary elections will be considered since this marks the time when advocacy for gender concerns together with the fight for the rule of law took place in a national environment characterized by democratic backsliding. Regulatory factors that condition access to the CoR will be examined. A second bottom-up consideration will be given to female representation at the Polish local elections in 2018 in the third section. It will also elaborate on qualitative considerations of the role of gender equality and LGBTIQA+ policies by looking at Polish parties' attention to the topics during the local elections. These elections determine female presence on the subnational level informing the composition of the CoR, whose composition will be analysed in the fourth section. The fifth section scrutinizes the top-down approach by the European Commission and

³ The catch-all Civic Coalition was formed as an opposition group to the PiS before the local elections in 2018. It comprises several parties: The Civic Platform, Modern, the Polish Initiative, The Greens, AGRounia, Yes! For Poland, and the Independents. It holds 157 seats in the Sejm.

⁴ The Third Way is electoral coalition comprising the liberal-centrist Poland 2050 and the conservative PSL (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, Polish People's Party). It was created in April 2023 and holds 64 seats in the Sejm.

⁵ The pro-European New Left was formed in 2021. It is a merger of the Democratic Left Alliance and Spring, which focused on women's rights, education, civic participation, and the EU, holding 18 Sejm seats.

the CJEU to assess qualitative commonalities with Polish dissident groups. Finally, context-based synergetic relationships between subnational actors and the European Union are found to be decisive in safeguarding Union values, policies, and laws. The conclusion offers policy perspective to safeguard gender dissidence as part of the Article 2 TEU values.

1. Social norms and multilevel governance

Judith Butler corroborates that a „norm operates within the social practices as the implicit standard of normalization.” (Butler, 2004, p. 41). Butler depicts an implicit standard of behaviour, a kind of conformism with social expectations. In the same vein, we understand gender as „the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the intersstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes.” (Butler, 2004, p. 42) Every time we think and speak about the masculine and the feminine, we affirm and normalise the gender binary and thus fortify corresponding limiting gender norms. Gender norms can have consequences for political participation. In a society where stereotypical gender roles persist, women and LGBTIQA+ persons are excluded from exercising their full political participation. Limited participation in the political realm, impacts the private space, for example via laws that affect family life, education, elections, and political participation and vice versa. Hence, in an EU context, social norms can impact the accessibility to policymaking already at the subnational level with consequences for the national and supranational levels of governance calling for the inclusion of social norms when thinking about the multilevel structure of the Union.

MLG theory holds that the multilevel dynamics between EU institutions and subnational actors blur the strict distinction between the national and international arenas of policymaking. Scholars of MLG examine the EU as a dynamic polity whose foundational political consensus changes over time without the power of Member State representatives being dissolved by supranational institutions (Hooghe, 1995; Hooghe & Marks, 1996; Hooghe & Marks, 2001; Marks & McAdam, 1996). The EU is considered a multi-layered polity with new policy networks beyond, but not without, the state that enhances intergovernmental bargaining (Aalberts, 2004; Callanan, 2011; Coen & Richardson, 2009; Jeffrey, 2000; Marks et al., 1996; Richardson, 2007, 2015; Risse-Kappen, 1996; Tatham, 2015; Tatham & Thau, 2014).

Amongst others, MLG found that constitutional determinants, such as levels of decentralization and institutionalized access channels, determine the impact of subnational actors (Blatter et al., 2010; Jeffrey, 2000; Loughlin, 2007). Jeffrey states that constitutional factors, hence legal/structural parameters, ultimately entail ramifications for political behavioural practice and provide the framework for subnational actors to be *potentially* strong. Actors are empowered *through* the state, leading to a variety of regional power configurations (2000). At all governance

levels, political impact varies dependent on whether action and ideas are anchored in political institutions or not. As such, gender concerns must translate into the agenda-setting public sphere that implements concrete policies, acting within the institutionalized policymaking process. Hannah Arendt reminded us in *Crises of the Republic: Lying in Politics, Civil Disobedience, on Violence, Thoughts on Politics and Revolution* that civil disobedience has to „always present and to be reckoned with in the daily business of government” (Arendt, 1972, p. 101). Yet, such access-providing, institutionalizing mechanisms – for example quota regulations – are not independent of social norms while the gender cause is ultimately affected by social them. Therefore, social norms and structural provisions correlate in the EU’s multilevel system and impact the resilience of European values, specifically those that aim a preventing democratic backsliding such as Article 2 TEU:

The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.

Article 2 TEU institutionalizes, safeguards, and encourages gender dissidence in the EU’s Member States (as long as such disobedience does not violate Art. 2 TEU), limits authoritarian governments and empowers those that protect the Union’s values. It ensures that Art. 2 TEU-compliant nationals of EU Member States can participate in the democratic decision-making processes of their respective states by emphasizing democracy, the rule-of-law, minority rights and equality between men and women. Taken together, these principles allow for dissent. They also constitute the rationale of and are reinforced by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (European Union, 2012).

If we enhance the starting point of MLG that found that subnational influence takes place through the state and if we add to this reasoning that social norms operate on the subnational level that provides access to politics, this combined approach considers both political structure and social parameters to assess whether Polish gender concerns could access the subnational and supranational policymaking spheres.

2. Access to the Committee of the Regions

The CoR is an advisory body that must be consulted by the Council, the Commission, and the Parliament prior to deciding on matters pertaining to local and regional government, such as employment and social affairs (Art. 153 TFEU), education, vocational training and youth (Art. 165 TFEU), culture (Art. 167 TFEU), public health (Art. 168 TFEU), trans-European transport, telecommunications and

energy networks (Art. 172 TFEU), as well as economic and social cohesion (Art. 175, 177, 178 TFEU). Article 153 TFEU stipulates „equality between men and women with regard to labour-market opportunities and treatment at work,” while Article 8 TFEU, concerning the entirety of the Union’s activities, postulates the elimination of inequalities and the promotion of equality between men and women.

The CoR normally decides by majority vote unless otherwise determined by its rules of procedure (CoR, 2021). As of December 29, 2022, the CoR is comprised of 329 members and 329 alternate members, whose allocation is determined according to the population size of each Member State (Council of the European Union, 2019). Members, appointed for five years (the current period ends on January 25, 2030), must perform Committee duties independently and only in the Union’s interest once membership at the CoR is confirmed (Art. 300, 4 TFEU). To ensure democratic answerability directly located at the subnational level, members and alternate members must represent regional or local bodies by way of electoral mandates or political accountability to a directly elected assembly (Art. 300, 3 TFEU).

In most Member States, as in Poland per statutory law, national lists nominating CoR members are drawn up by associations of regional and local authorities (Sejm, 2005; Joint Commission, 2022, CoR, n.d.-a). A Joint Commission of Government and Local Self-Government and Representatives (Komisja Wspólna Rządu i Samorządu Terytorialnego) coordinates the process leading to common positions of the national level and local government (Joint Commission, 2022) and opines on national, supranational, or international policies that affect subnational units. It is composed of national government and local government representatives. The government side is comprised of the minister responsible for public administration and 11 representatives appointed and recalled by the Polish Council of Ministers. They are matched by an equal number of local government representatives (Joint Commission, 2022).

CoR candidates must represent a) councillors of a commune, county, or voivodship, b) a commune head, mayor, or city president, and c) members of the county boards or the voivodship board.⁶ Once the full list is comprised, the Joint Commission consents and the Prime Minister formally concurs. After that, the Commission for European Affairs of the Polish Parliament opines, and the national government puts forward a list of 21 candidates and 21 alternates to the Commission (Council of the European Union, 2019). Thereafter, the Council of the EU, which

⁶ They are chosen by various local government corporations. The Union of the Voivodships of the Republic of Poland designates 10 members and the same number of deputy members. The Association of Polish Counties selects 3 members and 3 deputies. Associations representing communes chose 8 members and 8 deputies in total (Union of Polish Metropolises [2+2], the Association of Polish Cities [3+3], the Union of Small Polish Towns [1+1], and the Union of Rural Communes of the Republic of Poland [2+2]). (Sejm, 2005, nr. 90 poz. 759, Art. 20)

votes unanimously on national membership lists that it received from the Commission (Art. 300, 5 TFEU; Art. 305 TFEU) (CoR, n.d.-b).

This multilevel process operates at the national, regional, and local levels, allowing for potential access to European governance by dissident voices at subnational levels. However, ultimate authority partially remained centralized, as the Prime Minister's consent is required albeit only formally. Moreover, the formal process involving Poland's subnational representatives at the CoR lacks gender-sensitive provisions (CoR, n.d.-a). This structural absence effectively limits gender dissidents' participation in EU policymaking. With Jeffrey, one can corroborate that subnational dissidence is not only potentially strong but also weakened through the state. Such national regulations ultimately influence the resilience of European Union values, which is hampered in the case of Poland. Therefore, the following section shall examine if and in how far gender parity (quantitatively) and gender-related policies such as non-binary concerns (qualitatively) were topics of the 2018 local elections.

3. Bottom-up: the Polish local elections in 2018

In 2011, Poland was the first Eastern European country to introduce a statutory quota of no less than 35% female and male candidates respectively for the European Parliament (EP), the Sejm, and all local elections that follow the proportionality method to municipality councils with more than 20,000 residents, councils of cities with county status, county councils, and voivodship assemblies (Cichosz & Tomczak, 2019). Municipalities with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants and the Senate operate with single-mandate districts, where quotas are not applied but either one female or one male candidate is suggested. Whereas the quota has increased the number of female candidates in local elections over the years (1998: 20%, 2002: 25%, 2006: 29%, 2010: 30%, 2014: 38%, 2018: 45.8%) (Druciarek et al., 2019), it must be considered that female candidatures had already risen before the introduction of the quota system, albeit slowly.

The overall share of female candidatures is not a sufficient indicator for the evaluation of access-providing mechanisms since list positions play an important role in voter preferences. The likelihood of winning constituted the main factor for list composition, except at the voivodship level, where women's candidacies were systematically addressed. The extent to which society associates female political presence with success played a crucial role in shaping the impact of dissident voices. In the 2018 elections, female political presence was not perceived as a marker of success. Druciarek et al. (2019) have shown that due stereotypical role allocation the anticipated female likelihood of winning was low, and the subsequent female impact on political decision-making was limited. Women were perceived as potentially weaker politicians. This confirms the severe impact of social norms. In this specific

case they limit gender dissidence and the subsequent institutionalization into the policymaking realm. Table 1 confirms this.

Table 1. Female representation in the 2018 Polish local elections in percent

	Regional Assemblies	Counties	Cities (County Status)	Municipalities >20,000	Single Mandate Municipalities <20,000
Candidate s	45.80	46.10	45.90	45.90	35.20
List Position 1	26.30	24.00	26.00	27.50	35.20
Elected Women	28.80	23.80	26.80	27.50	31.20

Source: author's representation, data based on Druciarek et al. (2019)

In 2018, women in all local units except municipalities with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants comprised more than 40% of the candidates, but fewer than 30% held number 1 position. Single-mandate municipalities represent the exception, with a female share of 35.20% in the respective category. Regarding elected women, numbers are similar. Single-mandate municipalities outperform these other districts, which Druciarek et. al. (2019) attribute to more direct interaction with the electorate and less dependency on party politics (networking) and financial resources. Both of these are often less accessible for women, owing to their continued occupation of traditional social roles. The impact of stereotypical social roles might also explain why only a few women ran for the offices of city presidents (17.3%), mayors (18.1%), and head of commune (18.3%), with outcomes of 10.3%, 10.7%, and 12.9% respectively. This means that the higher up the level of governance, the more difficult it is for gender dissidence to succeed. Overall, the share of elected women in 2018 represents an increase since 2010, but only at a very slow pace. As stereotypes continue to determine women's participation in leading local political positions, the translatability of gender dissidence into institutionalized political action is negatively affected, reducing the likelihood of its permanent presence in the political discourse with a significant variation between political parties. The Green Party (46%) and the former conservative-liberal Together Party (53%) accounted for the highest share of female number 1 positions on electoral lists, while the governing PiS (19%), the right-wing populist and Eurosceptic KUKIZ'15 (18%), and the centre-left Democratic Left Alliance (SLD, 14%) represent the smallest shares.

In addition to the above considerations, party politics can actively question stereotypes even if party politicians are predominantly male. Research has shown that male politicians can represent women's interests (Kl  y et al., 2024) although one could ask in how far interest-definition is already at least partially determined

by the social realities of each context. Indeed, in the 2018 local elections, the rearward direction of government policies was challenged by the biggest opposition coalition, the Civic Coalition. The Civic Coalition addressed same-sex partnerships, sexual orientation, combatting stereotypes in the workplace, the closure of the pension gap between men and women, the equitable distribution of roles in childcare, promoting paternity leave and the guarantee of two months of paid parental leave, a fourteen-day unpaid care leave as well as combatting violence against women (Civic Coalition, 2019; 2023). While the Civic Coalition's focus centered on women's rights and overcoming gender stereotypes, LGBTQIA+ concerns were not prominently addressed. In addition to the Civic Coalition, only the agrarian Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe's (Polish People's Party, PSL) *Women's Declaration* addressed women's candidatures. However, instead of overcoming the binary and gender stereotypes, the PSL confirmed gender stereotypes by attributing care and maternity to the female. Consequentially, the gender binary informed the local election campaigns both quantitatively and qualitatively. This intensifies the consequences of gender stereotypes in the private sphere, aggravating the ramifications for institutionalized political representation in the public sphere because of social norms that impact both realms and locate the female in traditionally private realm. The existing 35% quota was rarely achieved because of access limiting gender norms. Gender-sensitive policies certainly help in raising awareness for the topic of gender equality but they cannot entirely do away with social norms. Given the connection of the local level to the composition of the CoR, the national deficiency will ultimately be replicated on the Union level, echoing Zweifel's findings that national democracy deficits are mirrored in the EU (Zweifel, 2014), extending the findings to public and private realms. Hence, gender stereotypes negatively impact participation through national and subnational governance levels to the European level. Bottom-up advocacy for European values in Poland was stalled by social norms.

4. The Committee of the Regions and gender equality

The Treaties do not make gender equality a prerequisite for CoR designations. Hence, there is a dependency on national provisions. Table 2, which demonstrates female representation in the CoR in each national delegation, displays that only seven (25.93%: Sweden, Finland, Ireland, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia) of the 27 Member States include the criterion of gender equality in the CoR nomination process (CoR, n.d.-b). It is noteworthy that such a formal requirement does not necessarily translate into gender balance at the CoR. Practice may diverge from procedural provisions and put on view a dependency on the national selection framework.

Very noticeable differences in female representation exist between Member States. Ireland (55.56%), Sweden (50%), and France (50%) rank top three in the

membership category. Considering the average share of the aggregate delegations (members and alternates), Sweden (70.59%), Luxembourg (54.55%), and Finland (50%) rank top three. France, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg belong to the top categories but do not explicitly mention gender representation as a decisive criterion for CoR membership designation while only seven of all EU Members (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden) implemented gender-sensitive selection processes, yet without the anticipated representational results in 4 of these countries (Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia). This underscores the importance of gender norms: they may impede gender equality despite policies that support respective goals. As of December 13, 2023, the Polish CoR delegation of twenty members contained three women. (One open position was to be filled.) Poland belongs to the worst-performing third of states in all categories examined. In the category of female CoR members, Poland (10%) performs the best in the group of the lowest ranking third of states, followed by Greece (8.33%), Portugal (8.33%), Estonia (0%), Croatia (0%), Malta (0%), and Slovakia (0%). The Polish tally falls short compared to the EU27 average of 22.21% in the category of female CoR members. Looking at local and regional elected officeholders in all Member States, 30% are women (CoR n.d.-c), a number neither Polish CoR members nor the average of the Union achieves.

Qualitatively, gender equality plays a role when the CoR opines on Union policies. The CoR strives to embrace gender-related behaviour in its Code of Conduct and elevate the visibility of gender equality via gender-mainstreaming and awareness-raising measures, such as developing the Committee into a platform for exchanging best practices and working closely together with national delegations (CoR, 2019). In the *Strategy for a Gender Balance in Members' Participation in the CoR*, the CoR's target – gender parity – exceeds the 2011 Polish 35% quota for national and subnational elections.

The CoR Strategy recommends only accepting female nominations until parity at the presidential level is reached and appeals to the nominating bodies of Member States to solely submit gender-balanced lists (CoR, 2019). So far, the Council supports a 40% quota but has not recommended binding measures (Council of the European Union, 2015).

Table 2. Female members in the CoR (by Member State with the highest female share in the membership category)

Country	Members (M) & Alternates (A)	M	Female M	Relative Share of Female M	A	Female A	Relative Share Female A	Female President*	Total Female M	Female Share Total	Gender- Sensitive Selection
Ireland	9	9	5	55.56	9	3	33.33	0	8	44.44	1
Sweden	12	8	4	50.00	9	8	88.89	0	12	70.59	1
France	24	24	12	50.00	22	10	45.45	1	22	47.83	0
Finland	9	9	4	44.44	9	5	55.56	0	9	50.00	1
Netherlands	12	11	4	36.36	10	3	30.00	0	7	33.33	0
Luxembourg	6	6	2	33.33	5	4	80.00	0	6	54.55	0
Germany	24	21	7	33.33	20	6	30.00	1	13	31.71	0
Denmark	9	9	3	33.33	9	2	22.22	0	5	27.78	0
Slovenia	7	7	2	28.57	6	2	33.33	0	4	30.77	0
Italy	24	19	5	26.32	19	2	10.53	0	7	18.42	0
Spain	21	20	5	25.00	20	7	35.00	1	12	30.00	0
Hungary	12	12	3	25.00	12	1	8.33	0	4	16.67	0
Romania	15	15	3	20.00	14	2	14.29	0	5	17.24	0
Austria	12	11	2	18.18	12	4	33.33	0	6	26.09	0
Czech Rep.	12	11	2	18.18	10	2	20.00	0	4	19.05	1
Belgium	12	12	2	16.67	12	5	41.67	0	7	29.17	0
Bulgaria	12	12	2	16.67	12	4	33.33	1	6	25.00	0
Cyprus	6	6	1	16.67	4	1	25.00	1	2	20.00	0
Latvia	7	7	1	14.29	7	1	14.29	0	2	14.29	1
Lithuania	9	9	1	11.11	8	2	25.00	0	3	17.65	1
Poland	21	20	2	10.00	19	1	5.26	0	3	7.69	0
Greece	12	12	1	8.33	12	2	16.67	0	3	12.50	0
Portugal	12	12	1	8.33	12	1	8.33	1	2	8.33	0
Croatia	9	9	0	0.00	9	4	44.44	0	4	22.22	0
Estonia	7	7	0	0.00	6	2	33.33	0	2	15.38	1
Slovakia	9	6	0	0.00	9	1	11.11	0	1	6.67	0
Malta	5	4	0	0.00	4	0	0.00	0	0	0.00	0
Total	329	308	74	22.21	300	85	29.58	6	159	25.83	7

Source: author's representation based on Council of the European Union (2019) and CoR (n.d.-b)

The CoR also supported the European Commission's 2012 initiative for *Directive 2012/0299 on Improving the Gender Balance Among Non-Executive Directors of Companies Listed on Stock Exchanges and Related Measures* (European Commission, 2012; CoR, 2013). This initiative envisioned a quota of 40% for non-executive directors and a 33% quota among all directors, as well as a sanctioning mechanism for non-compliant member states, which the CoR welcomed (CoR, 2013). The subsequent block in the Council prolonged implementation and was only overcome on March 14, 2022 (European Commission, 2022d). *Directive*

2022/2381 on Improving the Gender Balance Among Directors of Listed Companies and Related Measures (EU, 2022) was adopted by Parliament in November 2022 (European Parliament, 2022). The long legislative process that followed the Commission proposal can be read as a testimony of the strong position of the Council and, again, political empowerment on the Union level *through the states*.

Moreover, the CoR delivered an opinion on the Commission's *Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025* (European Commission, 2020a), stressing the need for subnational governments to be part of „the design, implementation, and monitoring of the strategy” (CoR, 2020). It urged the Commission to set up interinstitutional working mechanisms, to formalize meetings of equality ministers at the Council, to adopt codes of conduct, and to include violence against women in the Treaty of Lisbon's Eurocrimes Article 83 TFEU, urging Member States to ratify the The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (CoR, 2020). The CoR requested that the Commission demand Member States establish the necessary framework to strengthen women's candidacies in subnational elections and address social norms hindering equal chances of entering politics. Echoing that, the CoR urged Member States to transpose *Directive 2019/1158 on Work-Life-Balance* (EU, 2019), suggested an EU-wide care agreement, and asked the Commission for a revision of the *Barcelona Targets on Childcare* to ensure female labour market participation and the equalization of family and care-work between men and women (CoR, 2020). The latter was subsequently realized (European Commission, 2022a; 2022b).

The CoR endorsed the first *LGBTIQ Equality Strategy* ever put forward by the Commission (CoR, 2022; European Commission, 2020b), directly alluding to the situation in Poland when it

urges the European Commission to ensure that the fundamental principles of the EU are observed, and that no municipality, region, or state introduces systemic discriminatory initiatives, such as the 'LGBT-free zones', [...] or uses funds in ways that are non-compliant with the principle of non-discrimination (CoR, 2022).

This underscores the synergistic working routine between the CoR and the Commission. Yet, the CoR only constitutes a non-binding conjunctive mediator.

5. EU Top-Down Synergies: The European Court of Justice and the European Commission

The CoR's awareness for socially determined access-hindrances into regional, and subsequently Union, political representation, is matched by the work of the European Commission and the CJEU. Both institutions are accountable to the Treaties (Art. 17 TEU, Art.19 (3) TEU) and not to the European citizens or party

politics. Hence, they are less prone to political volatility. They ensure the application of the Union treaties, including the protection of the values of the Union. Both institutions worked synergistically with Poland's advocates for gender equality and the rule of law.

Furthermore, the Commission holds the authority to activate the Rule of Law Framework, established in 2014, which initiates a structured dialogue with non-compliant Member States, offering recommendations on how to address rule-of-law deficiencies. In the case of Poland, the Rule of Law Framework was invoked in 2016, for the first time in the Union's history. Despite these measures, further restrictive laws were enacted in Poland, prompting the escalation to the Article 7 procedure. The initial stage of this procedure (Article 7(1) TEU) allows the Council of the European Union to determine whether a Member State has committed a clear and serious breach of the values outlined in Article 2 TEU. On December 20, 2017, at the request of the European Parliament, the European Commission formally called on the Council to initiate this process. Consequently, five hearings with the Polish authorities were conducted by May 2022. The second stage (Article 7(2) TEU) of the Article 7 mechanism permits the imposition of sanctions, including financial penalties. Although there was considerable backing among EU Member States for such measures against Poland, implementing them necessitates a unanimous decision by the European Council, which comprises the heads of state or government of all 27 Member States. Moreover, the means potentially enacted through Article 7 TEU are not supported by respective deadlines, and the Commission has been criticized for its reluctance to activate Article 7(1) TEU against Poland (Blauberger & van Hüllen, 2021). While this criticism certainly is justified, the Commission's behaviour might be a result of the need for Council action in the end. Still, finally having activated the mechanism is a public sign for the readiness to protect Union values. In the same vein and with the aim of protecting the Union's budget, regulation 2020/2092 makes the disbursement of Union funds contingent upon the fulfilment of the Article 2 values (EU, 2020a) but, similarly to the Article 7 procedure, is contingent upon an implementing decision of the Council (EU, 2020a), which rises fairness questions since net-receiving countries are more vulnerable than net-contributing Member States (Blauberger & van Hüllen 2021). Annual reports on the rule of law on all Member States, that have been published since 2020 serve as a more coherent means to systematize rule of law breaches across the Union. Over time, these reports could provide the Commission with a documentation to structurally address rule of law breaches, being less vulnerable to Member State political manoeuvre at a certain point in time as they provide a more holistic picture of each Member State over the years.

Infringement procedures by which the European Commission has been safeguarding the principle of gender equality and the rule of law in the context of the judicial reforms in Poland (C-619/18; C-192/18; C-204/21R; C-204/21; C-791/19) (CJEU, 2019a, 2019b, 2021c, 2021d, 2023), have been proven to be more powerful

tool, independent from approval by the Council. The procedure is unequivocal: when a Member State contravenes the provisions of the European Treaties, the European Commission is empowered to escalate the matter to the CJEU, which holds the authority to impose financial penalties. Such an instance occurred with the Republic of Poland. Following the CJEU's determination that Poland had inadequately implemented EU-mandated disciplinary measures against judges and failed to retract specific judicial reforms contravening EU standards, a daily fine of €1 million was levied on October 27, 2021, (C-204/21R) and a landmark judgement condemned the entire Polish law reform on June 5, 2023 (C-204/21), explicitly reiterating the values of Article 2 TEU as the *conditio sine qua non* for Union membership: „respect for those values is prerequisite for the accession to the European Union of any European State applying to become a member of the European Union.” (C-204/21, para. 64) This financial disadvantage was decisive for Poland.

Benefitting from EU Cohesion Policy funds, citizens, regional politicians, and their representatives in the CoR have an interest in a sound working relationship with the Union – in the interest of their electorate. In June 2022, the Partnership Agreement between the Commission and Poland for the 2021-27 period designated €76.5 billion from the Cohesion Policy funds to Poland (European Commission, 2022c). The country is the largest beneficiary of these funds, which total €392 billion for the entire EU (European Commission, 2016.). These funds are Poland's main source for local and regional development initiatives (EU, 2020b; Kulesza & Sześciło, 2012). A significant portion of the European Social Fund Plus (12.9 billion for Poland) is allocated towards the participation of women in the labour market and the provision of childcare services (European Commission, 2022c). The withholding of EU funds is directly connected to Poland's assault on the rule of law and gender equality. The Union's financial mechanisms support the cause of the gender dissidence as the disbursement of EU funds is conditioned on the adherence to its fundamental principles (Art. 2 TEU). Because Poland neither fulfilled the rule-of-law requirement nor did it adhere to the principle of gender equality, the fund's actual arrival in the regions was at risk with a direct impact on Polish citizens.

Indeed, the former government's own logic of evoking financial concerns as the main reason for EU membership (Republic of Poland, 2022; 2023) might have been a reason to stipulate regional and local opposition. In 2021, the main centrist and left-wing opposition parties, several civil society groups (among them the Committee for the Defence of Democracy (KOD), the Citizens of the Republic (Obywatele RP), and the All-Poland Women's Strike have signed the *Agreement for the Rule of Law* (Porozumienie dla Praworządności) listing measures to roll back the government's judicial reform, restore the rule-of-law, and end the dispute with the EU. In addition, the group's identification with regional concerns is significant. Kamila Gasiuk-Pihowicz, a PO Member of Parliament, points out that „above all it [partnership with the EU] allows [us] to activate EU funds” (Notes from Poland, 2021). Indeed, research has shown that the increase in regional cohesion and

development funds granted by the EU is likely the main rationale for action in the CoR (Rodriguez-Pose & Courty, 2018).

In addition to those who benefit from Union funds, the Polish judiciary actively protected the rule of law and dissidence in the country. Despite the danger of being subjected to disciplinary proceedings controlled by the President and Minister of Justice, judges used their rights granted by the EU to oppose the systematic erosion of the judiciary in Poland (C-508/19; C-824/18; C-487/19; C-522/18; C-558/18 & C-563/18; C-585/18 & C-624/18 & C-625/18) (CJEU, 2019c, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b, 2022). The Polish judiciary reverted to the EU's legal framework to uphold the rule of law, democratic norms, and gender equality. It becomes apparent that each group developed disobedient action once they were affected by the regressive policies of the government. Opposition originated for different reasons: negative financial implications for the Polish citizens, limited rights for women and the LGBTIQA+ community, severe impediments in the own work sphere for judges that believed in the Poland's democratic value system⁷. All of them found resonance in the value system of the European Union that formed an antithesis to illiberal forces of the PiS. The Union, thus, offers an additional layer of support for dissenters to amplify their voices having institutionalized disobedience in its legal framework.

6. Specialized dissidence

If judges used their professional means to uphold the European legal framework, where did citizens concentrate their efforts? Since gender concerns were not very successful regarding their reach of institutionalized policymaking via national structures, direct presence in Brussels would be an option for unionwide dissent since the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union, and the European Commission are in dialogue with interest representatives and civil society represented at the Union level. This allows interest groups to bypass national governments and directly communicate with Union institutions. In 2023, the EU's Transparency Register stated that 3,599 registrants do not represent commercial interests, 600 registrants advance the interests of their clients, and 8,232 registrants promote their own interests or the collective interests of their members. Two hundred forty-nine registrants are from Poland, and four are directly concerned with gender concerns. Of those four organisations, the Fundacja Instytut Spraw Publicznych (Institute of Public Affairs), a research institution that deals with topics such as gender equality, was the first one to register in Brussels in 2020. The other three are

⁷ Poland was the first country in Europe to adopt a formal constitution, on May 3, 1791, replacing the feudal system with a constitutional monarchy based on the separation of powers and popular sovereignty (Davies, 1996; Granat & Granat, 2021). On June 7-8, 2003, Poland held a referendum about accession to the Union. 58.85% of the eligible electorate voted in favour of the accession with a majority of 77.45%. (Garton Ash, 2023)

non-governmental organisations, one of which followed in 2022 and two in 2023 (EU, 2023). Poland has been in the EU since 2004. It took time for these disobedient organisations to enter the European level, and they did so in the run-up to the 2023 parliamentary elections. This can be interpreted as a reaction to the unsuccessful local elections in 2018 as well as a way of channelling national opposition to the Union level to create more visibility, which ultimately creates more pressure on the national level. In turn, opposition parties' election campaigns can draw from that prominence and attract votes by catering to the pressure from both the subnational and the Union levels.

However, compared to the preliminary proceedings initiated by the Polish judiciary, direct interest group interaction with Brussels was low, which could be attributed to the fact that national women's organisations are organised in unionwide associations, like the European Women's Lobby, which represents more than 2,000 organisations within the EU, in candidate countries, former EU Member States, and in the European Free Trade Association countries (European Women's Lobby, 2025). The Network of East-West Women (NEWW) in Poland serves as the platform of the European Women's Lobby. During the 2001 national elections in Poland, they played a leading role in the „Pre-Election Polish Women Coalition”, which campaigned for greater representation of women in the Sejm and put women's and gender equality policy on the election campaign agenda. NEWW is one of the protagonists in advancing gender budgeting initiatives in Poland. To this end, it organises international and regional conferences and workshops, advise local parliaments and administrations, and provide expertise to civil society actors outside Poland. In 2004, together with the Mayor of Gdansk, they organised a campaign for better management in local communities through gender budgeting. As part of the European Women's Lobby the NEWW acquires knowledge from transnational connection that are facilitated on the Union level and utilizes the gained expertise actively in the national context. (Network of East-West Women, 2025)

This leads to the national level where the picture is different. In 2016, the All-Poland Women's Strike (*Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet*) was founded in response to the attack on women's reproductive and LGBTIQA+ rights. Until March 2022, it organised more than 2,500 equality marches (EUMANS, 2022). One possible conclusion that could be drawn from this is that dissenters who are directly affected by Union law and who already have working relations with it, namely the judiciary, make use of existing channels to the Union. Advocates for gender concerns increased their activities during the time of the retrograde path by the government as the promotion of traditional gender norms increased. Here, the re-introduction of traditional gender norms sparked national opposition leading to a favourable outcome of the 2023 Polish election. While activists did not reach beyond the national level, they expressed the desire for sound working relations with the EU, for example in the *Agreement for the Rule of Law*, which shows that an awareness for Union law and its civil disobedient protective characteristics exists (Notes from

Poland, 2021). The reluctance to significantly reach beyond the national level could be explained by the fact that the target population of these civil disobedient groups was the national population of Poland holding the power to overturn the government in the then upcoming election. Thus, there was simply no need to significantly reach beyond Poland but the values of the EU were brought from the supranational to the national levels to make the case for a pro-Union government and, thus, advancing the resilience of Union values in the national and subnational contexts.

Conclusions

The present article connects social norms with MLG to assess the conditions that allow EU law compliant advocacy for the rule of law and gender concerns to access the multi-layered governance system of the EU when such advocacy operates in a state where EU values are under threat. In doing so, insights for the resilience of European values ranging from the subnational to the supranational level were gained. Polish advocacy for the rule of law and gender equality and its translatability to the CoR served as an example of a European values compliant group operating in a democratically backsliding state. It was found that structural provisions and social norms exert multidirectional effects for the European, national, and subnational policymaking levels.

Concerning structural provisions, the Polish 35% quota constitutes a formal step toward the institutionalization of gender dissidence. However, the 2018 regional elections displayed that the pre-eminence of stereotypical gender norms and the neglect of LGBTIQA+ concerns constrained the dissident access in the political realm. Impediments to the success of women in local elections in Poland included heteronormative forms of life, the subsequent impact on women's daily workload due to care and family duties, and the lack of networks. Regarding the structural provisions that inform the Polish delegation to the CoR, a gender-sensitive selection mechanism was not in place while selection processes vary significantly according to internal party rules. Hence, political systems and the democratic national sovereignty over determining these structures limit the enforcement of EU values with consequences for the European governance level. Female representation in the Polish delegation of the CoR remained marginal, ranking among the lowest groups in the CoR. However, female representation in the CoR also demonstrated that gender-sensitive selection policies in some countries do not necessarily lead to high female representation while other countries achieve a higher proportion of female CoR members despite lacking such policies nationally. Hence, gender norms exert a negative influence on equality even when supportive policies are in place, which testifies to the strong impact of traditional gender norms for policy output with varying gravity depending on legal and socially normative realities in Member States.

Conversely, the curtailment gender equality policies and the rule of law galvanized activism once entrenched rights were encroached upon as hetero-

normative, masculine social norms were standardized by the government. Such active dissidence was facilitated by the synergies between the values safeguarded by Article 2 TEU and subnational dissident ideas, establishing a direct link between the Union's body of law and citizens in EU Member States. The Union's legal framework provides dissident actors with agency in their capacity as potential lawful dissidents against their respective Member States. This empowerment is facilitated by provisions such as preliminary rulings (Art. 267 TFEU), lobbying the Union's institutions, and political representation within these institutions, including the CoR.

Synergies between supranational and subnational efforts are key for the containment of governments that violate the rule of law and gender equality. Dissidents deploy Union law in context-based manners to address the specific target audience and objectives. The Polish judiciary leveraged EU provisions through preliminary proceedings with reach to the CJEU to advance gender equality and the rule of law. Attacks on EU values generated increased support for Union policies when Polish gender advocacy groups championed the necessity for a constructive relationship with EU institutions while forming a presence at the Union level relatively late in time concentrating their activism predominantly within Poland. These efforts worked synergistically with efforts by the Commission and the CJEU of which infringement procedures with a direct financial impact were more successful than measures that are contingent upon Member State agreement. Overall, national structural and social realities condition the accessibility of gender dissidence to the European Union level, creating dynamic multidirectional effects that operate both bottom-up and top-down with resilience-strengthening as well as weakening results for Union values within Member States. Hence, to credibly safeguard EU values, the day-to-day practice of social and structural norms in each Member States is key, be it in their application in the judicial system as Poland has successfully shown, in maintaining educational diversity and continuously questioning the social norms that govern our private lives.

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European cybersecurity challenges and policy gaps. The Estonian experience in cybersecurity

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Abstract: Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Union has strengthened its cybersecurity policies to address the growing threats generated by increased digital dependence, including attacks on critical infrastructures, individuals, and businesses. While notable progress has been made, fragmentation remains a major challenge. Legal and regulatory advancements, such as the NIS2 Directive, the Cyber Resilience Act, and DORA, have harmonized standards and reduced disparities among Member States. Horizontal fragmentation between EU institutions and agencies has improved through strengthened ENISA competences and cooperation mechanisms like CERT-EU, the CSIRTs network, and CyCLONe, yet overlapping mandates and the absence of a central coordinating authority persist. Vertical fragmentation, involving the EU, Member States, and the private sector, remains pronounced, as sovereign prerogatives and limited information-sharing hinder coherence. This study evaluates the EU's post-pandemic cybersecurity framework, identifies structural and institutional challenges, and draws lessons from Estonia's cybersecurity model using qualitative analysis of EU strategies, ENISA and Europol reports, and academic literature.

Keywords: malicious use of technological advancements, European institutions, European cybersecurity policy, Estonian cybersecurity policies

Introduction

The advancement of the Internet has facilitated accelerated growth in the global economy, enabling faster information exchange, global trade, and the digitalization of services. In parallel, developments in information and communication technology (ICT) have interconnected billions of devices worldwide, thereby expanding cyberspace into new domains of economic, social, and personal interest for users. The widespread adoption of cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and digitally connected devices has catalysed profound transformations in governance, commerce, healthcare, education, and daily social

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interactions, reshaping the way societies operate and individuals engage with technology (Muggah, 2021). However, this expansion has also amplified the attack surface for cybercriminals, increasing the frequency and sophistication of cyber threats. Modern attackers exploit technological vulnerabilities, such as insecure software, network misconfigurations, and weak authentication systems, while simultaneously taking advantage of human behavioural weaknesses through phishing, social engineering, and manipulation of trust.

A new challenge has emerged for free societies: democracies must find ways to strike a balance between allowing Internet freedom on one hand and maintaining adequate early warning and monitoring systems on the other (Herzog, 2011). The post-Covid-19 crisis has led to a greater dependence on digital solutions, exposing many of its vulnerabilities to state and non-state actors who have begun to exploit them. The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a long-anticipated tipping-point in digital transformation (Muggah, 2021). Unfortunately, this period has led to an increase in cyber incidents at a rate never seen before. Meanwhile cybercrime, especially ransomware, has also increased exponentially (Muggah, 2021). As the consequences of cyberattacks and other malicious activities have increasingly affected multiple policy domains—including critical infrastructure, finance, healthcare, and public administration—cybersecurity has emerged as a central priority on the European Union's policy agenda. Recognizing the pervasive risks posed by digital threats, the EU has sought to strengthen its regulatory and institutional frameworks to protect citizens, businesses, and public institutions from cybercrime and systemic vulnerabilities. Simultaneously, the European Commission has placed Europe's digital transformation at the centre of its strategic agenda, emphasizing the necessity of ensuring that the growth of digital services, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and interconnected devices is accompanied by robust cybersecurity safeguards.

This study seeks to address several interrelated research questions. First, it examines the extent to which the European Union has succeeded in developing a coherent cybersecurity policy framework in the post-pandemic period. Second, it investigates the main institutional, political, and structural challenges that hinder the implementation of a unified cybersecurity strategy. Third, the research analyzes the impact of vertical fragmentation (relationships between the EU, Member States, and the private sector) and horizontal fragmentation (relationships among EU institutions and agencies) on the coherence of cybersecurity governance. Fourth, it explores the role of trust and divergent policy priorities among Member States in shaping EU cybersecurity policies. Finally, the study considers the Estonian model to identify lessons and best practices that may be transferable at the EU level.

The objectives of the study are closely aligned with these questions. They include evaluating the coherence of EU cybersecurity policies post-COVID-19, identifying barriers affecting European cybersecurity governance, analyzing vertical and horizontal relationships within the EU governance architecture, and

investigating how trust and differences in priorities among Member States influence policy coherence. In addition, the study aims to examine the Estonian experience to extract lessons and policy recommendations applicable to the broader EU context.

The research addresses multiple policy dimensions. The institutional and governance dimension focuses on cooperation among EU institutions and specialized agencies. The national and comparative dimension examines the involvement of Member States, highlighting differences between larger and smaller states. The sectoral (public–private) dimension explores interactions with private actors essential for critical infrastructure protection. The normative and strategic dimension considers EU directives, regulations, and cybersecurity strategies. The trust and solidarity dimension analyses how mutual trust and information sharing between states and institutions affect policy effectiveness. Finally, the lessons and best practices dimension investigates the Estonian model and its potential applicability to other EU Member States. Together, these research questions, objectives, and policy dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for assessing the EU's cybersecurity governance and identifying avenues for improving coherence and effectiveness.

1. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design, relying primarily on document and policy analysis. It draws on official EU documents, strategies, regulations, and communications, as well as reports from relevant agencies such as ENISA and Europol. In addition, academic literature and think-tank studies provide the analytical framework for understanding both the achievements and the limitations of the EU's cybersecurity governance. A comparative element is incorporated through the case study of Estonia, widely regarded as a pioneer in cybersecurity policy within the EU. The Estonian experience is examined in order to extract insights and policy lessons that may be relevant for other Member States and for the Union as a whole. This approach allows for both a descriptive mapping of existing EU instruments and actors in the cybersecurity domain, and a critical assessment of their coherence and effectiveness.

However, the study also presents certain limitations. First, the reliance on document analysis and the absence of primary empirical data may reduce the depth of understanding regarding the practical experiences of the actors involved. Second, the official sources consulted may be shaped by an institutional perspective, emphasizing achievements while downplaying challenges. Furthermore, the choice of Estonia as a case study, although relevant due to its pioneering role, raises issues of transferability, as its specific context does not necessarily reflect the realities of other Member States. Finally, the rapid evolution of policies and the cybersecurity landscape limits the durability of the conclusions, which may require frequent updates.

2. Literature review. The gradual evolution of the cybersecurity regulatory framework

To understand the evolution of EU cybersecurity policy, it is important to highlight the key developments in the legal and institutional frameworks that have underpinned its growth. Initially, the European Commission's primary focus was on economic integration and the protection of the single market, rather than on cybersecurity per se. In this context, information and communication technologies have been widely recognized as fundamental to economic growth. Beyond their technological advantages, ICTs pose notable risks, as reflected in international discussions on cybersecurity and the growing concerns over computer- and network-based crimes. Information and communication technologies were presented as both the Single Market's future, but also its Achilles' heel, as their abuse by foreign powers and individual criminals could seriously undermine economic development, distorting the functioning of the internal market (European Commission 1993) (Carrapico & Farrand, 2024). This approach emphasizes the essential role of ICT protection in supporting economic growth. In this context, the European security discourse on these challenges, which initially emerged under the Justice and Home Affairs Pillar, has gradually shaped the EU's approach to cybersecurity. By the mid-1990s, European institutions were already expressing a sense of urgency in addressing illegal and harmful content on the Internet (European Council 1996), as well as the use of information technologies by organised criminals (Council of the European Union 1997) (Carrapico & Farrand, 2024). The EU has soon become a key leader in cybersecurity, developing a comprehensive cybersecurity strategy and policies that emphasize public-private collaboration, leveraging private sector responsibility for information infrastructure and recognized expertise.

It is worth noting that security dynamics continue to be shaped by international events, including regional conflicts, cyberattacks, and terrorist operations, which increasingly rely on information and communication technologies for planning and execution. The EU Cybersecurity Strategy (EUCSS), adopted in 2013, was the first comprehensive document to address the wide range of cyber threats. The strategy introduced a comprehensive approach to cyber security, including cyber threats as a new risk to European security. The document aimed to protect the internal market by combating cybercrime, strengthening the resilience of network and information systems, and securing critical information infrastructures.

The strategy has also a legislative proposal to strengthen the security of information systems in the EU. The proposal highlighted the need for Member States and the private sector to adopt appropriate strategies to combat cyber threats and to facilitate information sharing between the public and private sectors, as well as among Member States, although the document itself is not legally binding. It reflects the awareness that coordination across a range of policy areas in Europe is necessary to respond to the challenges of cybersecurity (Vela, 2021). The EUCSS also defines

national and EU-level entities responsible for ensuring cyber security and emphasizes the need to strengthen national cybersecurity capabilities, including the development and operation of Computer Emergency Response Teams (CERTs). The EUCSS will require each MS to possess a well-functioning, national-level computer emergency response team (CERT) and a competent authority to speak on behalf of the country in discussions on the European level (Vela, 2021). Given that CERTs did not have a legal framework, informal operation was achieved by sharing data without knowing what data they could or could not share across borders.

Another significant achievement was the NIS Directive (EU) 2016/1148, which established a unified level of security for networks and information systems, as these systems are vital for critical sectors of a society. This directive provides, in particular, further clarifications on operators of essential services and relevant digital service providers. In this regard, they must apply security elements and report incidents. The proposal strengthens and streamlines security and reporting requirements for companies by imposing a risk management approach, which provides a minimum list of basic security elements that have to be applied (Sciacca, 2020). The document also describes the national framework that should be adopted by each Member State regarding the security of network and information systems. In this regard, Member States had the obligation to introduce a national strategy and to designate national competent authorities and the computer security incident response teams (CSIRTs).

Due to the rapid technological advancements and intense transactions on the internet, the volume of personal data collected and shared has grown substantially. Private companies and public authorities are using personal data on an unprecedented scale to carry out their activities, thus underlining the urgent need for adequate security measures to protect personal information against destruction, loss, alteration, disclosure or unauthorized access. In response to these new challenges, the General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 679/2016 required all businesses, whether acting as data controllers or processors, to ensure the security of personal data processing. In particular, it mandates that the controller, by the use of appropriate technical and organisational measures, shall ensure that only personal data that are necessary for the purpose are processed (Sciacca, 2020). Moreover, the controller shall ensure that by default personal data are not made accessible, without the individual's intervention, to an indefinite number of natural persons (Sciacca, 2020).

The EU Cybersecurity Act (Regulation EU 2019/881) strengthened the ENISA authority and expanded its mandate to new tasks. The Act granted ENISA a permanent mandate and gave it more resources and new tasks, including the implementation of an EU cybersecurity certification framework for ICT products (Fahey, 2024). The act also authorized the agency to enhance operational cooperation at the EU level by assisting Member States in managing cybersecurity incidents and supporting the EU in the event of large-scale cross-border cyberattacks and crises. The first objective of the regulation is to establish a certification scheme

about the cybersecurity features of ICT products, ICT services and ICT processes to tackle the current fragmentation of the internal market (Sciacca, 2020). CE marking indicates that a product has been assessed by the manufacturer and deemed to meet EU safety, health and environmental protection requirements (Fahey, 2024).

The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on EU cybersecurity policy resulted not in a rupture but in the continuation of existing strategies, this time emphasizing the role of social platforms in spreading disinformation and undermining the legitimacy of certain institutions and democracy. Thus, while the private sector proves to be a reliable partner in protecting cyberspace, social platforms provide sources of insecurity, being considered a challenge to EU security. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU's cybersecurity policy continued to evolve, furthering digital transformation while strengthening security measures to enhance digital security, resilience, and cooperation among Member States. Many lessons have been learned, with the key realization that rapid digitalization has considerably increased security standards, making cybersecurity a top priority. To continue to develop society and promote economic prosperity through digitalization, government leaders, businesses, and end users must recognize the essential role of cybersecurity in this process. Additionally, the threat posed by cybercriminal activities in the online environment compels the EU to take decisive and urgent action to safeguard the digital market. The EU is aware of these risks, not only with respect to the direct potential damages but also with the loss of trust in the digital market, which could lead to more serious repercussions (Sciacca, 2020). In the contemporary European security context, the EU acknowledges that effective security depends on a strong cybersecurity strategy.

In light of this, the EU Cybersecurity Strategy, introduced in late 2020, sought to ensure the security of critical sectors of the economy and society, including energy networks, aviation systems, and space programmes. Particularly, the strategy stresses the significance of preventing foreign manipulation of elections and protecting press freedom (Renda, 2022). At the same time, the strategy addresses the development of new technologies, such as quantum communications infrastructure, encryption, 5G and future generations of mobile networks, as well as artificial intelligence. All these technologies must be developed and produced as designed and made in Europe technologies by European companies that are not dependent on high-risk suppliers (Renda, 2022). Lastly, the strategy acknowledges the EU's efforts to protect global cyberspace, to support non-binding international norms, rules and principles on responsible state behaviour, and its role in facilitating international cooperation, including bolstering third-country cybersecurity capabilities. The new Cybersecurity Strategy also allows the EU to step up leadership on international norms and standards in cyberspace, and to strengthen cooperation with partners around the world to promote a global, open, stable and secure cyberspace, grounded in the rule of law, human rights, fundamental freedoms and democratic values (European Commission, 2020).

The NIS Directive (NIS 2), updated in 2023 (Directive (EU) 2022/2555 of the European Parliament and of the Council), strengthened cyber resilience across critical public and private sectors, while enforcing specific cybersecurity requirements. Thus, it expanded the number of regulated sectors from 7 to 18, including digital services, critical manufacturing, utilities, and postal services. At the same time, the directive represents the EU's first comprehensive cybersecurity legislation that protects vital services within the European community. The entities concerned and their management bodies were required to implement measures in accordance with the directive by a certain date. The directive also mandates the establishment of a network of Computer Security Incident Response Teams (CSIRTs) in each EU Member State to oversee and respond to cyber threats, vulnerabilities, and incidents at the national level; to provide early warnings and disseminate information to the entities involved and therefore provide assistance in this regard. EU Member States can request ENISA's assistance in setting up their CSIRTs and must ensure their national CSIRTs' active involvement in the CSIRTs Network (Rupp, 2024). The CSIRTs Network provides a forum for cooperation and developing a coordinated response to cross-border cybersecurity incidents (Rupp, 2024).

The Digital Operational Resilience Act (DORA) (Regulation (EU) 2022/2554) strengthens cybersecurity in the financial sector, ensuring banks, insurance companies, and financial institutions can withstand cyberattacks. The DORA Regulation establishes a proportionality principle, requiring that rules on ICT risk management, incident reporting, operational resilience testing, and third-party risk management be applied in proportion to the financial entity's size, risk profile, and the complexity of its activities (Rupp, 2024). In late 2023, the EU adopted the Regulation on institutional cybersecurity, obliging Union entities to implement internal frameworks for managing, governing, and controlling cybersecurity risks. The regulation obliges each Union entity to carry out cybersecurity assessments, following which they must develop cybersecurity plans. In effect, the cybersecurity risk-management measures „shall ensure a level of security of network and information systems across the entirety of the ICT environment commensurate to the cybersecurity risks posed” (Art. 8 (1)) (Rupp, 2024).

In October 2024, the European Commission adopted the Cyber Resilience Act (CRA), setting cybersecurity requirements for products containing digital elements, to ensure their security throughout their lifecycle. The Act aims to ensure that products bearing the ‘CE marking’ comply with a minimum level of cybersecurity requirements (Fahey, 2024). CE marking indicates that a product has been assessed by the manufacturer and deemed to meet EU safety, health and environmental protection requirements (Fahey, 2024). The Cyber Resilience Act addresses the insufficient level of cybersecurity in many products, and the difficulties consumers and businesses face when trying to identify products that are cybersecure. The CRA introduces mandatory cybersecurity requirements for manufacturers and retailers, governing the planning, design, development, and maintenance of such products

(European Commission, 2025). This regulation will give the Commission considerable powers, under the heading of market surveillance and enforcement, including deeming products as non-compliant with the regulation and as presenting a significant cybersecurity risk based on an ENISA assessment (Carrapico & Farrand, 2024).

In December 2024, the European Commission adopted the Cyber Solidarity Act (CSA) (Regulation (EU) 2025/38) in order to enhance resilience and response to cyber threats. The document aims to establish a cybersecurity unit, supported by member states, to enhance the detection, analysis, and response to cyber incidents. It also includes the creation of an urgent response mechanism for cybersecurity incidents and the establishment of an EU cybersecurity reserve, made up of contractual providers, ready to intervene in the event of a cybersecurity incident. Article 1 of the proposed Cyber Solidarity Act explicitly includes in its objectives reinforcing ‘the competitive position of industry and services in the Union cross the digital economy and contributing to the Union’s technological sovereignty in the area of cybersecurity’ (European Commission, 2023, p. 22), reinforcing the regulatory mercantilist position adopted by the Commission in this field (Carrapico & Farrand, 2024). This means that the EU seeks to reduce its dependence on external technologies (for example, from the United States or China) and instead to develop and rely on its own solutions.

Furthermore, the EU has advanced its cybercrime agenda by reinforcing Europol’s European Cybercrime Centre (EC3) and introducing legislation on digital evidence. Additionally, cyber diplomacy has significantly increased in recent years, becoming a central component of the European Union’s (EU) cybersecurity policies. Cyber diplomacy as part of cybersecurity policies involves a collective effort to implement a unified diplomatic response to malicious cyber activities. In this context, the EU’s cyber diplomacy toolbox is particularly noteworthy, as it introduces, for the first time, a coordinated diplomatic response to malicious cyber activities. The measures included within the Toolbox are meant to be „complementary to existing and continuous cyber diplomacy engagement to advance conflict prevention, cooperation and stability in cyberspace” and can be carried out „individually or jointly, in coordination or in parallel, and where appropriate in cooperation with international partners” (Rupp, 2024). Also, cyber defence policy advocates for investments in cyber defense capabilities and aims to enhance coordination and cooperation between the EU’s military and civilian cyber communities. In accordance, the Council regards the EU Policy on Cyber Defence as an enabler for „the EU and its Member States to strengthen their ability to protect, detect, defend and deter, making appropriate use of the whole range of defensive options available to the civilian and military communities for the broader security and defence of the EU, in accordance with international law, including human rights law and international humanitarian law” (Rupp, 2024).

The EU also engages in high-level cooperation with NATO through the NATO Defence Innovation Accelerator (DIANA), an initiative that collaborates with top researchers and entrepreneurs across the Alliance to develop technologies aimed at safeguarding NATO populations. The NATO Defence Innovation Accelerator seeks to increase the participation of innovative companies based in NATO member countries. These companies are developing deep technology solutions to respond to pressing security challenges related to energy & power, sensing & surveillance, data & information security, human health & performance, and critical infrastructure & logistics (NATO, 2024). Under the DIANA programme, companies gain funding, training, and access to specialized environments for testing and improving their technological solutions.

In conclusion, the European Union has shown a clear ambition to enhance its ability to project cybersecurity norms on the international stage, while simultaneously striving to present a cohesive position in global fora in coordination with the United States. Like the US, the EU is also increasingly interested in nudging international cybersecurity developments (Fahey, 2024). Their engagement has been concentrated mainly within the framework of the Council of Europe, because of the long-standing deadlock at the UN in recent years, stemming from disagreements among major powers on issues such as state responsibility in cyberspace, the applicability of international law, and norms for offensive cyber operations (e.g., differences between the US, EU, Russia, and China). The EU's continued efforts to strengthen European cyber capabilities are a key component of its cybersecurity strategy, thus contributing to regional stability. Along with these, the Union actively promotes the security and stability of international cyberspace by leveraging its cyber diplomacy toolbox, engaging in diplomatic initiatives with global partners, and employing legal instruments such as the sanctions regime to deter and respond to malicious cyber activities.

2.1. Horizontal and vertical dynamics within the EU's cybersecurity field

Horizontal fragmentation arises from structural and functional overlaps among different EU institutions and agencies, which complicates cohesive cybersecurity governance. Agencies such as ENISA (EU Agency for Cybersecurity), Europol's EC3 (European Cybercrime Centre), and CERT-EU have overlapping but distinct responsibilities, potentially leading to redundancy, inefficiencies, and inter-agency competition. The absence of a central coordinating authority with overarching responsibility for cybersecurity at the EU level further exacerbates these challenges, as there is no single entity tasked with ensuring strategic alignment across institutions. Moreover, cybersecurity intersects multiple policy areas—including justice, internal affairs, defense, the digital market, and data protection—yet coordination across these „silos” is often limited. This fragmentation can hinder rapid response to emerging threats, delay policy implementation, and reduce the

overall coherence and effectiveness of the EU's cybersecurity framework, leaving gaps that may be exploited by attackers and undermining public trust in digital infrastructures.

Carrapico and Barrinha (2017), in their article „The EU as a coherent actor in the field of (cyber)security?”, highlight the difficulties the European Union faces in achieving coherence in cybersecurity governance, emphasizing both vertical and horizontal dimensions. Vertical challenges stem from the need to coordinate cybersecurity policies between the EU, Member States, and the private sector, where issues of national sovereignty and uneven capacities impede the consistent implementation of measures across the Union. Horizontal challenges, on the other hand, are linked to insufficient communication and coordination among EU institutions, agencies, and Member States. The authors emphasize the importance of addressing contradictions between policies, responsibilities, and instruments to enhance coherence and effectiveness in the EU's cybersecurity governance.

In this view, the NIS Directive, adopted by the European Commission in 2016, is the EU's first cybersecurity legislation and serves as a legally binding instrument on cybersecurity policy. In the NIS Directive, the EU legislature acknowledges the importance of imposing not only obligations on the Member States' authorities, but also on the private sector, notably the providers of essential services mentioned in Annex II of the Directive and the providers of digital services mentioned in Annex III of the Directive (Verhelst & Wouters, 2020). In light of the above, the NIS Directive represents the most significant advancement in strengthening coordination between EU institutions and Member States. The NIS Directive (Directive (EU) 2016/1148) appears to further contribute to this by bringing together the European Commission, Member States and ENISA as members of the new Cooperation Group, which has been created to offer strategic guidance and facilitate cooperation between Member States on information security (Carrapico & Barrinha, 2017).

Following this, the cooperation agreement between the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) and the European Cybercrime Centre (EC3), signed in 2019, elevated the level of coordination within the EU. Key issues addressed included defining what constitutes a cyber incident and establishing a systematic information-sharing framework to combat cybercrime. In this context, Carrapico and Barrinha (2017) emphasize the need to eliminate contradictions in policies, responsibilities, and instruments. They argue that various EU bodies, including the European Commission, ENISA, and EC3, should collaborate synergistically. Moreover, the authors highlight that overlapping mandates among these institutions can create inefficiencies and hinder coherent action, making it essential to clarify roles and ensure that coordination mechanisms effectively complement rather than duplicate each other.

The EU's approach to cyberspace is still fractured despite these accomplishments, as it is a developing policy field with too many complicated issues. There are coordination problems between, but also within institutions, which

are related to the historical evolution of the different cybersecurity areas, as well as the perception that each area still experiences different separate challenges (Carrapico & Barrinha, 2017). Moreover, cybersecurity intersects a wide range of policy domains—including justice, internal affairs, defense, the digital market, and data protection—each governed by distinct legal frameworks, institutional mandates, and strategic priorities. This multidimensional nature of cybersecurity creates challenges in aligning objectives, procedures, and resources across sectors. Coordination across these areas is often hindered by institutional silos, differing threat perceptions, and varying levels of technical expertise, which can lead to overlapping responsibilities, delays in decision-making, and inconsistencies in policy implementation.

Vertical fragmentation refers to the coordination challenges between the European Union, Member States, and the private sector in managing cybersecurity. One of the main obstacles is national sovereignty: cybersecurity remains largely considered a matter of national security, and Member States are often reluctant to delegate authority or harmonize policies at the EU level. This reluctance can slow down the implementation of common strategies and create inconsistencies in preventive and response measures across the Union. Additionally, there are significant differences in national capacities: while some Member States have developed sophisticated cyber defense infrastructures, others face resource constraints and limited technical expertise, leading to uneven implementation of EU directives and standards. Public–private coordination also remains insufficient. As most critical infrastructures are owned or operated by private entities, the lack of systematic information-sharing and joint risk management between governments and private actors reduces overall resilience and creates vulnerabilities that can be exploited in cross-border cyber incidents.

In the vertical dimension—encompassing relationships between Member States and EU institutions, as well as interactions with the private sector—a gradual increase in coherence has been observed in response to the intensification of cyberattacks. Several factors have contributed to this trend, including the rapid growth of internet users and digital services, the significant societal and economic impacts of cyberattacks, and the rising prevalence of cybercrime. These developments have created strong incentives for Member States and EU institutions to enhance coordination, align policies, and engage more effectively with private-sector actors to mitigate risks and strengthen overall cybersecurity resilience across the Union. More recently, the increasing use of cyber tools by nation-states to disrupt elections and other democratic processes has further strengthened the EU's commitment to improving cybersecurity.

Despite these successes, Carrapico and Barrinha identify that the lack of coherence at the vertical level is largely driven by difficulties in alignment and collaboration. In the relationship between Member States and EU institutions, the primary coordination challenge lies in the European Commission's limited capacity

to persuade Member States of the necessity for deeper integration in cybersecurity. The reluctance of Member States to grant the EU greater authority over cyber activities constrains the Union's overall coherence in this field. Nevertheless, while coordination challenges persist between Brussels and Member States, the primary responsibility for cybersecurity governance appropriately remains with the Member States. This approach acknowledges the importance of national sovereignty and the critical coordinating role that each country plays in addressing cyber threats within its own territory, while still emphasizing the need for effective collaboration at the EU level.

Vertical fragmentation in the EU's cybersecurity governance is significantly shaped by issues of sovereignty and uneven capacities. Member States are cautious in delegating authority to EU institutions, as cybersecurity is considered a core aspect of national security, and there is concern that deeper integration could undermine sovereign control over sensitive operations. Also, states are often afraid of sharing information that could compromise the economic interests of their companies or, given the significant secrecy that still surrounds cybersecurity operations, of sharing too much operational information (Carrapico & Barrinha, 2018). In this regard, smaller EU member states often lack both resources and expertise in cybersecurity, while larger EU states are reluctant to have cybersecurity priorities set for them by the European Commission. Additionally, some countries are not prepared to make substantial financial investments in developing cybersecurity infrastructure, not because they lack interest, but because cybersecurity is not currently a high policy or budgetary priority relative to other national concerns.

Additionally, conflicts of interest have also been observed in public–private interactions, as the public sector prioritizes security and risk mitigation, whereas private actors often emphasize efficiency, profitability, and competitive advantage (Carrapico & Barrinha, 2017). Thus, while the public sector prioritizes security and the protection of critical infrastructures, the private sector often emphasizes efficiency and profitability, seeking to maintain a competitive advantage. These differing priorities can create tensions in the implementation of cybersecurity measures, complicate information-sharing, and hinder the development of coherent strategies that effectively balance risk management with operational and commercial considerations. The more attractive financial prospects in the private sector make it challenging for public institutions to attract and retain professionals with cybersecurity expertise (Spanou, 2021). This disparity in incentives can undermine trust between public and private partners, which is crucial for effective information-sharing, particularly regarding the reporting and disclosure of cyberattacks at the national level (Carrapico & Barrinha, 2017).

2.2. Additional challenges for European cybersecurity policies

Beyond the theoretical framework proposed by Helena Carrapico and André Barrinha regarding the coherence of European cybersecurity policy, it can be argued that global political and social developments play an equally significant role in shaping these dynamics. Such external factors contribute to both vertical and horizontal fragmentation within the EU's cybersecurity architecture, affecting coordination between Member States, EU institutions, and the private sector, as well as among the various EU agencies themselves. The Russo-Ukrainian war has had a significant impact on the European Union's security policy, including its approach to cybersecurity. The conflict has accelerated efforts to strengthen defense and security cooperation among Member States, highlighting the need for rapid and coordinated responses to emerging threats, including cyberattacks originating from state or state-affiliated actors. In particular, the risk of cyberattacks targeting critical infrastructure—such as energy, transportation, and communication systems—has increased, emphasizing the importance of resilience and information-sharing between governments and the private sector.

The hybrid war started by Russia, as long as it continues, this will destabilize European security. For the foreseeable future, this threat landscape will be dominated by risks connected to the Kremlin's cyber operations (Kaushik, 2024). Since the outset of Russia's war, several European countries have been victims of cyberattacks launched by cyber-organized groups that support the Kremlin's revisionist policy. The attacks targeted the countries' critical infrastructure, namely satellite networks and the energy grid. Hybrid campaigns and influence operations carried out by Russian malign actors, which have historically especially targeted Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), are likely to continue as the EU maintains its support for Ukraine (Kaushik, 2024).

The role of China in conducting state-affiliated cyberattacks is extensively documented and acknowledged by experts and international observers. Chinese aligned Advanced Persistent Threat (APT) groups have been active for quite some time, regularly targeting government entities, as well as private companies in the engineering, telecom, and aerospace sectors, in a bid to steal classified information (Kaushik, 2024). While their activities are global, they frequently focus on countries with advanced technological capabilities and critical infrastructure, including the United States, members of the European Union, Japan, and Australia. These operations aim to exfiltrate classified information, intellectual property, and sensitive technological data, thereby advancing China's strategic and economic objectives. Within the European context, the persistent activity of these APT groups underscores the vulnerabilities of EU institutions and companies to state-aligned cyber threats, highlighting the urgent need for robust cybersecurity measures, enhanced public-private cooperation, and coordinated responses across At the same time, China's ambition to become a global leader in emerging technologies—such

as 5G, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing—places pressure on the EU to accelerate the development of its own digital capabilities and to safeguard critical infrastructure from dependency on foreign technology. In addition, the proliferation of disinformation campaigns, including deepfake content and online influence operations, poses significant challenges to public trust and democratic resilience within Europe.

In this context, emerging technologies, especially AI and machine learning, have great potential to improve cybersecurity capabilities. In this situation, artificial intelligence can identify threats and vulnerabilities, predict threats and risks, and be incorporated into incident response capabilities to accelerate response times. An increasing number of companies, such as IBM, Google and Microsoft, have started advertising and showcasing ways in which AI can be used to enhance cybersecurity (Car & Marcellin, 2024). However, hostile actors could use artificial intelligence algorithms to launch automated cyberattacks and disseminate false information. According to ENISA, AI systems are becoming particularly powerful in social engineering techniques thanks to their ability to mimic human interaction (Car & Marcellin, 2024). These challenges are made worse by the growing calls for European cybersecurity financing. Additionally, there is a sizable disparity in priority accorded to cybersecurity within EU Member States, contributing to uneven cybersecurity capabilities across the EU and exacerbating security vulnerabilities across European networks (Kaushik, 2024).

Beyond these factors, the size and complexity of cyberspace, which makes it even harder to pinpoint specific attackers, present another obstacle for European cybersecurity policy. As a result, attackers utilize various tactics and tools to evade detection and deceive investigators. For example, attackers use false flags – employing techniques, tools, and/or languages associated with other threat actors/nations – to mislead investigators and may spoof IP addresses to make it seem as though an attack originated from a different location (Kaushik, 2024).

3. Case study - the Estonian cybersecurity policy model

The Estonian model is widely regarded as an effective cybersecurity policy thanks to its holistic approach, which places strong emphasis on investment in education and developing cyber skills. Estonia has incorporated cybersecurity into its academic programs, developed a robust local cyber ecosystem, assisted small cybersecurity companies to increase their knowledge and facilitate information exchange. Furthermore, it promoted cooperation between the public and private sectors, adopted cybersecurity procedures in both private businesses and educational institutions, and put important laws in place to protect data and the privacy of its citizens. Experts also stress the importance of the fact that Estonia's cybersecurity prioritisation is premised on scientific research and analysis rather than being dependent on changing political whims (Kaushik, 2024).

The success story begins following the cyberattacks of 2007, with Estonia being the victim of the world's first coordinated cyberattack against a state that was allegedly committed by Russian-backed hackers. The attacks targeted various organizations in the country, including the parliament, banks, ministries, newspapers, and broadcasters, serving as a catalyst for the nation's digital transformation. The cyber-terrorist attacks were executed via globally dispersed botnet networks composed of „zombie” computers. The hackers hijacked computers—including many home PCs—in places like Egypt, Russia, and the United States and used them in a „swarming” DDoS strategy (Herzog, 2011). With this sudden awakening of the world, the cyberattacks on Estonia became a pivotal moment in enhancing the nation's security infrastructure for the long term. Shortly after the attacks, the Estonian government endorsed the first national-level cybersecurity strategy focused on the protection of critical information infrastructure (Pernik, 2021).

Estonia has developed a comprehensive cybersecurity infrastructure that involves multiple institutions working collaboratively to ensure national resilience and societal preparedness. Central to this system is the Estonian Information System Authority (RIA), responsible for national cybersecurity policies and the protection of critical digital services, alongside the Cyber Defense Unit of the Estonian Defence League, a volunteer-based organization providing operational support in cyber defense. Estonian Information System Authority can conduct risk analyses of critical information infrastructures and impose extra-judicial fines for insufficient actions on operators of essential services or digital service providers (Kohler, 2020). The Cyber Defense Unit is an innovative model for the involvement of volunteers in national cyber defence. Also, the Estonian Defence League is a voluntary defense organization with about 16,000 members (Kohler, 2020). Over the past decade, Estonia has become home to numerous cybersecurity organizations that have earned international recognition. NATO was the most effective framework for Estonia in boosting its status as a cyber authority, as Tallinn is home to NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE), which serves as a key hub for cyber defense research, training, and international collaboration. The CCDCOE facilitated the Tallinn Manual I and II, describing how international law can apply to cyberspace (Crandall, 2024). CCDCOE also hosts annual multinational exercises such as Locked Shields and Crossed Swords. The former is the largest and most complex international live-fire cyber defense exercise in the world, which is run on the NATO Cyber Range in Tartu operated by the EK (Estonian Defence Forces) (Kohler, 2020). Estonia has become a hub for cybersecurity innovation, many leading cybersecurity companies have either been founded by Estonians or established offices in the country, contributing to the development of cutting-edge security solutions and fostering collaboration between the private sector, government institutions, and research organizations. Notable examples include Malwarebytes,

Symantec, and CyberCube, which illustrate the country's growing influence in the global cybersecurity landscape.

Equally important is the fact that Estonia has incorporated cybersecurity education into its academic curriculum from an early stage, fostering a highly skilled workforce. Higher education institutions offer undergraduate and graduate programs in computer science, cybersecurity, and digital technologies, complemented by specialized courses and international certifications that enable continuous professional development.

Tallinn University of Technology (TalTech), Estonia, offers cybersecurity bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees that are all taught in English. In this academic context, TalTech's Center for Digital Forensics and Cyber Security enhances cyber competence and emphasizes research and education in cybersecurity. Also, Estonia consistently collaborates with global tech leaders to keep its education system at the cutting edge of innovation. Thanks to the programs offered by TalTech, some graduates pursue careers with the police and border guard to combat cybercrime, others join the Defense Forces, while some transition to the private sector, specializing in cybersecurity-related work. Furthermore, the Center for Digital Forensics and Cyber Security at TalTech aims to establish itself as the premier institution for Master's and Doctoral studies in cybersecurity across the Baltics and Nordic countries. Today, Estonia is taking another pioneering step by integrating AI into high school education, ensuring that the next generation is equipped to navigate and shape the future (Holm, 2025). By teaching young people how to leverage AI for their benefit, we are strengthening their digital competence and fostering a new generation of cyber security experts who can anticipate and counter emerging threats (Holm, 2025).

Participation in international exercises, such as NATO's Locked Shields, allows professionals to refine their skills in complex attack and defense scenarios. Also, the presence of leading cybersecurity companies, including Malwarebytes, Symantec, and CyberCube, further enhances expertise through collaboration, knowledge transfer, and exposure to cutting-edge technologies. Estonia collaborates with private companies and international partners to strengthen cyber defenses and information-sharing. As a result of these developments, Estonia has established a robust national cybersecurity ecosystem, underpinned by strong collaboration between government institutions and private sector actors, particularly startups and technology firms. This partnership not only facilitates the development of cutting-edge cybersecurity solutions but also promotes innovation, knowledge transfer, and the continuous professional growth of cybersecurity specialists, reinforcing the country's position as a global leader in digital security. For instance, private cybersecurity companies often collaborate with government agencies to share expertise, improve threat detection systems, and strengthen national cybersecurity defenses. Estonia collaborates extensively with international partners, including NATO and the European Union, particularly in the fields of cybersecurity and

defense. This cooperation encompasses joint research initiatives, participation in multinational cyber exercises, sharing of threat intelligence, and the development of common standards and best practices, thereby enhancing both national and regional resilience against evolving cyber threats. Additionally, Estonia collaborates with other EU member states to combat cybercrime, actively participating in the European Cybercrime Centre (EC3) at Europol and contributing to coordinated efforts to prevent and respond to online threats and cyberattacks.

Estonia's e-governance system—which encompasses digital IDs, e-voting, and a wide range of secure online services—is supported by a secure and resilient digital infrastructure. This robust framework ensures the integrity, confidentiality, and availability of digital services, enables efficient and transparent interactions between citizens and the state, and provides a strong foundation for implementing advanced cybersecurity measures that protect both personal data and critical national systems. Estonia developed institutions such as the e-Governance Academy which is responsible for training and educating administrative representatives and officials from different countries. Estonia developed the e-Governance Academy (eGA) to train and educate government officials and administrative representatives from various countries, transferring knowledge and best practices in digital transformation, e-governance, digital democracy, and national cybersecurity. Since its inception, eGA has been recognized as a pioneer in implementing development cooperation projects, transferring best practices in e-governance and digital transformation to various countries. Projects carried out in Ukraine currently listed on their website go back to 2014 and cover several topics such as boosting e-governance solutions, improving cybersecurity readiness in Ukrainian public officials, and building cyber defence capabilities (Crandall, 2024).

Estonia has been a pioneer in integrating blockchain technology into its digital infrastructure, particularly for enhancing cybersecurity, data integrity, and e-governance. Blockchain is applied in areas such as the national digital ID system, healthcare records, and data exchange between public institutions, ensuring that critical information remains tamper-proof while enabling efficient and trustworthy interactions between citizens and the state. Thus, in public services, such as the Land Registry and Business Registry, blockchain maintains secure, tamper-proof records of property ownership and company registrations. In the healthcare system, it is used to securely track patient data and prevent unauthorized modifications. Additionally, blockchain plays a key role in cybersecurity and data protection, securing national databases and safeguarding citizen identity data. In finance and banking, it enhances transaction security, and in the legal and judicial system, it enhances security, transparency, and efficiency. These implementations have positioned Estonia as a global leader in blockchain-driven digital governance and cybersecurity innovation. As a result of having proven its capacity and preparedness to successfully counter cyber threats, Estonia has increased public trust in state institutions. Through proactive cybersecurity measures, transparent communication, and collaboration

with private and international partners, Estonia has reinforced its digital resilience, assuring citizens that their data and digital services remain secure. Estonia now boasts one of the highest levels of public trust in government, proof of our transparent and citizen-centric digital society (Holm, 2025).

3.1. Statistical data on cyber incidents in the last 2 years in Estonia

Estonia has experienced a significant rise in cybercrime incidents over 2023 and 2024, reflecting broader global trends influenced by geopolitical tensions and the increasing sophistication of cyber threats. The escalation in cyber threats has been influenced by major global events, such as Russia's aggression in Ukraine since February 2022 and the Hamas-Israel conflict that reignited in October 2023. In this regard, armed conflicts often stimulate an intensification of cyber operations conducted by states or state-affiliated actors, as they seek to disrupt critical infrastructure, gather intelligence, or project power in the digital domain. These tensions led to increased ideological hacktivism, with denial-of-service attacks targeting Estonia's government, financial, transport, and media sectors. In Estonian cyberspace, one of the largest and most visible indirect effects of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022, was a fourfold increase in distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks (Information System Authority, National Cyber Security Center, 2024). This surge reflects broader regional cyber tensions, as Estonia, due to its historical and strategic position, often becomes a target for politically and ideologically motivated cyber operations linked to conflicts in Eastern Europe.

In 2023, according to the Estonian Information Systems Authority (RIA), 3,314 impactful cyber incidents were recorded, representing a 24% increase compared to 2022. We saw – and will surely continue to witness – a growth in ideological 'hacktivism' expressed in denial-of-service attacks against the government, financial, transport, and media sectors (Information System Authority, 2024). DDoS attacks surged, with 484 incidents in 2023—a 60% increase from the previous year (139 of the attacks had an impact). The damage was generally limited to a short period of downtime or slower response on a website or service, but a few cases were more serious (Information System Authority, National Cyber Security Center, 2024). It is important to emphasize that some of these incidents were the result of human error or technical malfunctions, rather than malicious cyberattacks.

The cybersecurity incidents involved data leaks, as a result of which attackers infiltrated the systems of a higher education institution in Estonia, compromising the personal data of students and graduates. According to the Estonian Information System Authority, a notable data breach was the incident involving the genetic testing company Asper Biogene, where attackers accessed and downloaded sensitive medical and personal data of approximately 10,000 individuals. Various forms of fraud have recorded significant increases, recalling that 546 fraud incidents were

recorded, a 250% increase over the previous year. Data provided by the Police and Guard Board show that Estonians were defrauded of at least 8.3 million euros (Information System Authority, National Cyber Security Center, 2024). Some scammers posed as police officers, claiming to help victims avoid fraud, asking for personal information, while others pretended to be interested buyers on Facebook Marketplace, trying to extract sensitive information from sellers.

Ransomware attacks have also been recorded, mainly targeting relatively large and financially stable companies, perceived as being able to pay significant ransoms. We also saw criminals use IT and accounting service providers to obtain access to bigger, wealthier clients and implant ransomware that encrypts data (Information System Authority, National Cyber Security Center, 2024). Also, zero-day vulnerabilities in software that remain unaddressed by developers in a timely manner present attractive targets for attackers, who recognize the potential for significant financial gain. Not lastly, the Estonian Information System Authority reported that one-third of phishing attack recipients are deceived by the scam, with 10-20% of victims ultimately providing the requested information. These incidents highlight a significant vulnerability in terms of user awareness and digital hygiene in the country.

In 2024, Estonia experienced a marked escalation in cyber threats, with the number of significant cyber incidents doubling compared to the previous year. The Estonian Information System Authority (RIA) reported 6.515 such incidents, up from 3.314 in 2023. Regarding the cyber incidents, in 2024 two-thirds of the incidents involved phishing and scam websites, with 4.224 cases detected—2.5 times more than the previous year, highlighting a significant rise in social engineering attacks. Additionally, in 2024, distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks reached unprecedented levels, overwhelming public-sector websites for several hours and producing approximately three billion malicious requests. Some websites experienced short-term outages or slowdowns, but none of the attacks caused severe damage (Information System Authority, National Cyber Security Center, 2025). Estonia also recorded 68 data leak incidents, almost twice as many as last year. The most serious cyberattack was on the company Allium UPI, which affected more than 700,000 people. Attackers gained access to this system and successfully stole nearly 700,000 personal identification numbers, more than 400,000 email addresses, and tens of thousands of phone numbers and home addresses (Information System Authority, National Cyber Security Center, 2025).

According to the Estonian Information System Authority, 624 significant fraud incidents were recorded last year, up from 546 in 2023. This rise is largely attributed to the growing prevalence of investment scams and banking fraud, which continue to exploit public trust and digital vulnerabilities. Invoice fraud has become a relatively common type of scam in which fraudsters send a fake invoice to an organisation under the guise of a legitimate business partner (Information System Authority, National Cyber Security Center, 2025). Ransomware attacks decreased in

2024, with around 10 ransomware incidents reported, fewer than in previous years. In this context, two Estonian schools were hit by ransomware attacks: only one had backups to restore its data, while the other suffered more severe disruption. In nearly one-third of cases, attackers gained access to systems through Remote Desktop applications that were protected by weak passwords and lacked additional security measures such as VPNs, two-factor authentication, IP-based restrictions, logging and monitoring (Information System Authority, National Cyber Security Center, 2025).

Zero-day vulnerabilities continue to be exploited by attackers within the systems used to manage the agency's computers and devices, with over 40.000 security vulnerabilities reported last year. Some agencies fail to apply essential system updates for managing their computers and devices, increasing vulnerability. This vulnerability is also observed in both public and private sector organizations. Cybercriminals also continued to target devices with older, known vulnerabilities, often exploiting them for ransomware attacks or adding them to botnets (Information System Authority, National Cyber Security Center, 2025). As in previous years, numerous critical vulnerabilities were discovered in web content management systems and e-commerce software (Information System Authority, National Cyber Security Center, 2025).

4. Discussion

Despite being targeted by multiple cyberattacks over the past two years, Estonia maintains a strong cybersecurity posture and is consistently ranked among the most cyber-resilient nations in the world. The country's strong digital defenses and proactive measures continue to set the standard for cybersecurity procedures around the globe. According to data provided by specialists in the field, the proactive measures taken by Estonian institutions to mitigate cyber threats, their early recognition and subsequent investments in building a secure digital infrastructure have made Estonia a successful model of cybersecurity policy for other European states. The lessons of the Estonian model show that a good relationship between the public-private sector and academia is essential for the proper management of cybersecurity risks. Estonia has taken bold steps to ensure that cyber security awareness extends beyond government and industry to the entire population (Holm, 2025). Considering that we all use gadgets on a daily basis to make our lives easier, it is essential that we become more mindful and vigilant about the risks we encounter in cyberspace. The use of these commonplace gadgets without cybersecurity safeguards and consumers' lack of attention to detail, on the other hand, makes room for bad actors who, without necessarily intending to harm us personally, can use our devices as tools to create botnets or, worse, to serve organized crime and destabilize democratic and peaceful societies. This is why we need people who will bring cyber hygiene into general education as a skill that everybody must have if they are going to be owners of electronic equipment (Spanou, 2001). Investments should prioritize

education, with the goal of creating programs that improve students' cybersecurity skills and encourage research in the field of cybersecurity, while also supporting the private sector by helping small companies provide specialized expertise in the field. As the continent prepares to defend itself, it must take a holistic approach, integrating technological security with public awareness and trust (Holm, 2025).

Conclusions

The study's objectives align closely with its research questions, focusing on evaluating the coherence of EU cybersecurity policies post-COVID-19, identifying governance barriers, analysing vertical and horizontal institutional relationships, and examining how trust and divergent priorities among Member States influence policy effectiveness. The Estonian experience serves as a comparative case to extract lessons and best practices applicable to the broader EU context. These objectives engage multiple policy dimensions, including institutional cooperation, national variation between larger and smaller Member States, public–private interactions, normative and strategic frameworks, trust and solidarity, and the transfer of lessons from successful national models. Theoretical claims regarding multilevel governance and fragmentation are supported by evidence that inconsistent coordination, misaligned priorities, and limited trust undermine a fully cohesive EU cybersecurity policy, while Estonia's proactive and integrated approach highlights pathways for improving resilience and coherence.

Methodologically, the study relies on qualitative document and policy analysis, drawing on official EU and national documents, agency reports, and scholarly literature. While this allows for a detailed mapping of policies, actors, and instruments, it limits insight into operational practices and real-time challenges, suggesting that conclusions are interpretive rather than empirically validated. Despite these limitations, the findings point to prioritized EU-level actions: strengthening vertical and horizontal coordination, enhancing trust and information sharing, integrating national best practices such as Estonia's cyber resilience and awareness campaigns, promoting sectoral public–private cooperation, harmonizing legal and strategic instruments, and developing EU-wide education and workforce initiatives. Together, these measures address the institutional, national, sectoral, strategic, and trust dimensions of cybersecurity governance, offering a roadmap for increasing policy coherence and effectiveness across the Union.

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Deliberative democracy and law-making in the digital era

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Abstract: This paper deals with codification and institutionalization of deliberative democracy among member states and EU institutions in the scope of democratic cohesion in the digital era. The general approach is based on the premise that innovations in deliberative democracy triggered by digitalization and new technologies need to be institutionalized in the legal systems of member states according to a set of legal standards that stem from the EU *acquis* in order to maintain democratic cohesion in the law-making process. The main objective of this paper is to analyse the necessity of institutionalizing deliberative democracy processes in the framework of EU democracies. The hypothesis is that codification and institutionalization of deliberative democracy is necessary to preserve democratic cohesion among EU member states and also to guarantee citizens' entitlements. As for methodology, data collection and data analysis constitute the bulk of the research. Data collection relies on literature, and EU legislation. Data analysis is based on legal reasoning, mainly. The conclusion is that citizens' participation needs to be secured and guaranteed by means of a set of core principles base on the EU *acquis* in order to preserve democratic cohesion among member states. Otherwise, no rights are conferred to citizens and deliberative processes operate at the discretion of public authorities.

Keywords: deliberative democracy, participatory democracy, law-making, new technologies, citizens' participation

Introduction

This paper deals with codification and institutionalization of deliberative democracy among member states and EU institutions in the scope of democratic cohesion in the digital era (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). The general approach is based on the premise that innovations in deliberative democracy triggered by digitalization and new technologies need to be institutionalized in the legal systems of member states according to a set of legal standards that stem from the EU *acquis* in order to maintain democratic cohesion. The aim of this study is to look into

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innovation in governance in order to implement new models of citizen participation intended to bring democracy to the highest level of quality and commitment towards citizens (Palumbo, 2024). Governments could foster innovation in participation at a political level by using the latest tools, techniques and organizational models to help democracy to thrive in today's dramatically changing landscape, given the current challenges faced by democracy.

The reasons to introduce innovations in government based on deliberative democracy are directly related to an attempt to enhance democratic requirements such as transparency, accountability, legitimacy and efficiency, and also to bring democracy to a new level in which citizens' participation supersedes representativeness in decision making, at least in certain areas (Fong & Wright, 2003). Democratic systems of government can always benefit from civil engagement and citizen participation in public affairs. This paper focuses on the interaction between government and individuals and how the quality of democracy could be improved by implementing more effective mechanisms to strengthen the legitimacy of public authorities and engage citizens to take an active role in decision-making and government action by resorting to deliberative democracy.

In this scenario, codification of deliberative democracy aims at creating a standardized legal framework of guarantees and safeguards capable of preserving EU democratic cohesion when introducing deliberative decision-making procedures potentially adopted by member states, or European Union institutions in the context of a digital environment.

The codification process should rely on the essential elements of deliberative democracy in the framework of EU values and democratic principles, translating these attributes into practical legal standards to be followed by all member states and European Union institutions. This functional approach aims to transcend the diversity of member states' democratic cultures, as well as the variety of methods through which deliberative democracy can be articulated.

In this regard, the Report on deliberative democracy, issued on the 23th of January 2023 by the European Committee on democracy and Governance of the Council of Europe (European Committee on Democracy and Governance, 2023) put forward that the essential elements of deliberative democracy and its attributes need to be set out in the form of legal standards that guide member states and democratic systems of government to develop new deliberation methods in the framework of a common democratic culture. The Recommendation CM/Rec(2023)6 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on Deliberative Democracy, adopted on 6 September 2023, has become the first international standard in this field (Council of Europe, 2023).

Codification of deliberative democracy is expected to fill this gap and facilitate the process of institutionalization by diving into the EU acquis and following the Council of Europe standards and recommendations.

1. Research justification

As the Council of Europe, European Committee on Democracy and Governance, identified on report January 31st, 2023, deliberative democracy has not been an object of codification or institutionalization in a coherent, systematic and comprehensive way until now in the scope of the EU member states (European Committee on Democracy and Governance, 2023). According to this report, deliberation by the public in decision making has been put into practice by different European states from an experimental point of view, and certain methods of participatory or deliberative democracy have been regulated in fragmented laws (Bächtiger et al., 2019). Consultations, or people assemblies have been object of consideration as disconnected mechanisms of participatory democracy. However, deliberative democracy requires something else than a bunch of participatory instruments scattered throughout the legal system of any given member states. Deliberative democracy is not only to give people the opportunity to express their views sporadically. Deliberative democracy requires to respond to a set of core principles and undeniable attributes (Ackermann & Fishkin, 2002). It also requires to meet a number of guarantees and safeguards to avoid being used to manipulate citizens. It requires continuity and commitment by public powers, a process design and also a set of methods or techniques that can be different and still respond to the requirements of a democratic system. Under these requirements the legal standards needed to codify deliberative processes within a regulatory framework should give solutions to certain questions that remain unsolved. Such questions should consider the topics that are more suitable for deliberation, the design of the deliberative process, how the result of such deliberative processes should be embedded in decision making, the scope of deliberation, how the recruitment of participants should be managed, what deliberative method offers the greatest potential, or the impact of the inputs in decision-making. And yet, these questions remain unsolved.

As well as this, deliberative democracy needs to address an additional challenge. Any legal considerations to deliberate by the public must take a future-oriented approach, considering not only to give solutions to current unsolved problems, but also considering the lurking challenges in the context of a changing world (Fishkin, 1991). In this regard, we must consider the intersection of technology and society, which also has a reflection in deliberative processes. These new functionalities allow to scale deliberation up, making possible massive participation by the public in decision-making. The next step will be to use AI to analyse these large amounts of citizens' inputs so that group decisions can be considered as collective intelligence and also as collective will.

The use of artificial intelligence is making it technically possible to gather citizens' opinions on a great scale, allowing for massive participation by the public. European countries need to step into deliberative processes at the same footing. The EU is a community with a democratic heritage and a similar democratic culture.

When it comes to representative democracy, the values are clear. However, when it comes to deliberative democracy this is not the case. We lack a common legal framework of principles in this regard. We need to define the safeguards and warranties to make sure that decisions made by using deliberative democracy meet the democratic standards that we share as EU community.

The main objective of this paper is to analyse the convenience of tackling institutionalization of deliberative democracy among member states and EU institutions in the context of democratic cohesion in the digital era. Our hypothesis is that deliberative practices need be institutionalized in the legal systems of member states and EU institutions according to a set of legal standards that stem from the EU *acquis* in order to maintain democratic cohesion in the digital era.

2. Literature overview

Disaffection toward politicians has led to give citizens a more active role in policymaking. The so-called deliberative democracy has been one of the ways of giving citizens a more active role in decision-making. Up to now, deliberative democracy is more of a concept than an articulated and comprehensive set of rules governing deliberative methods of decision-making. Different conceptual frameworks dealing with deliberative democracy have been elaborated and also there is an agreement about some of the principles that have to be considered in any given deliberative process. This includes principles such as transparency, inclusiveness and openness.

Literature on deliberative democracy is varied and diverse and includes theoretical foundations and practical applications. Key authors such as Habermas (1994), Rawls (1993), Fishkin and Laslett (2003) and Ackermann and Fishkin (2002) have set the ground for contemporary research. There is a general agreement on the importance of deliberation, inclusion, and public reasoning in the theory of deliberative democracy. However, subject matters as the nature of consensus, the breadth of public reason, the convenience of large-scale deliberation, or how to address structural inequalities in deliberative processes have been subject to discussion and disagreement Rawls (1971).

Such debates show the complexity of this area of research and also trigger further development of theories. Studies and theories about deliberative democracy are in a constant process of evolution, facing new political circumstances, internal revisions, empirical research, interdisciplinary approaches, methodological and technical innovations and global challenges, such as climate change (Smith, 2022), mass migration, and pandemics (Bächtiger & Dryzek, 2024). Deliberative democracy must be adaptable to these new challenges in order to maintain its relevance and effectiveness in promoting higher standards of democracy. And so must be the theories underpinning deliberative processes (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019).

Legal research on deliberative democracy has also been conducted with a view to exploring how deliberative processes can be intertwined with decision-making to achieve real and relevant effectiveness. Fishkin (2011) research on deliberative polling has been substantial in illustrating how deliberative methods can be used in the context of public consultations and legal reforms.

Studies on deliberative democracy in the scope of the EU have been focused on introducing deliberation in the framework of EU institutions with a view to improving EU legitimacy (Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007). Their work focuses on the dynamics of deliberation within the European Parliament and its impact on decision-making. Alemanno and Nicolaïdis (2019) address the functioning of citizens' assemblies in various member states and their potential for implementation at the EU level. Other works have analysed the benefits of deliberative democracy in terms of countering populism (Blockmans & Russack, 2020). Deliberative democracy in the scope of the EU has been approached from a partial point of view, focusing on specific methods of deliberative democracy, such as citizens' assemblies, (Smith, 2021), or addressing specific cases, such as the Conference for the future of Europe (Alemanno, 2020). Previous research on the topic of deliberative democracy has explored how deliberative principles can be integrated into legal systems to enhance democratic legitimization, participation by the public and equal opportunities to participate in decision-making (Cohen, 1997; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004).

Research considering the impact of new technologies on the deployment of deliberative methods is wide and varied. Although this is a field in constant evolution, new technologies have been considered as long as they are at the service of representativeness (Allen & Light, 2015; Bernholz et al., 2021; Besson & Utzinger, 2007). This works as a limit, since the understanding of democracy in terms of representativeness constrains the potential of new technologies. AI and new technologies are considered in democratic terms as long as they match existing forms of exercising democracy. In other words, new technologies are seen as tools to enable an extended version of democracy, not as a way of reformulating democracy and its functioning in new ways. Even though some research has focused on digital advances on deliberative democracy, representativeness remains at the core of this form of democratic participation

Research funded by the EU has explored subject matters related to deliberative democracy. This is the case of DEMOTEC (Democratizing territorial cohesion: experimenting with deliberative citizen engagement and participatory budgeting in European regional and urban policies. From a similar approach, the research project Cities as arenas of political innovation in the strengthening of deliberative and participatory democracy. Also, we must consider the research project EUComMeet.

Most of the research and studies developed up to now adopt a today-perspective, analysing how the introduction of deliberative democracy processes can enhance democracy and create higher legal standards. However, it is necessary to analyse the impact of AI-deliberative democracy in the evolution of democracy from

a long-term future-oriented approach. Democracy must be considered as a living creature that evolves over time. From this perspective, prospective research aimed to foresee and anticipate future effects on democracy becomes necessary if we are to codify deliberative practices in the context of the EU.

3. Deliberative democracy in the context of representativeness

Representative democracy is in crisis at this moment in time. Citizens have a feeling of disaffection towards politicians and feel that the decisions taken by their representatives are not always the most accurate ones. This triggers a crisis of legitimacy. The development of new technologies provides citizens with quicker and easier access to information and, therefore, they can analyse public decisions and draw their own conclusions. They have the feeling that their representatives do not always fulfil their expectations. Trust in government has been eroded as a consequence of a growing inequality, which has been exacerbated as a consequence of the economic crisis. Deliberative democracy could reduce the rising disaffection towards politicians. Governments would feel a greater sense of accountability to their citizens with no grey lines between what citizens want and what governments provide and this would enhance legitimacy and efficiency at the same time.

Representative democracy is undergoing a process of adaptation and faces challenges that demand the involvement of new actors. By carefully granting decision-making authority to private entities and citizens, governments can achieve considerable gains in both efficiency and consent. New government systems make use of networks to ensure more effective deliberation and democratic legitimacy, which makes it necessary to involve the public and also private actors. Legislation should aim at a more equitable participation of the people in formal and societal governance in accordance with principles of justice and individual rights. This should be a requirement not only to meet the needs of a changing world, but also as an imperative resulting from the development of new technologies, which make it possible for individuals to have an active role in government activity. Citizens must have a more active role in government, both as individuals and also as part of organizations and networks, and in this regard, the role of new technologies is an important tool to empower citizens.

Governments play an important role when it comes to the making of decisions, the formulation of policies and the delivery of public services across a wide range of areas (Podgórska-Rykała, 2024). Governmental action covers the particular needs of localities and citizens. The proximity of governments to the electorate and to the needs and interests of citizens makes it clear that citizens must be given the opportunity to shape public policies and intervene in the decision-making process. It is necessary to look into new ways of citizens' participation (Alemanno & Organ, 2021) and to go deeper into participatory democracy.

Innovation in government is needed. Technologies are accelerating at an exponential rate, yet most government organizational structures and processes remain lineal. Yesterday's best practices are no longer sufficient to succeed in today's fast-paced, tech-driven, disruptive world. Instead, new mindsets and skill sets are required for leaders to envision the future. We are 21st century citizens under 18th century government structures and procedures. The aim is to empower citizens by reducing the gap between them and their political leaders, and in this regard the use of technological tools plays an important role. New technologies bring citizens closer to the decision-making process by giving them the opportunity to take a more active role in the process. Likewise, the exercise of democracy can be transformed and reformulated in the light of new technologies. This implies exploring the opportunities offered by new technologies, challenging existing preconceptions. Technological innovations have a great potential and as a logical consequence, democracy cannot be based on the principle of representativeness exclusively.

This prospective approach allows us to challenge existing preconceptions about democracy, such as that of representativeness. The usage of AI-supported deliberation can serve as a catalyst for a new era of democratic government. AI will redefine and transform the idea of democracy and the way in which sovereignty is exercised. For this reason, any legal considerations of deliberative processes must take a future-oriented approach, considering not only present handicaps, but also the lurking challenges in the context of a changing world and codification must be approached from this perspective.

Democracy evolves over time and adapts itself to a given place and time. In ancient Greece, democracy was exercised in the way of direct democracy. Thousands of years later, the best expression of democracy is that of representativeness, given the impossibility of the direct and personal intervention of individuals in public life. However, new technologies will make it possible to express opinions in a massive way and AI offers the tools to have massive amount of information processed and analysed. As AI will transform people's opinions into a kind of new collective will, democracy may not be bound to representativeness as the main form of exercising power. Our assumption is that the introduction of AI in deliberative processes will allow for a new form of direct democracy in the adoption of certain decisions, bringing back the concept of Greek agora. A shift from a democratic system based on representative democracy to a new one in which AI-assisted deliberative democracy will coexist with representative democracy at an equal footing is already technically possible. The idea of polydemocracy implies that different forms of democracy will be able to coexist at an equal footing and representative democracy may not be the paradigm of democracy anymore.

The idea of citizens' assemblies comprised by randomly selected citizens who work under the principle of representativeness shows that even if public powers want to introduce innovations in government, they are stuck on the idea of representativeness. New technologies will make it possible to resort to large-scale

participation without the constraints of representativeness. What do we need these representativeness-based citizens' assemblies for, if we already have representative institutions directly elected by the electorate?

4. Deliberative democracy as an experimental practice

Currently, deliberative methods and processes are still experimental. The role and purpose of deliberative democracy in the context of a representative democracy needs to be the object of study and analysis. A theory of deliberative democracy still needs to be put in place, as it remains legally undetermined how deliberative democracy should be introduced in decision making processes. Many experiments have been conducted in this regard, mainly in the public sector, but also by private companies.

In the scope of the European Union, deliberative processes have been experimental attempts to involve citizens in decision making. The last of these attempts is the Conference for the future of Europe (Alemanno, 2020). However, in spite of the popularity of these new forms of exercising democracy, deliberative processes have not been institutionalized or codified in the scope of the European Union up to now.

Experimental attempts in the field of deliberative democracy have been conducted by the private sector too. In this sense, Meta carried out an experiment in which technology users were invited to participate in Community Forms where participants had the opportunity to have a say on generative AI. The experiment was conducted with the collaboration of Standford Deliberative Democracy Lab. The aim was collecting public input on issues concerning Meta's products. This experiment driven by the tech industry was based on the so-called deliberative democracy model. Meta made use of AI to moderate Community Forum discussions. The experiment put forward the lack of standards in the field of deliberative democracy, whether in the private sector, or in the public one. The experiment also showed that the result was dependent of the company commitment to follow up the inputs gathered by the public and this is a conclusion that can be easily extrapolated to the public sector, making clear the existence of a democratic gap, which must be closed in the future. Following on the steps of Meta, OpenAI has also held its own AI-supported deliberative processes.

Other experiments in the area of collective intelligence have been run by The Collective Intelligence Project, with the aim of aligning progress, safety and participation in the context of new technologies. Some companies, such as Go Vocal have also developed AI-supported functionalities to enable deliberation, which have been put into practice by several governments providing a field for research.

Experimental research in AI deliberative democracy is also being conducted by different institutions and organizations. The Global Citizens' Assembly is conducting research on the role of citizens' assemblies in agenda setting at a

transnational level. The Stanford Deliberative Democracy Lab is devoted to research dealing with democracy and public opinion obtained through Deliberative Polling and related democratic processes. Along with the Stanford's Crowdsourced Democracy Team, they developed an AI-assisted online deliberation platform intended for massively scale deliberation, which allowed Meta to conduct the experimental approach to deliberative democracy.

Experimental approaches to deliberative democracy based on the method of citizen assemblies have been conducted by FIDE, Federation for Innovation in Democracy- Europe. This research focuses on citizens' assemblies as a form of exercising deliberative democracy, and the facilities to gather selected citizens fostered by digital platforms. However, turning these pilot programs into sustained governmental practices remains a challenge.

5. Democratic cohesion as the reason behind codification. Reasons to codify deliberative democracy according to EU values

Governments and also private companies have been experimenting with innovative practices in the field of deliberative democracy to make the public participate in decision-making. Citizens' assemblies and mainstream participation are good examples of this. However, these experimental practices do not create citizens' entitlements, nor public power duties. Citizens' participation needs to be secured and guaranteed through codification and institutionalization. Otherwise, no rights are conferred to citizens and deliberative processes operate at the discretion of public authorities. Experimental practices, without a legal framework supporting them, are likely to bring about harmful effects on democracy. Citizens may perceive that their participation is useless if their opinions are not considered in decision-making because not legal framework makes compulsory for public authorities to integrate these inputs in the process.

Member states and even EU institutions are reluctant to introduce codified methods of citizens' participation in their legal systems. However, institutionalization of deliberative democracy is the key to secure citizens' rights and also to provide deliberative processes with a set of guarantees and safeguards, such as regular monitoring, transparent reporting, or fruitful feedback.

And yet, there are not common legal standards that could guide the process, as it has been stated by the Council of Europe in a recent report. Having common legal standards to codify deliberative democracy becomes particularly important in a time when governments have to face new challenges, as they need to integrate digitalization and new technologies in the design of deliberative forms of participation. These new technologies have the power to enhance democratic life but also have the potential to transform democracy and the way in which it is exercised. The common democratic heritage of member states and also the integration in a political community demands a common approach to these new challenges.

EU treaties assume that social and territorial cohesion must be promoted (Craig, 2010). The arrival of digitalization and their impact on democratic participation makes also necessary to promote democratic cohesion among member states. Democracy is in the process of being reformulated according to the new possibilities offered by new technologies. Legal standards to codify deliberative processes are more necessary than ever to bring unity when facing such challenges. EU member states need to step into deliberative processes at the same footing. When it comes to representative democracy, the principles are clear. However, when it comes to deliberative democracy, we lack common legal standards in this regard. We need to define the legal safeguards and guaranties to make sure that decisions made following deliberative methods meet the democratic standards that we share as the EU community, especially with the introduction of new technologies. Indeed, the consequences of lacking common legal standards is exacerbated by the potential impact of AI-supported deliberative procedures and machine learning on the exercise of democracy. Up to now, member states had a common heritage and shared common democratic traditions that revolved around the idea of representative democracy. However, the future implementation of AI in democratic practices can make democracy evolve in different ways in different EU member states. Likewise, member states may find different forms of implementing AI and also different forms of exercising democratic power (Habermas, 1994) disaggregating the common democratic heritage as democracy evolves. This makes it necessary for member states to follow certain standards to keep democracy on common grounds.

Deliberative processes assisted by chat boxes, digital platforms and the usage of AI to select participants in citizens' assemblies, are just the first approaches to AI, which have already been implemented in certain countries. Technology has also been of use to determine the level of participation required to undertake a deliberative process. Data collection and its analysis by means of artificial intelligence are future possibilities. This will make it possible to scale deliberation up, allowing for massive and large-scale participation in decision-making. The next step may be to use AI to analyse these large amounts of citizens' inputs so that group decisions can be considered as collective intelligence and also as collective will.

In this future scenario, maintaining democratic cohesion in the exercise of democracy among member states and EU institutions will be a requirement. As a polyhedron, democracy also has many faces. Balance and ponderation among them will have to be struck according to certain standards that will have to be anticipated.

Democratic cohesion will have to be assured by means of a set of rules and legal standards intended to preserve the essential elements and attributes of EU democracy when codifying deliberative democracy, especially when introducing new technologies and AI.

Of course, there is not just one-size-fits-all ways of regulating deliberative decision-making. Each member state will have to pass effective legislation to this end, according to their legal traditions and democratic culture. However, there must

be some legal standards intended to safeguard legitimacy of decision-making adopted by following these methods, and also citizens' rights must be guaranteed when resorting to deliberative processes. Even considering the diversity of democratic cultures, there is a need for standards to underpin deliberative processes in the scope of the EU and their member states. In this sense, the first standardized rule in a democratic environment should be the institutionalization of deliberative democracy.

A standardized regulatory framework of AI-deliberative democracy in the scope of the EU must:

1. be consistent with the Treaties.
2. respect EU values and democratic principles.
3. be respectful with citizens fundamental rights, such as data protection, privacy, rights of minorities.
4. respond to the principle of good administration, so that the design process must be oriented to effectiveness and must have an impact on decision making, allowing citizens to receive feedback.

Deliberative democracy requires it to be codified and institutionalized in a coherent and comprehensive way to give response to the challenges, limits and barriers that governments will have to face, but also to create effective legislation. Of course, there is not just one way to regulate deliberative democracy, but there must be some legal standards intended to safeguard legitimacy of decision making adopted by following these methods, and also citizens' rights must be guaranteed when resorting to deliberative processes. Even considering the diversity of democratic cultures, there is a need for standards to underpin deliberative processes. Such standards should be intended to avoid a harmful impact on democracy and also to create a link between policy making and people's opinions. These limits will allow us to control the actions of government when they adopt decisions using these procedures.

Member states must meet some common democratic grounds in their governmental practices and deliberative processes. Experimental practices in this regard, without a legal framework to support them, are likely to bring about harmful effects for democracy. Citizens could perceive that their intervention in policy making is useless if their opinions are not considered in the final decision because not legal framework makes it compulsory for public authorities to integrate their inputs in the decision-making process. Some examples can illustrate this in the field of participatory democracy. Consultations, for instance, are open to the public (Fishkin, 2011). However, discretion runs the process, as public powers are not bound to send any feedback to participants, who often feel that they have not been heard in the process. This discourages citizens from participating in future processes eroding democracy and trust in politicians. When talking about deliberative democracy we risk the same consequences. For these reasons codification and institutionalization of participatory and deliberative democracy is a mandatory consequence if we are to prevent democracy from weakening.

Up to now, member states have had a common heritage, and shared democratic traditions that revolved around the idea of representative democracy. However, new technologies and particularly the implementation of AI in democratic practices can make democracy evolve in different ways in each one of the EU member states. Likewise, member states may find different forms of implementing AI and also different solutions to the exercise of democracy, disaggregating the idea of democracy and the common heritage as democracy evolves.

Democracy may evolve differently in different countries, even if they share a common democratic background. This makes it more necessary than ever for member states to follow certain standards to keep democracy on common grounds. EU treaties assume that social and territorial cohesion must be promoted. The arrival of new technologies is also necessary to promote democratic cohesion among member states. Democracy risks being reformulated according to the new opportunities offered by new technologies. From this perspective, democratic cohesion among different member states and EU institutions is more necessary than ever. We are facing a time of reformulation of democracy. Legal standards to codify deliberative processes are more necessary than ever to bring unity when facing such challenges.

Digitalization of democracy will bring about different patterns of democracy. Democratic systems of government will not be bound to rely on just representative democracy as the foundation of a democratic government. More than a given legal architectural structure, democracy will manifest itself through different forms. The concept of polydemocracy implies that different forms of exercising democracy will be possible. As AI will allow transform people's opinions into a kind of new collective will, democracy may not be bound to representativeness as main form of exercising democracy. Many forms of democracy will be possible, because different forms of democracy will merge in the same democratic environment. In this context, it will be necessary to create legal standards intended for member states and EU institutions to codify AI-deliberative democracy on common grounds in order to maintain democratic cohesion.

The idea of polydemocracy implies not just one paradigm of democracy underpinned by the idea of representativeness. In such context, keeping democratic coherence among member states and EU institutions becomes crucial in order to preserve political integration. Such democratic cohesion will have to be assured by means of a set of rules or legal standards intended to preserve the essential elements and attributes of democracy when codifying the introduction of new technologies in democratic practices as is the case with deliberative democracy.

In this context, democratic cohesion will need to be guaranteed in order to avoid desegregation. This is more important than ever, because democracy will be recognizable for the limits and respect of democratic rights, principles and values regardless of the way in which it is exercised. And such things will have to take into consideration the specificities of the EU.

6. Effects of codification on deliberative democracy

Codification of deliberative democracy will contribute to take practices on deliberative democracy a step further, as follows: 1) By considering deliberative democracy from an EU-oriented perspective, codification will contribute to create a common deliberative democratic culture and to facilitate deeper political integration into the EU community. 2) By considering deliberative democracy not only as a concept or theoretical framework, but also as a form of exercising democracy, codification will imply analysing the legal technicalities and legislative requirements needed to preserve citizens' fundamental rights and common principles and values. 3) By adopting an integrative and comprehensive perspective that goes beyond the regulatory framework of a specific method of deliberation, codification will contribute to build a thorough picture of deliberative democracy in the scope of the EU. 4) By taking a functional approach, codification and institutionalization of deliberative democracy will fill an existing gap in EU democratic practices. 5) By creating legal standards to institutionalize deliberative democracy among EU member states, codification will create novel legal knowledge in the subject. 6) By adopting a future-oriented vision, which anticipates future effects on democracy, codification will contribute to creating legal standards for the functioning of EU democracies in the long-term, maintaining democratic cohesion.

Institutionalization will provide a set of legal standards, based on the EU *acquis*, capable of promoting democratic cohesion and political integration when codifying the functioning and operation of deliberative processes and the role of new technologies. Also, it will anticipate the impact of AI-supported deliberative practices on democracy and will elaborate a core set of legal standards capable of foreseeing upcoming challenges in a context of polydemocracy. Finally, codification will create common legal knowledge on deliberative democracy, which will contribute to build a common democratic culture in this regard.

Developing a set of common legal standards based on EU principles, values and rights will set the stage for governments to codify and institutionalize deliberative democracy in a meaningful and effective way, making it possible for citizens to influence decision-making at a national level. Also, this will provide member states and EU institutions with legal standards to face the challenges created by the introduction of digitalization and AI. Codification will contribute to the implementation of AI-supported deliberative democracy in the context of European government systems, helping member states to pass effective and efficient legislation in line with the European Union *acquis*.

Creating legal standards to institutionalize deliberative democracy among EU member states will transform deliberative democracy from an experimental practice into an institutionalized form of exercising democracy. This will bring democracy to a higher level by integrating deliberative methods into the common practices of members states.

As well as this, the effects are expected to transcend the national level. The EU centered approach intended to build a common culture on deliberative democracy is expected to facilitate deeper political integration into the EU, as member states enter digital democracy at the same footing by following legal standards in line with EU democratic values and principles. The process of codification will also provide legal grounds to escalate deliberative democracy to an EU level, not just as an experimental practice, as it happened with the Conference on the Future of Europe, but also from an institutionalized perspective. Codification is aimed to bring EU democracy to a higher level by integrating deliberative democracy in the common practices of members states in the framework of common EU principles and values and citizens' fundamental rights. Codification also aims at helping the EU enter into digital democracy on the same footing by following legal standards which are in line with EU democratic values and principles.

Finally, even if this is not the purpose of the project, the findings will pave the way to escalate deliberative democracy to an international level, since EU democratic standards can be taken as an example of the highest democratic practices in the world.

Conclusions

Codification of deliberative democracy addresses a political, technological and societal challenge, as it aims to develop common legal standards to institutionalize deliberative democracy in the framework of EU present and future member states and EU institutions, according to common values, and democratic principles and spread such principles to other countries. This is a standing question. Indeed, the lack of legal standards to codify deliberative democracy in the scope of the EU member states needs to be tackle from a common perspective. Many questions related to the functioning and operation of deliberative decision-making still remain unanswered. The introduction of new technologies exacerbates the process.

Currently, deliberative methods and processes remain experimental. The role and purpose of deliberative democracy in the context of representative democracy needs to be object of study and analysis. It remains unanswered how deliberative democracy should be introduced in decision making processes. The lack of a normative approach in the elaboration of a theory on deliberative democracy makes it difficult to institutionalize this participatory model. And yet, there is a lack of legal standards to guide the development and institutionalization of deliberative democracy in the scope of the EU and its member states. The Council of Europe put forward that the essential elements of deliberative democracy and the attributes that make it recognizable need to be set out in the form of legal standards that guide member states and democratic systems of government to develop new deliberation methods in the framework of a common democratic culture. However, any step taken to deliberative democracy in the framework of the EU must take into consideration

the specificities of the European Union and its member states. It is essential for democracy to create a set of common criteria and legal standards to help countries to codify and institutionalize deliberative democracy in an integrative way and to face the digital challenges of introducing AI in EU deliberative processes.

It is conclusive the unavoidable necessity of developing common principles for the sake of political integration. The transforming power of new technologies put at the service of deliberative democracy will give rise to different forms of exercising democracy. If this transformation is not faced in the framework of a common set of rules provided by common democratic values and principles, democracy risks being disaggregated in many different forms and European countries risk missing their common democratic heritage, also creating inequalities among citizens.

Codification aims to transcend the diversity of democratic cultures, as well as the variety of methods through which deliberative democracy can be articulated. The goal is to come up with the essential elements of deliberative democracy in the framework of EU values and democratic principles and translate these attributes into practical legal standards to be followed by all present and future member states, European Union institutions and third countries.

It is substantial to promote the institutionalization and codification of deliberative democracy in European systems of government in the context of the possibilities open by new technologies and AI, preserving EU democratic cohesion in this future scenario. The general purpose of codification aims at creating a standardized legal framework of guaranties and safeguards capable of preserving EU democratic cohesion when introducing deliberative decision-making procedures potentially adopted by members states, or European Union institutions in the context of a digital environment. Beyond these objectives, the functional purpose of codifying deliberative democracy is to preserve democratic cohesion in the context of EU democracy. The EU centered approach aims to build a common deliberative culture on deliberative democracy, which has the potential to facilitate deeper integration into the EU. Codification is aimed to bring EU democracy to a higher level by integrating deliberative democracy in the common practices of members' states in the framework of common EU principles and values and citizens' fundamental rights.

The challenge beyond codification and institutionalization of deliberative democracy is to maintain democratic cohesion while facing present and future challenges brought about by digitalization and new technologies.

Codification is expected to have a scientific, political and societal impact, whether at a national, or at a transnational level. Developing a set of common legal standards based on EU principles, values and rights will set the stage for governments to codify and institutionalize deliberative democracy in a meaningful and effective way, making it possible for citizens to influence decision-making at a national level and transnational level.

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Research on the determinants of bilateral trade between Romania and its major trading partners: panel data analysis based on the GLS gravity model

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Abstract: Based on the gravity model theory, this paper studies the determinants of bilateral trade flows between Romania and its main trading partners from 2010 to 2023. The research goal is to explore the role of economic size, geographical distance, institutional arrangements and foreign direct investment stock in promoting trade. To this end, this paper constructs an extended gravity model, using the generalized least squares method (GLSAR) and introducing a first-order autoregressive correction to deal with serial correlation and improve estimation accuracy. The model introduces variables such as GDP lagged term, FDI lagged term, geographical distance, border relations, Schengen membership and EU membership. The results show that economic size and geographical proximity are the core factors determining trade flows, while institutional integration and investment also have a significant driving effect on trade relations.

Keywords: bilateral trade, gravity model, panel data, economic integration, trade determinants

Introduction

As an important economy in Central and Eastern Europe and a member of the European Union, Romania's economy is highly dependent on foreign trade. Bilateral trade plays a key role in promoting Romania's economic growth and employment (Gherman & Ștefan, 2015). In particular, trade between Romania and its major trading partners has continued to expand over the past decade. These major partners include Germany, Italy, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria and China. Germany and Italy are Romania's largest export markets, accounting for about one-third of Romania's total exports.

The research subjects were selected based on the principles of interpretability and representativeness. First, Romania's seven largest trading partners were

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included, balancing long-term market share and stability to cover major bilateral flows. Second, geographical proximity and supply chain coupling were emphasized to reflect the actual constraints of intra-regional division of labor and cross-border logistics.

Neighbouring countries such as Hungary and Bulgaria are also important trading partners for Romania in the region. These nations have strong supply chain collaboration and industrial linkages with Romania, and in recent years, China, a major player in the world economy, has grown in importance as a trading partner. Romania's export performance is significantly affected by the demand of its major EU trading partners, consistent with the fact that around three-quarters of Poland's goods exports were destined for the EU market in 2024. To better understand how trade supports Romania's own development and to establish successful foreign economic policies, it is crucial that we do in-depth research on the bilateral trade between Romania and the aforementioned key trading partners.

The goal of this study is to analyse the main factors that affect Romania's bilateral trade flows with Germany, Italy, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria and China. The following research questions will be addressed in this paper: First, do factors such as economic size and foreign investment significantly promote Romania's trade with these countries? Second, what is the impact of factors such as geographical distance and bordering on bilateral trade? Third, do regional integration factors (such as the Schengen area and EU membership) further enhance the level of bilateral trade? This study uses the gravity model, which is popular in international commerce, as an analytical framework to address these issues.

Research on bilateral trade between Romania and its major trading partners is not only of academic value, but also of practical significance. Trade theory and existing research emphasize that trade is an important engine of growth for emerging economies. In the recovery process after the financial crisis, many EU countries, including Romania, have taken export promotion as an important strategy for economic growth (Gherman & Ștefan, 2015). Baier & Bergstrand (2007) systematically analyzed the role of free trade agreements in promoting the trade volume of member countries. In their review, Head & Mayer (2014) called the gravity model a „workhorse” model for international trade research and pointed out that it is applicable to various bilateral trade scenarios. Davidescu et al. (2022) used a panel data gravity model to simulate Romania's export trends during the epidemic and verified the predictive ability of the extended gravity model. In the context of European integration, Simionescu (2018) investigated the effect of foreign direct investment (FDI) on Romania's exports and noted that trade and investment can have a complementary relationship.

Since Romania joined the EU in 2007, the trade environment has undergone profound changes, and trade ties with neighbouring EU countries have become closer. At the same time, China's rising position in the global trade system has also brought new trade opportunities and challenges to Romania. Through this study, we

will have a clearer understanding of the factors driving Romania's foreign trade, thereby providing a scientific basis for Romania to consolidate its economic and trade relations with major partners.

The first chapter of this paper constructs an extended gravity framework and explains the data, GLSAR estimation and various variables; the second chapter presents the core results and diagnosis; the third chapter interprets the results and proposes policy implications such as infrastructure upgrades and strategic FDI; finally, the contributions and limitations are summarized and the future development direction is pointed out.

1. Methodology and data

This study uses the gravity model as a basic analytical tool to examine Romania's bilateral trade with its partner countries. Jan Tinbergen, a Nobel Prize winner in economics, first proposed the gravity model in 1962. He used the concept of universal gravitation in classical physics and compared two countries to two mass objects, and the trade flow between the two countries is similar to their „gravity”. The size of this „gravity” is inversely proportional to the physical distance between the two countries and directly proportional to the economic size of the two countries (Tinbergen, 1962).

Since Tinbergen's pioneering research, the gravity model has become the „workhorse” of empirical trade analysis. Early extensions added price and exchange rate effects to explain the value elasticity of trade flows (Bergstrand, 1985). Subsequently, scholars systematically explained multilateral resistance, pointing out that the accessibility of a country to other global markets will systematically affect the measurement of bilateral trade barriers. Anderson & van Wincoop (2003) formalized this idea into a structural gravity model, proving that if multilateral resistance is ignored, coefficient estimates will be biased.

In its most basic form, the logarithmic linear expression of the Gravity Model is as follows:

$$\ln T_{ij} = \alpha + \beta_1 \ln GDP_i + \beta_2 \ln GDP_j - \beta_3 \ln Distance_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

Among them, T_{ij} represents the trade volume between country i and country j , GDP_i and GDP_j represent the economic size of the two countries, $Distance_{ij}$ represents the geographical distance between the two countries, and ε_{ij} is the error term. This form demonstrates the fundamental reasoning that bilateral trade has a negative correlation with geographic distance and a positive correlation with economic scale.

With the development of the theory, the modern gravity model has gradually added more explanatory variables, such as common language, trade agreements, bordering, whether it belongs to a regional economy and other virtual variables,

which further enhances the explanatory power and predictive ability of the model (Anderson & van Wincoop, 2003). Many empirical studies have proved the effectiveness of the gravity model in explaining bilateral trade patterns, and it is a „workhorse” model for trade research (Head & Mayer, 2014). Therefore, the use of the gravity model can help us systematically examine the factors that affect Romania’s trade flows with partner countries and quantify the direction and magnitude of each factor.

This study refers to these classic model structures. In order to more precisely identify the factors influencing bilateral trade flows between Romania and its main trading partners, it employs the generalized least squares method (GLSAR) for estimation and introduces institutional variables like FDI, EU membership, and Schengen membership. This is done on the basis of the traditional gravity model in conjunction with the features of panel data.

In the framework of the gravity model, this paper takes the total bilateral trade between Romania and its major partner countries as the explained variable. The core independent variables include the economic scale indicators of both parties and other expansion factors.

The following is the model’s log-linear form:

$$\begin{aligned}\ln(\text{TRADE}_{it}) = & \alpha + \beta_1 \ln(\text{GDP_ROM}_{t-1}) + \beta_2 \ln(\text{GDP_PARTNER}_{t-1}) \\ & + \beta_3 \ln(\text{FDI_PARTNER}_{t-1}) + \beta_4 \ln(\text{DIST}) + \beta_5 \text{BORDER}_i \\ & + \beta_6 \text{EU_membership}_i + \beta_7 \text{SCHENGEN}_i + \varepsilon_{it}\end{aligned}$$

Where:

ln(TRADE_{it}) indicates the total bilateral commerce between Romania and trading partner nation *i* in year *t*, expressed as a natural logarithm;

ln(GDP_ROM_{t-1}) represents the natural logarithm of Romania’s GDP in year *t-1*;

ln(GDP_PARTNER_{t-1}) represents the natural logarithm of the GDP of the trading partner country in year *t-1*, representing its economic size;

GDP is a measure of economic scale. In order to reduce the endogenous impact and consider the lagged effect of economic scale on trade, the first-period lagged value of GDP, that is, the GDP data of the previous year, is used as the explanatory variable in the model. This treatment can avoid the deviation caused by the mutual influence of trade and GDP in the current year, and it is also in line with the economic intuition that there is a certain lag in trade demand and supply. In the study of related gravity models, lagged GDP is often used to explain the current trade flow to ensure that the direction of causality is clearer (Egger & Pfaffermayr, 2004).

ln(FDI_PARTNER_{t-1}) represents the natural logarithm of the stock of foreign direct investment (lagged one period) of trading partners in Romania;

The FDI variable is introduced because investment exchanges may promote trade - foreign investment in Romania may drive the import of raw materials and parts and the export of finished products, showing the complementary relationship

between trade and investment. In the context of European economic integration, trade and FDI have certain complementarity, and the increase of regional investment is often accompanied by an increase in trade volume (Straathof et al., 2008). Including FDI stock in the gravity model has a solid theoretical and empirical basis. In a gravity model study based on panel data, Baltagi et al. (2015) simultaneously estimated bilateral commodity exports and FDI stock as system equations. The results showed a significant positive correlation between the two, indicating that FDI can directly drive bilateral trade volume through intra-industry trade division and production network effects. FDI usually promotes the import of intermediate inputs and drives the export of final products, thereby enhancing trade links; including it in the model can not only capture the economic integration effects beyond GDP and geographical distance, but also improve the explanatory power and robustness of the estimate. Therefore, using the lagged FDI stock as an explanatory variable in the GLS/GLSAR framework is not only feasible, but also has important policy implications for the empirical results.

$\ln(DIST)$ symbolizes the geographical distance between Romania and its commercial partner expressed as a natural logarithm;

One of the most important factors in the gravity model is geographic distance. The geographical distance data comes from the GeoDist database of the French Economic Research Center CEPPII (CEPII, 2011), where the bilateral distance is calculated based on the geographical center of each country in kilometres. Longer distances usually mean higher transportation costs and information asymmetry, which inhibits bilateral trade (Tinbergen, 1962).

The variable **$BORDER_i$** is used to indicate whether the country borders Romania, with a value of 1 if the country borders Romania and a value of 0 if the country does not border Romania;

$EU_membership_i$ is a binary variable used to determine EU membership, with a value of 1 for member states and 0 for non-member states;

Romania and most of its major trading partners belong to the EU internal market. EU membership means a customs union and a unified trade policy, which greatly reduces trade barriers between member states. To assess the effect of EU membership, a dummy variable is created. It equals 1 if the partner country is an EU member, and 0 otherwise.

$SCHENGEN_i$ is a dummy variable indicating whether the country is a member of the Schengen Agreement. If yes, it takes 1, otherwise it takes 0;

The Schengen Area allows the movement of people and goods while reducing border checks. Although Romania has not officially joined the Schengen area during the study period (2010–2023), partner countries such as Germany, Italy, Hungary, and Poland are Schengen members. This paper sets a dummy variable to capture the possible trade facilitation effect of the Schengen mechanism. It takes 1 when the partner country belongs to the Schengen area, otherwise it takes 0.

ϵ_{it} is the error term.

Table 1. Variable Definitions and Data Sources

Variable Name	Description	Unit/Format	Data Source
<i>ln_trade</i>	Annual bilateral trade volume between Romania and partner countries	Current USD (log-transformed)	UN Comtrade
<i>ln_gdp_romania_lag1</i>	Romania's GDP in the previous year	Current USD (log-transformed)	IMF
<i>ln_gdp_partner_lag1</i>	Partner country's GDP in the previous year	Current USD (log-transformed)	IMF
<i>ln_fdis_partner_lag1</i>	Partner country's stock of FDI in Romania in the previous year	Current USD (log-transformed)	UNCTAD
<i>ln_distance</i>	Geographical distance between Romania and the partner country	Kilometers (log-transformed)	CEPII GeoDist
<i>schengen_partner</i>	Whether the partner country is a member of the Schengen Area	Dummy variable (1 = Yes, 0 = No)	EU Official Website
<i>border</i>	Whether the partner country shares a border with Romania	Dummy variable (1 = Yes, 0 = No)	Author's compilation (based on geographic data)
<i>eu_membership</i>	Whether the partner country is an EU member	Dummy variable (1 = Yes, 0 = No)	EU Official Website

Source: author's representation

To eliminate the dimensional differences between different variables and improve the comparability of regression coefficients, this paper standardizes continuous variables (including GDP, FDI, distance, etc.). The specific method is to perform Z-score standardization on the original variables, that is, subtract the mean of each variable and divide it by the standard deviation. The standardized variables are used for regression analysis to ensure the stability of the model and avoid the imbalanced impact of some variables on the regression results due to excessive magnitude (Gelman & Hill, 2007). At the same time, this also means that

the interpretation of the regression coefficient needs to be based on the „unit standard deviation”.

The data used in this paper are annual panel data from 2010 to 2023, covering Romania and seven trading partners: Germany, Italy, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, China, and Turkey. Data on bilateral volume of trade from the United Nations (UN) Commodity Trade Database (UN Comtrade). Macroeconomic indicators, i.e., GDP and population, are taken from IMF, and foreign direct investment (FDI) data are sourced from UNCTAD. From these sources, a balance panel data set was created. The cross-section are country pairs, which are constituted by Romania and its trading partners, and the time frame goes from 2010 to 2023, providing 14 annual observations per pair.

The subsequent are the causes why GLS with serial correlation is considered as a robust model estimation in panel information as the problems of serial correlation and heteroskedasticity Usually exist in the panel datasets. The GLSAR method corrects for autocorrelation in the residuals through iterative estimation, and possibly may give relatively unbiased and efficient parameter estimates (Egger, 2001). GLSAR estimates the autocorrelation coefficient first, and then corrects the data for it, then fits the regression. This process allows us to trim the model building using underlying assumptions for the model that are closer to data properties, therefore providing more dependable standard errors to either estimate coefficient and importantly improves the reliability of the statistical inference (Wooldridge, 2013).

2. Empirical results and analysis

This study uses a GLS gravity model to regress the panel data concerning Romania and its main traded countries over 2010-2023. The model is well-sized, with an R^2 of 0.824 and an adjusted R^2 of 0.809. The F-statistic is 54.27, which is highly significant ($p < 0.001$) showing that the explanatory variables explain well the differences in trade flows and carrying the overall statistical significance of the regression. The significant result of the Durbin-Watson statistic of about 2 also showed that no serious autocorrelation exists in the residuals of the model and thus, the model is robust. An additional p-value related to normality in the residuals is provided from the Jarque-Bera test; this p is 0.639, such that the residuals are approximately normal, and basic assumptions of the regression analysis are adequately satisfied.

To test whether there is a serious multicollinearity problem between model variables, this study reports the condition number, which is 13.7. According to the conventional judgment standard (Belsley et al., 1980), when the condition number is less than 30, it can be considered that the model collinearity problem is not serious. Therefore, although there is a certain correlation between the explanatory variables

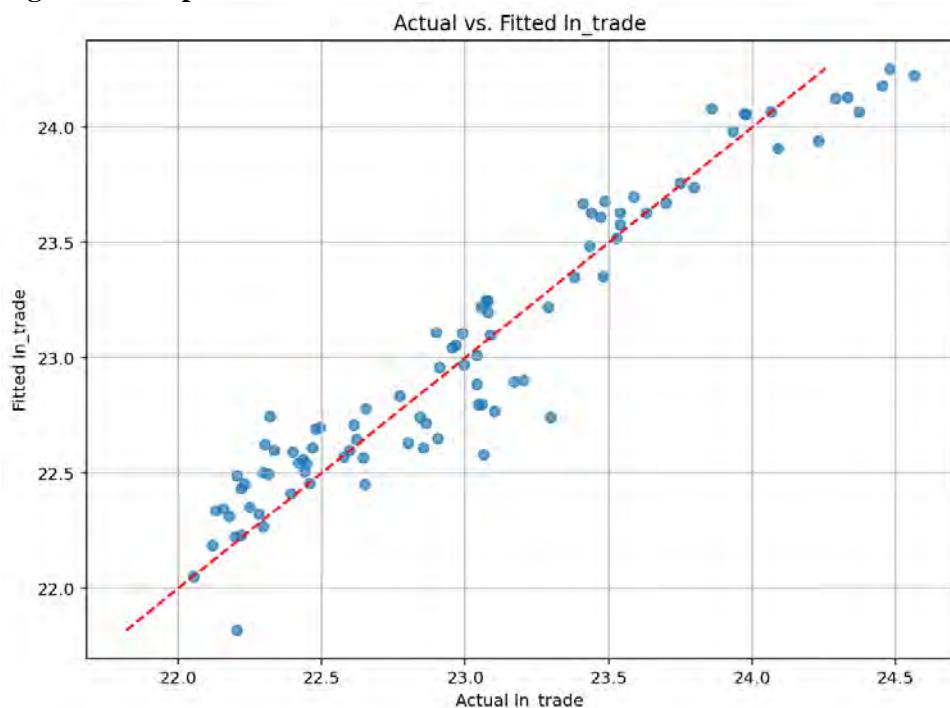
in this model, it is within an acceptable range and will not cause substantial interference to the stability of the regression results.

Table 2. Summary Statistics of the GLS Regression Model

R ²	F-statistic	p-value	Durbin-Watson statistic	Jarque-Bera p-value	Condition Number
0.824	54.27	< 0.001	1.94	0.639	13.7

Source: author's representation based on summary table of the GLS Regression Model

Figure 1. Comparison of Actual and Fitted ln_trade Values

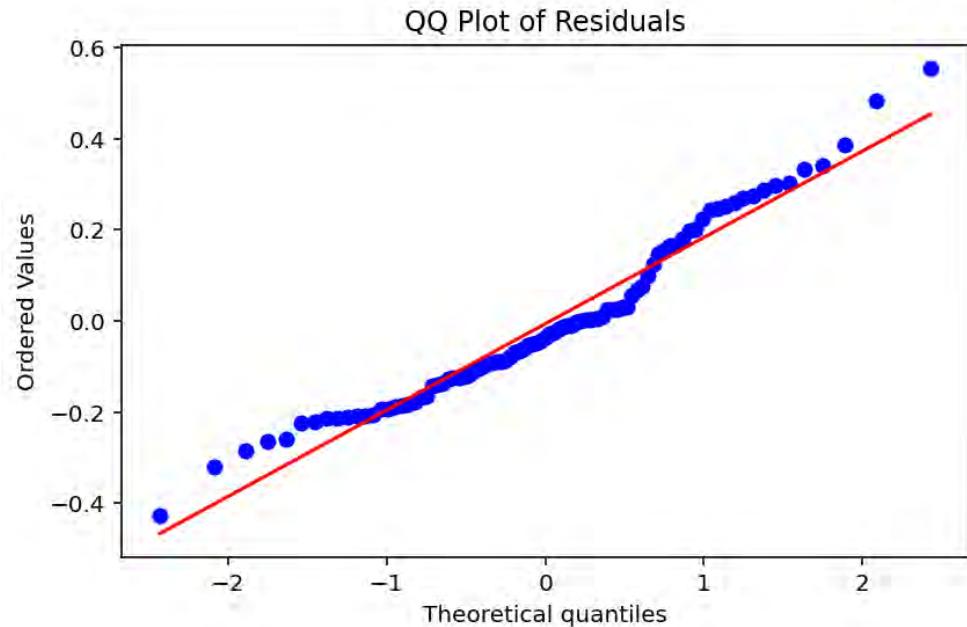


Source: author's representation based on model output

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the logarithmic values of actual trade volumes and the model's predicted outcomes. As shown in the figure, the majority of data points align closely with the red dashed line, which represents the ideal fit. This visual alignment suggests that the model performs well in capturing the observed trade dynamics. This is also consistent with the regression results. The R² of the model reaches 0.824, indicating that about 82.4% of the trade volume fluctuations can be explained by the selected variables in the model.

The regression results show that the impact of most core variables on Romania's bilateral trade flows is consistent with the expectations of the gravity model. The figure below shows the main results of the model.

Figure 2. GLSAR model residual normality QQ plot



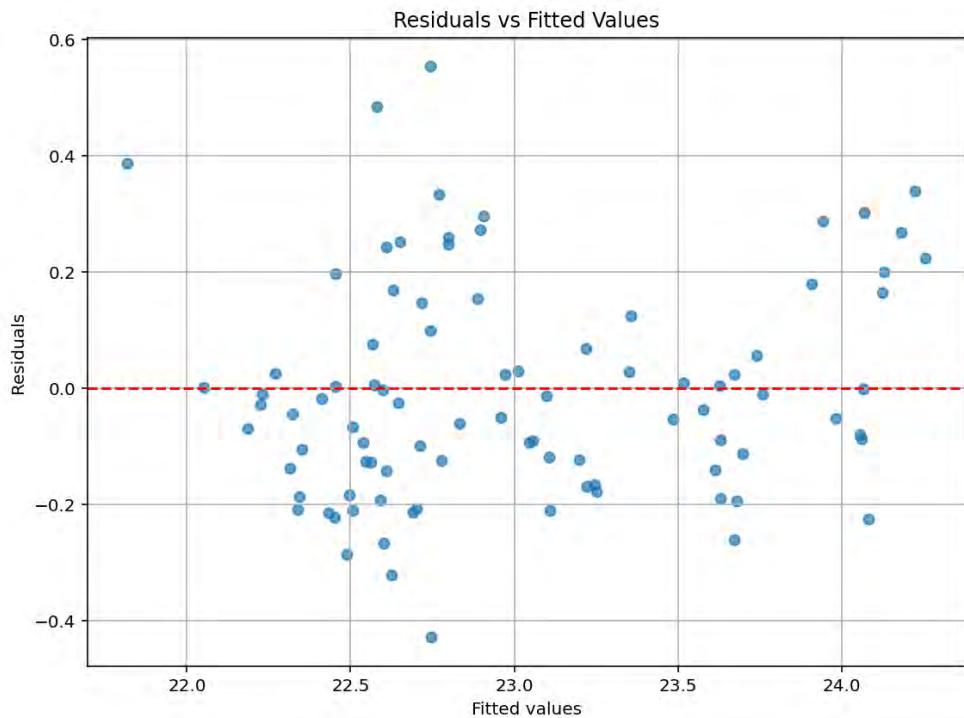
Source: author's representation based on model output

Figure 2 shows the QQ plot of the residuals of the GLSAR model in this study, which is used to test the normality assumption of the residuals. Most of the points in the figure are distributed along the reference line (45°) in the middle, indicating that the residuals are approximately normally distributed in the middle range; there are only slight deviations at the upper and lower quantiles, suggesting that there is a slight thick tail or peak phenomenon in the tail, but the degree of deviation is small. Combined with the statistical results of the Jarque–Bera test ($JB = 0.895, p = 0.639$) and the Omnibus test ($Omnibus = 1.105, p = 0.576$), it can be considered that the residuals generally meet the normal distribution assumption, thereby ensuring the validity of the coefficient estimation and the reliability of the significance inference.

In order to evaluate the distribution characteristics of the model residuals and the presence or absence of heteroskedasticity, Figure 3 shows the relationship between the residuals and the fitted values in the estimation results of the generalized least squares autoregression model (GLSAR). This figure is one of the classic residual diagnostic graphs, with the horizontal axis representing the fitted values of the model and the vertical axis representing the corresponding residuals. From the

image, most of the data points are randomly distributed near the zero residual axis (red dotted line), without showing any systematic trend or funnel-shaped pattern, which indicates that the error term of the model generally meets the homoskedasticity assumption.

Figure 3. Residual vs. fitted value plot



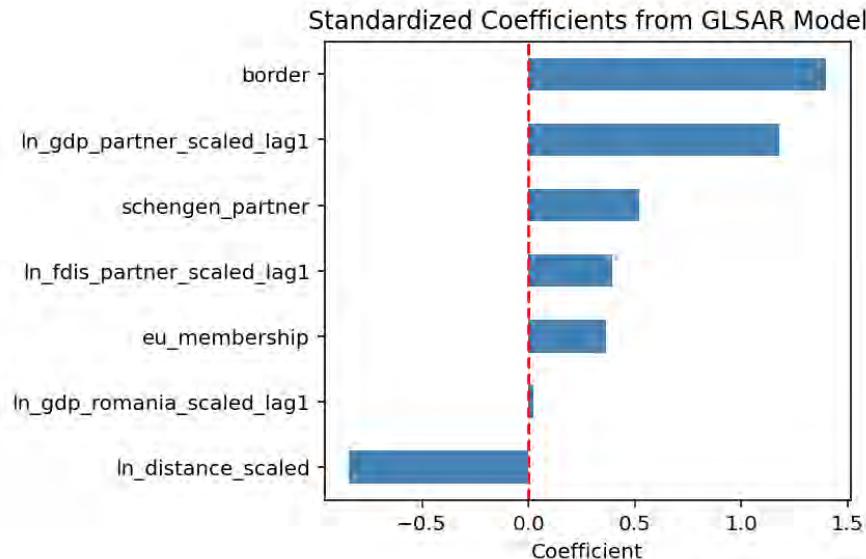
Source: author's representation based on model output

Further observation shows that the fluctuation range of the residual value is mainly concentrated in the range of ± 0.4 , and there are no extreme outliers, which indirectly verifies the robustness of the model. In addition, the vertical diffusion of the residual is roughly balanced in different fitting value intervals, and does not show a significant expansion or contraction trend, which means that the different value intervals of the explanatory variables do not lead to systematic changes in the error variance.

Figure 4 presents the standardized regression coefficients for the variables included in the model, highlighting their relative influence on trade volume. Among them, the „border” variable exerts the strongest effect, suggesting that, despite high trade volumes with certain non-neighbouring countries such as Germany and Italy, geographic proximity still plays a key role in shaping trade relationships. The

variable „ln_gdp_partner” ranks next in importance, indicating that the economic size of a partner country is also a significant driver of bilateral trade flows. The variable with the strongest negative impact is „ln_distance”, which is also in line with the expectations of the gravity model: the greater the distance, the higher the trade costs and the lower the trade volume.

Figure 4. Standardized Coefficients from the GLSAR Gravity Model



Source: author's representation

Ln_gdp_partner_lag1: The coefficient is 1.1797 and passes the significance test, which means that the larger the economic size of the partner country, the higher the trade volume with Romania. This is consistent with the traditional gravity model, that is, trade flows are positively correlated with economic size. With other variables unchanged, when the lagged GDP of the partner country increases by one standard deviation, the logarithmic trade volume between Romania and that country increases by 1.18 units on average, reflecting that external demand is an important driving force for Romania's exports.

Ln_distance: The coefficient is -0.8440 and is highly significant, indicating that when the distance increases by one standard deviation, the logarithmic trade volume decreases by 0.844 units on average. Longer geographical distances increase transportation costs and trade barriers, thereby inhibiting bilateral trade. This result supports the law of „distance hinders trade”, that is, Romania prefers to trade with geographically closer countries, and closer neighbors are often more ideal trading partners.

Border: The coefficient is 1.3996 and significant, which shows that sharing a border can significantly increase bilateral trade volume. The results show that if the partner country borders Romania, the trade volume is on average about 4.05 times higher than that of non-border countries. Neighboring countries often have more convenient transportation connections and closer historical and cultural ties, so the border effect promotes bilateral trade and has a strong driving force for trade.

Table 3. Regression Results from the GLSAR Gravity Model

Variable	Coef fici nt	Std. Error	T- valu e	P- valu e	95% Confidenc e Interval	Interpretation
LN_GDP_PA RTNER_LAG 1	1.17 97	0.157	7.53 1	0.00 0	[0.868, 1.491]	Significant positive impact
BORDER 96	1.39 96	0.162	8.62 5	0.00 0	[1.077, 1.722]	Significant positive impact
SCHENGEN_ PARTNER 09	0.52 09	0.122	4.28 2	0.00 0	[0.279, 0.763]	Significant positive impact
LN_DISTANC E 40	- 0.84 40	0.084	10.0 3	0.00 0	[-1.011, - 0.676]	Significant negative impact
LN_GDP_RO MANIA_LAG 1	0.02 41	0.026	0.92 3	0.35 9	[-0.028, 0.076]	Not significant
EU_MEMBE RSHIP 47	0.36 47	0.145	2.50 9	0.01 4	[0.075, 0.654]	Significant positive impact
LN_FDIS_PA RTNER_LAG 1	0.39 52	0.102	3.86 4	0.00 0	[0.192, 0.599]	Significant positive impact

Source: author's representation

Schengen_partner: coefficient is 0.5209, indicating a significant positive effect. If the partner country is a Schengen country, the trade volume is about 68.3% higher on average, indicating that if the trading partner belongs to the Schengen area, it will help increase its trade with Romania. The Schengen membership of the partner country may indirectly promote trade by simplifying personnel exchanges and improving logistics efficiency. Romania's accession to the Schengen area is expected to have an additional positive boost to its trade with Schengen countries.

EU_membership: The coefficient is 0.3647 and significant, indicating that when the trading partner is also a member of the EU, the bilateral trade volume is significantly higher than the trade with non-EU countries, and the trade volume increases by about 44% on average. After Romania joined the EU, many trade

barriers such as tariffs have been eliminated with member states, and common market regulations and standards have also facilitated the circulation of goods. Therefore, the „EU effect” brought about by EU integration has significantly improved Romania’s foreign trade level.

Ln_fdis_partner_lag1: The coefficient is 0.3952 and significant, indicating that an increase in the stock of direct investment from partner countries to Romania will lead to an increase in bilateral trade in the following year. For every one standard deviation increase in the stock of FDI from partner countries to Romania, the bilateral trade volume in the following year increases by about 0.40 units, indicating that the hypothesis that investment promotes trade holds true. FDI may promote trade by establishing cross-border supply chains and improving local production capacity. This is consistent with the findings of Simionescu (2018): Romania has attracted a large amount of foreign investment since joining the EU, and countries with larger exports are more inclined to invest in Romania. This shows that trade and investment have a complementary relationship, and an open investment environment can further expand trade channels.

The coefficient of Romania’s own lagged GDP is positive but not statistically significant, suggesting that fluctuations in Romania’s economic size have no notable marginal effect on bilateral trade within the framework of this model. This result may be attributed to Romania’s relatively small and stable economy. Once partner country demand and other factors are controlled for, the influence of Romania’s GDP appears diminished. Therefore, compared to internal supply capacity, external demand and structural factors provide a stronger explanation for trade fluctuations (Miron et al., 2019).

These empirical results are generally consistent with the expectations of the classical gravity model. Overall, the model explains most of the variation in Romania’s foreign trade flows, confirming the important role of economic size, distance, and institutional factors in bilateral trade.

3. Discussion and implications

The empirical results underscore that the external trade of Romania reflects the classical gravity form: the larger and closer in distance two economies are, the greater their trade connection. Consistent with conventional theory, volumes of bilateral trade are positively correlated with the economic size of the partners countries, but are negatively correlated with geographical distance (Tamaş & Miron, 2021). The higher the distance between Romania and a trading partner, the lower is the trade intensity and the less the two countries are related by trade. In practice this means that richer European markets suck in more Romanian exports and trade with more distant countries is snuffed out by the tyranny of distance. In conclusion, this gravity decomposition shows that external demand conditions and distance are first-order determinants of Romania’s trade, precisely as Tinbergen’s gravity model

would expect. These results suggest the importance of maintaining the growth of its exports will depend crucially on economic developments in larger markets notably in Europe and in overcoming geographical trade barriers.

Regional integration and institutional quality are also crucial. Membership of the EU has traditionally given Romania a significant trade boost with other member states. In this specification, the EU membership dummy is positive and statistically significant, consistent with higher trade via harmonized standards, a common external tariff, and streamlined border formalities that reduce compliance and waiting costs. Similarly, the Schengen Agreement, is predicted to act as a facilitator to trade, and for Romania recently joining the Schengen area, its exports will receive an added fillip. Apart from agreements, the institutional factor is equally important. The poor governance and regulation quality can foster or inhibit trade. For example, Davidescu et al. (2022) find that Romanian exports are affected by government effectiveness and control of corruption. Tamaş & Miron (2021) determine, in the context of an augmented gravity model that different governance indices (rule of law, regulatory quality, control of corruption, etc.) would imply huge increases in exports. More specifically, improved Corruption Control in Romania is linked to higher Exports, while low corruption and strong institutions in partners sustain Imports. These institutional channels embody the notion that stable and transparent policies minimize trading frictions.

Thus, EU integration and institutional development have complementary effects: by aligning Romania's regulations and legal standards with those of its neighbors, integration has encouraged trade, while further institutional reforms can amplify this benefit. In practice, trade agreements and common markets have helped explain why about three-quarters of Romania's trade is now with other EU members, and why further convergence in regulations or currency union could raise bilateral flows even more. However, as some studies note, the gains are not automatic. For example, deeper EU integration has sometimes been shown to influence FDI flows even more than trade flows (Straathof et al., 2008, cited in Simionescu 2018). In sum, this finding supports the view that institutional improvement, like reducing corruption, enhancing regulatory quality and deeper regional integration, maintaining open market linkages with the EU and neighbors, strengthen Romania's trade beyond what simple size and distance would predict.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) is another key channel linking Romania with the world. By facilitating production of tradable goods domestically, FDI can alter trade patterns. High inflows of FDI, especially in manufacturing and technology, often raise a country's exports and imports (through local demand for intermediate inputs). Recent firm-level research finds that FDI in Romania has tended to boost the quality of its exports. Bajgar & Javorcik (2020) report that the involvement of multinational companies in upstream industries correlates with improved export quality from Romanian firms. In other words, foreign investment in inputs and component industries enables local producers to upgrade and sell more sophisticated

products abroad. They also notice smaller, positive impacts of FDI in downstream sectors. The implication is that attracting strategic FDI can have spillover effects on domestic exporters, improving Romania's competitiveness.

At the aggregate level, foreign-owned companies contribute a large share of Romania's trade flows. While up-to-date official numbers are limited, previous studies show that FDI-backed firms were responsible for over two-thirds of Romania's exports in the late 2000s (Zaman & Vasile, 2012). Notably, this also meant they accounted for the bulk of imports in sectors such as retail and trade. For example, Zaman & Vasile (2012) find that between 2007 and 2009, FDI firms held 70.8% of Romanian exports and 59.2% of imports, but nevertheless generated a trade deficit. While more recent data are needed, it is likely that foreign-affiliated enterprises remain influential.

To capitalize on FDI for trade, Romania needs to ensure that inward investment supports export capacity. This involves maintaining a stable, investor-friendly environment – in line with the institutional effects above – and fostering sectors with global value chain links. It also implies encouraging partnerships between multinational and local firms. The positive link between FDI and export quality suggests policies to attract greenfield investment in high-tech and R&D could pay off in higher exports. Conversely, measures should be taken to avoid „trapped” FDI that only imports final goods. In sum, FDI influences Romania's trade both directly (through the volume of goods foreign firms sell) and indirectly, and thus represents a crucial factor that complements the gravity drivers.

In a bilateral gravity model, one typically includes both partners' GDP. Partner GDP measures external demand, while Romania's own GDP represents its supply capacity. However, the coefficient on Romania's GDP can be tricky to interpret, especially in panel estimations with fixed effects. In some specifications, Romania's aggregate GDP variation is absorbed and its direct coefficient may be estimated imprecisely. Indeed, sectoral studies have found unexpected results for this term. For example, Tamaş (2020) reports that in a gravity model of Romania's electronics trade, the coefficient on Romania's GDP turned out negative in some regressions. This counterintuitive finding likely reflects statistical issues rather than an economic „negative size” effect.

In practice, the key point is that Romania's market size sets an upper bound on trade but adds little explanatory power once other factors are controlled. The partner's GDP typically emerges as the dominant demand driver, whereas Romania's GDP mostly reflects aggregate supply changes over time. For example, if Romania's economy grows, one might expect exports to rise, but this tends to happen only if that growth is in tradeable sectors or triggered by foreign demand. The literature on structural gravity suggests interpreting the GDP terms with care: fixed effects may sweep out exporter-time effects, and multilateral resistance may obscure a simple GDP coefficient. Thus, in this model Romania's GDP is included for completeness, but its coefficient should be viewed conditionally. Instead of focusing on this

coefficient, it is more informative to note that other results – higher partner GDP, shorter distance, better institutions – remain robust drivers of bilateral trade. In summary, while Romania's economic size matters in theory, the gravity results emphasize the relative sizes: Romania exports more to partners whose economies are large relative to its own, and vice versa.

3.1. Policy Implications

The above findings have clear implications for Romania's trade and economic policy. First, deepening ties with neighboring EU countries remains essential. The evidence indicates that share of trade with close EU partners is disproportionately high; hence policies should aim to reduce any remaining non-tariff barriers, harmonize standards, and take full advantage of single-market membership. Romania's recent Schengen entry should, for example, make cross-border trade in services and goods more fluid. Bilateral or regional agreements to improve border procedures can further amplify the gravity gains.

Second, infrastructure investment must become a priority. As highlighted, Romania's lagging road, rail, and port infrastructure actually increases transport distances and costs. Policymakers should therefore accelerate EU-funded projects to modernize transport networks. This includes not only building new motorways and rail links, but also improving the efficiency of customs and port terminals. Investments in the Danube corridor and Black Sea ports, such as dredging the Sulina Channel and upgrading the Port of Constanta, will pay off handsomely by reducing transport times. Improving infrastructure will reduce the negative effects of distance and enable Romania to integrate more fully into European supply chains.

Third, the importance of institutional reform and governance cannot be ignored. Lowering corruption and reducing the administrative burden will reduce trade costs and increase the quality of FDI it receives. This may mean digitising clearance of goods, enhancing judicial contract enforcement, and providing policy predictability. The experience indicates that to the extent that these gains are realized, very small changes in governance indices may lead to significant increases in exports. In addition, Romania can attract FDI in sectors that are complementary to domestic industry by creating a transparent investment environment (Bajgar & Javorcik, 2020).

Fourth, promoting strategic FDI and export-oriented investment pays off. Policy should not only seek to raise the amount of FDI but to direct it to high-value-added industries. This could be achieved by providing tax incentives or subsidies for projects with export potential or technology „spillovers”. Simultaneously, support measures for domestic exporters can help local firms serve foreign demand. For instance, the focus of trade promotion activities could include countries in which Romania already has investment relationships utilizing companies' existing business contacts.

Finally, macroeconomic stability continues to matter. As external demand is a major force, sound fiscal and monetary policies that maintain stable growth and currency conditions will enhance Romania's appeal as a trade partner. While this gravity analysis abstracts from short-run fluctuations, broader assessments warn that reliance on consumption-driven growth can widen trade deficits. Therefore, policies that boost productive rather than purely consumption will support a healthier trade balance over time.

In sum, the analysis reveals that Romania's trade patterns are driven by well-known gravity forces, but also by integration decisions and by the institutional context. Economic policy in Romania needs to continue to build strong links to both neighbouring countries and major exporters, need to invest in the physical infrastructure that is the basis for these links and the increase in trade, and need to improve the business environment in order to attract productive investment. These will help Romania take advantage of its strategic location in Europe and get back to economic growth that is related to the overall growth of the countries with which we trade.

Conclusion

Drawing on an augmented gravity-model specification, this study provides a systematic picture of the multifaceted determinants shaping Romania's bilateral trade with its seven main partners during 2010–2023.

First, the strongly positive coefficient on partner GDP confirms that external demand remains the key driver of Romanian exports; trade dynamics are tightly synchronized with the business cycles of core EU economies. Second, distance and border effects continue to act as „geographical valves”: a 1% reduction in distance significantly raises trade flows, while sharing a common border multiplies trade volumes thanks to lower costs and cultural proximity. Third, the combined benefits of EU and Schengen membership are evident: common tariffs, regulatory alignment, and the abolition of border checks reduce both visible and „institutional” trade frictions. Fourth, the positive elasticity of lagged FDI stock indicates that investment and trade are complementary within global value chains—multinational firms that set up operations in Romania import intermediate inputs and export finished goods, expanding flows in both directions.

The policy implications are obvious. Romania could deepen its economic links with its neighbors to harness its EU single-market status and its forthcoming full participation in Schengen, press ahead with cross-border corridor projects, digitalize border-processing procedures and modernize its ports to cut logistics costs and reduce effective economic distance, reinforce investor confidence through stronger rule of law, anti-corruption efforts, and more efficient administration, and thus attract FDI to high-value manufacturing and technology intensive services, and the help domestic firms integrate into regional value chains by offering training in

skills and technology upgrades to create more secure and responsive links to the region. Lastly, given that the current study only includes macro-level indicators and medium-N data, future research could use sectoral-level data or nonlinear and dynamic panel methodologies to further examine the interaction between trade, investment, and institutional determinants and offer more detailed insights into Romania's long-term trade strategy.

Although this study tries to reduce the endogeneity problem by using lag terms and robustness tests, it still cannot completely rule out the possible two-way causality between FDI and bilateral trade volume and the bias caused by common unobserved shocks; therefore, the size of the coefficient should be mainly regarded as correlation rather than strict causal effect, and it is necessary to be cautious when interpreting it. Nevertheless, the sign direction and relative magnitude of the empirical results remain consistent under different models and subsamples, indicating that FDI and trade still show positive interaction in deepening Romania-major partner economic integration. Future research can further identify causal mechanisms by combining instrumental variables or system equations on a larger sample or industry level.

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Transforming Europe: the power of culture in shaping a stronger, safer, and more resilient future

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Abstract: This article explores the strategic role of culture in shaping a stronger, safer, and more resilient European Union. Moving beyond a narrow understanding of culture as tradition or heritage, it examines how cultural engagement fosters democratic values, social cohesion, and collective identity. The research aims to explore culture as a strategic asset, assess the impact of EU cultural programs on civic engagement and resilience, illustrate these dynamics through a case study of the Republic of Moldova, and provide actionable policy recommendations. Methodologically, it adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, combining analysis of EU policy documents, scholarly literature, and case study material. Programs such as Erasmus+, Creative Europe, and EU4Culture are examined as tools for promoting intercultural dialogue, countering disinformation, and preventing marginalization. The findings show that integrating culture into strategic planning enhances community mobilization and strengthens the EU's capacity to respond to crises.

Keywords: European Union, culture, resilience, cultural policy, social cohesion, Republic of Moldova

Introduction

Europe's contemporary landscape is marked by complex challenges: rising populism, economic disparities, climate change, and geopolitical tensions threaten the European project's stability and cohesion. Amid these pressures, culture emerges as a critical resource for transformation. Culture shapes collective identities, mediates social relations, and provides frameworks for democratic engagement and resilience. In the context of increasing geopolitical tensions, democratic backsliding, and social fragmentation, the European Union (EU) is reevaluating the strategic dimensions of its foundational principles. While economic and political integration have historically dominated the EU's agenda, there is growing recognition that culture plays a vital role in shaping a cohesive, resilient, and inclusive European project.

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Culture, traditionally viewed as a symbolic or soft domain, is now acknowledged as a dynamic force with the power to connect societies, mobilize communities, and safeguard democratic values. The EU's motto, „*United in Diversity*”, exemplifies the belief that respect for varied traditions, languages, and histories can serve as a foundation for unity. Cultural participation is not only a form of expression but also a driver of social capital, intercultural understanding, and civic engagement, which are key pillars of democratic resilience.

This article aims to examine the evolving role of culture in the EU's integration strategy, with a particular focus on how cultural policy contributes to security, resilience, and solidarity. In particular, the research seeks to answer the following guiding questions: How does culture operate as a strategic resource in European integration? In what ways do EU cultural programs and initiatives enhance resilience and security? And how does the case of the Republic of Moldova illustrate the transformative effects of cultural cooperation at the Union's external borders?

Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives, the study investigates the influence of cultural engagement on identity formation, value transmission, and crisis response. Methodologically, the paper adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach, combining policy analysis, review of EU documents, scholarly literature, and case study materials. This methodological choice enables a critical synthesis of theory and practice, while highlighting the links between cultural policies and their concrete effects in Moldova.

Focusing on the Republic of Moldova, a key partner in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, the paper explores the transformative impact of cultural collaboration on regional cohesion and European integration. The objectives of this study are: to analyse the conceptual underpinnings of culture as a strategic asset in European integration; to assess the contribution of EU cultural programs to resilience and security; to illustrate these dynamics through a focused case study on the Republic of Moldova; and to formulate policy recommendations aimed at strengthening the cultural dimension of the European project.

1. Theoretical and conceptual framework

Understanding the transformative power of culture in the European integration process necessitates an interdisciplinary theoretical approach that bridges cultural studies, political science, sociology, and policy analysis. Culture is not merely a reflection of identity or tradition, but an active, strategic force in shaping political and societal structures. In this context, three core conceptual pillars frame the present analysis: culture as soft power, culture as a vehicle for identity construction, and culture as a mechanism of societal resilience.

Joseph S. Nye's (2004) influential theory of soft power provides the foundational lens through which the strategic dimension of culture can be understood in global affairs. Soft power refers to the capacity of an actor, such as the European

Union (EU), to influence others not through coercion or payment, but through attraction, values, and legitimacy. Nye defines it as „the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction” (p. 5).

In the European context, culture is increasingly recognized as a tool of soft power that promotes democratic values and fosters mutual understanding. Cultural cooperation, exchange programs, and heritage initiatives contribute to building legitimacy through non-military means, aligning with the broader principles underlying the EU’s external relations. As Gienow-Hecht and Donfried observe, states must „employ a diversity of different vehicles of cultural diplomacy” in order to effectively pursue both short- and long-term strategic objectives, which in turn can strengthen bilateral and multilateral relations (Gienow-Hecht & Donfried, 2010, p. 4). This logic is reflected in the EU’s neighbourhood strategies, which emphasize cultural diplomacy as a strategic instrument for promoting stability, fostering partnerships, and reinforcing shared values with neighbouring countries, particularly within the Eastern Partnership and Southern Neighbourhood regions.

Culture plays a central role in the construction, negotiation, and representation of collective identity. Stuart Hall argues that identity is not a static essence but a „production,” continuously shaped through discursive practices and representational systems (Hall, 1990, p. 222). From this perspective, European identity is not given, but rather constructed through cultural narratives, shared heritage, and symbolic rituals such as European Capitals of Culture and cross-border cultural festivals.

Jan Assmann’s concept of cultural memory further deepens this view. Cultural memory involves the transmission of identity-shaping content including myths, values, symbols, and rituals through institutions and social practices. This memory provides temporal continuity and supports a shared sense of belonging that transcends national boundaries (Assmann, 2011, p. 6). In the EU context, policies promoting cultural heritage preservation and digital archives (e.g., Europeana) are tools through which this shared memory is curated and disseminated.

From a sociological perspective, cultural engagement is directly linked to the formation of social capital—the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate collective action and civic participation. Putnam argues that participation in cultural and civic life, such as attending local concerts, volunteering at cultural festivals, or engaging in artistic production, fosters trust and reciprocity essential to the health of democratic societies (Putnam, 2000, p. 290). These activities create informal spaces for intergroup dialogue, social bonding, and intercultural learning, which are critical elements in diverse, multi-ethnic European societies.

EU-funded initiatives that support community-based cultural programs (e.g., EU4Culture, CERV) enhance these networks at the grassroots level, particularly in marginalized or post-conflict regions, thereby contributing to more cohesive and inclusive European societies.

In recent years, scholarship in crisis management, disaster resilience, and public policy has begun to emphasize the role of cultural practices in enhancing

societal resilience. David Alexander broadens the concept of resilience beyond infrastructural or technical capacity, arguing that effective resilience also requires social adaptability, community cohesion, and psychological well-being (Alexander, 2013, p. 2712). Cultural engagement contributes to these non-material dimensions of resilience by fostering shared meaning, solidarity, and collective expression.

Gotthardt et al. underscore this role in their analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating how cultural activities, both digital and physical, promoted empathy, emotional recovery, and social cohesion during periods of isolation and uncertainty (Gotthardt et al., 2022). Cultural institutions and creative practitioners thus emerge not merely as entertainers or heritage custodians, but as key actors in social recovery and crisis response.

By integrating insights from soft power theory, identity construction, sociology of culture, and resilience studies, this article conceptualizes culture as a multifaceted policy resource within the European integration process. Culture is not simply a decorative or symbolic layer, it actively shapes political legitimacy, nurtures democratic values, reinforces cohesion, and equips societies with the emotional and social tools to adapt in times of stress. In doing so, culture strengthens the EU's capacity to act as a coherent and resilient union in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.

In addition, these theoretical perspectives directly inform the choice of the Republic of Moldova as a case study. The case of the Republic of Moldova was chosen to highlight the cultural impact at the European Union's external borders. Moldova's geopolitical position at the EU's eastern border makes it a critical site where culture functions simultaneously as soft power, as a tool of identity negotiation, and as a resilience-building mechanism. The combination of theories allows the study to analyse how EU cultural policies are translated into practice in Moldova and why a qualitative interpretive methodology is particularly suited for capturing these dynamics. By linking the theoretical framework to the case study design, the analysis demonstrates how abstract concepts of power, identity, and resilience acquire concrete meaning in a borderland context.

2. Methodology

This study employs a *qualitative and interpretive approach* to examine the strategic role of culture in European integration. The methodology is designed to capture both the conceptual dimensions of culture such as its contribution to identity formation and resilience and its practical application through EU cultural policies and programs, highlighting its relevance as an instrument of soft power.

The research is based on three main sources of evidence. First, EU policy documents and strategic frameworks, including the New European Agenda for Culture, as well as operational programmes such as Erasmus+, Creative Europe, and EU4Culture, are analysed to identify institutional objectives, policy instruments, and

programmatic orientations. Second, *scholarly literature* from cultural studies, sociology, political science, and European integration studies is reviewed to provide the theoretical foundations of the analysis. Third, *case study material from the Republic of Moldova* is examined to illustrate how EU cultural policies are implemented in practice and how they affect resilience, civic engagement, and identity construction in a borderland context.

The research proceeded in several stages. Initially, *conceptual mapping* was conducted to connect theoretical approaches such as soft power, cultural memory, social capital, and resilience studies with the European Union's policy framework. This was followed by a *document analysis* of EU cultural programs, focusing on their stated aims, implementation mechanisms, and reported outcomes. Finally, a *case study synthesis* of the Republic of Moldova was carried out, assessing the relevance, impact, and limitations of EU-funded cultural initiatives in this particular context.

The *selection of policies and programs* for analysis was guided by three criteria: their direct relevance to EU cultural strategies, their implementation in the Republic of Moldova or the wider Eastern Partnership region, and the availability of credible documentation, such as official reports, project evaluations, and academic assessments. By combining theoretical perspectives with empirical evidence, this methodology ensures both analytical depth and contextual specificity. It moves beyond a descriptive overview of cultural programs to provide a *critical interpretation* of how culture contributes to resilience, identity-building, and European integration.

3. The multifaceted role of culture in EU policies

The European Union (EU) has long recognized the importance of culture in promoting unity, democracy, and transnational cooperation. Although economic and political integration have traditionally taken priority, the cultural dimension has gradually gained recognition as an essential element of European identity and strategic resilience. Culture contributes to the European project through its symbolic, social, and political roles, particularly in promoting democratic values, strengthening cohesion, and shaping collective narratives.

The recognition of culture as a formal EU competence occurred with the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, which introduced Article 128 (now Article 167 TFEU), establishing the Union's role in supporting and complementing the cultural actions of Member States (European Union, 2012, Art. 167). This marked a major turning point, legitimizing cultural engagement as part of the EU's broader mission.

Over the following decades, the cultural sector became the focus of several EU-level initiatives such as the „Culture,” „Europe for Citizens,” and „MEDIA” programmes aimed at promoting cross-border collaboration, safeguarding cultural heritage, and strengthening a shared European identity. These initiatives marked a shift in perspective: from culture as national heritage to culture as a shared European

resource capable of supporting cohesion, inclusion, and democratic engagement within the Member States and neighbouring regions (European Commission, 2007).

Cultural participation plays a vital role in promoting democratic engagement, social cohesion, and mutual understanding. The arts and culture create inclusive spaces for dialogue, enabling citizens from diverse backgrounds to interact, express themselves, and create together. These interactions foster trust, tolerance, and civic responsibility (Culture Action Europe, 2018, pp. 7 - 8). In the EU's post-crisis agenda, particularly after the financial crisis, the refugee wave, and the COVID-19 pandemic culture has emerged as a powerful tool for combating fragmentation and rebuilding solidarity.

Research shows that cultural engagement enhances democratic resilience by encouraging civic participation and public discourse. Artistic and creative activities are also essential for avoiding and resolving conflicts, and enabling community reconciliation. Many conflict resolution and community reconstruction initiatives have built on arts and cultural activities. (European Commission, 2023a, p. 30). Cultural institutions such as museums, libraries, theatres, and public art projects serve as spaces for democratic learning and critical reflection, where contested histories and complex identities can be negotiated. Moreover, European programs such as Creative Europe, Erasmus+ and CERV (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values) programme not only promote mobility and artistic exchange but also reinforce fundamental values by supporting projects related to citizenship, remembrance, and intercultural dialogue.

The European Union is a multi-level political community that encompasses diverse national and regional identities. In this context, culture serves as a crucial space for mediation, enabling the reconciliation of distinct identities within a shared European framework. As Delanty (2010) argues, culture in Europe provides a space for symbolic integration, where different traditions can coexist and converge around shared narratives. He emphasizes that „with the enlargement of the EU there is clearly a need for a wider definition of the European heritage to include the various forms of Europe - central, eastern, [and] Balkan Europe.” Moreover, the notion of unity in diversity, he notes, highlights „the regional plurality of Europe below the national level” (Delanty, 2010, p. 13). This perspective underpins initiatives such as the European Heritage Label, the European Capitals of Culture, and the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe, which illustrate how cultural heritage can promote civic belonging and transnational solidarity.

By placing culture at the heart of the integration narrative, the EU proposes a form of belonging that is not based solely on ethnicity or language, but on participation in a shared civic and cultural project. This is particularly important for border regions, minority populations, and candidate countries aspiring to align with EU values and norms. For example, the European Heritage Label explicitly selects historical sites that „symbolize European ideals, values, history, and integration,” with the goal of bringing citizens closer through shared heritage (European

Commission, n.d.c). These sites from the places where the Peace of Westphalia was signed to Robert Schuman's house are chosen for their role in the collective European narrative. EU policy thus seeks to strengthen European identity and mutual understanding among Member States. Similarly, the European Capitals of Culture initiative (e.g., Chemnitz 2025, Nova Gorica 2025) highlights Europe's cultural diversity while cultivating a sense of belonging to a shared cultural space visibility (European Commission, n.d.b). The Commission notes that these capitals „celebrate the cultural features Europeans share” and serve as an annual festival of European solidarity, also contributing to urban regeneration and international visibility (European Commission, n.d.c).

Beyond symbolic programs, the EU integrates culture into broader social and economic agendas. The New European Agenda for Culture (2018) and subsequent work plans emphasize the links between culture, education, digitization, the Green Deal, and social inclusion. For example, the cultural and creative industries are seen as drivers of the „European triple transition (green, social, and digital)” and the Creative Europe programme (2021-2027) explicitly funds green, inclusive, and gender-balanced projects. By supporting cross-border networks of artists and cultural professionals, Creative Europe seeks to strengthen the European community. Complementarily, Erasmus+ and other mobility schemes encourage students, teachers, and young creatives to live abroad; such exchanges foster intercultural dialogue and empathy among new generations of Europeans.

In the EU's eastern neighbourhood, these values are projected through dedicated programs. The EU4Culture initiative (2021–2024), within the Eastern Partnership, is a representative example. Funded by the European Union, EU4Culture supports the cultural and creative sector in the Eastern Partnership countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Among its objectives are strengthening the cultural sector as a driver of economic development and promoting peaceful dialogue among communities. For instance, EU4Culture offers grants for local cultural strategies (€30,000 - €300,000 per city) and funds festivals and artist mobility (EU Neighbours East). By supporting cultural institutions and local authorities in non-capital cities, the program aims to spread the benefits of „cultural citizenship” beyond the core of Europe.

Furthermore, EU foreign policy tools increasingly include culture: since 2021, new Council conclusions and initiatives by the European External Action Service (EEAS) have integrated heritage conservation into the EU's agenda for peace and security. Overall, the EU's cultural diplomacy (through United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], bilateral agreements, etc.) emphasizes that the heritage of different countries contributes to a shared cultural heritage.

Thus, the integration of the cultural dimension into European Union policies reflects a strategic vision of culture's role in strengthening social cohesion, democracy, and European identity. Beyond its symbolic value, culture is recognized

as a cross-cutting instrument with impact across multiple domains from education and innovation to social inclusion, sustainable development, and public diplomacy.

To illustrate this multidimensional contribution, the table below summarizes the main functions of culture in the European context and links these functions to relevant EU programs and initiatives, showing how culture supports the European project in an integrated and sustainable manner(see).

Table 1. Ways in which culture contributes to the european project

Function of Culture	Impact on the European Union	Example of EU Program/Initiative
Symbolic	Contributes to creating a shared European cultural identity and reinforcing EU values	Creative Europe, European Capitals of Culture, European Heritage Label, CERV, Erasmus+
Social	Fosters social inclusion, cohesion among states, and intercultural dialogue	European Capitals of Culture, Creative Europe, EU4Culture
Democratic	Supports civic participation, freedom of expression, historical memory, and cultural and media pluralism	CERV, Creative Europe
Economic	Supports cultural and creative industries, fosters innovation and job creation	Creative Europe, Horizon Europe, European Capitals of Culture
Diplomatic	Projects EU values in the Eastern Neighbourhood and globally through cultural cooperation	EU4Culture, Creative Europe
Educational	Encourages mobility, intercultural learning, and development of artistic and civic skills	Erasmus+, Creative Europe
Scientific/Innovative	Funds research and innovation in cultural heritage, digitization, social inclusion, collective memory, and European identity	Erasmus+, Horizon Europe – Cluster 2 „Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society”

Source: European Commission (n.d.a)

Through diverse programs like *Creative Europe, Erasmus+, CERV, and targeted regional initiatives such as EU4Culture*, the EU leverages culture to achieve multiple strategic objectives. Symbolically, culture helps forge a shared *European identity* and reinforces fundamental values. Socially, it builds *cohesion, encourages inclusion, and facilitates intercultural dialogue*, providing inclusive spaces for interaction and understanding, particularly crucial in a multi-level political community. Democratically, cultural engagement strengthens *civic participation, critical reflection, and public discourse*, making cultural institutions vital hubs for democratic learning. Economically, the cultural and creative industries are recognized as key drivers of *innovation, job creation, and sustainable development*. Furthermore, culture plays an increasingly important role in the EU's *diplomatic efforts*, projecting European values and fostering cooperation with neighboring regions.

The integrated approach, where cultural functions are supported by both dedicated cultural programs and transversal initiatives, underscores culture's pivotal role in the European project. It serves as a tool for *social cohesion, education, innovation, citizenship, and sustainable development*, ultimately contributing to a more resilient, inclusive, and unified Europe. The examples provided, from the European Heritage Label to the European Capitals of Culture and EU4Culture, illustrate how these policies translate into tangible outcomes, demonstrating culture's indispensable contribution to the continuous evolution and success of the European Union.

3. Culture and resilience in times of crisis

The role of culture in strengthening societal resilience has become increasingly evident in the face of recent European and global crises. From the COVID-19 pandemic to the war in Ukraine, cultural actors and institutions have responded in ways that not only sustained public morale but also fostered solidarity, trust, and emotional recovery.

The COVID-19 crisis exposed the vulnerabilities of European societies, not only in health and economic systems, but also in terms of social disconnection and mental health deterioration. Cultural participation through online concerts, virtual museum tours, neighbourhood art projects, and creative digital campaigns proved essential in maintaining a sense of connection and shared experience during lockdowns (Lazarev, 2021, p. 116).

The European Commission (2023b) acknowledged that the cultural and creative sectors play a pivotal role in supporting economies, societies, and individual well-being and empowerment at national, regional, and local levels (p. 94). These cultural responses also demonstrated the adaptive capacity of institutions and artists to shift towards digital and community-based formats, thus broadening accessibility. They became, in essence, platforms of emotional solidarity and civic care, enabling

citizens to process collective trauma, express grief, and reaffirm social bonds. As Alexander (2013) notes, „the strength of a human society under stress is its ability to devise means of resisting disaster and maintaining its integrity (coherence), while the ductility lies in its ability to adapt to circumstances produced by the calamity in order to lessen their impact” (p. 2710). In this light, cultural initiatives during the pandemic can be seen as both resilient and flexible responses that mitigated social fragmentation while reinforcing shared values and human connection.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 brought another wave of disruption to European stability. Cultural institutions across Europe mobilized rapidly to express solidarity with Ukraine through public performances, exhibitions, and awareness campaigns. EU-funded initiatives supported displaced artists, protected cultural heritage, and facilitated intercultural dialogue across refugee-hosting societies. These efforts highlighted the role of culture as both a humanitarian response and a geopolitical act of resistance.

According to the European Parliament resolution (2022), culture enhances resilience by enabling societies to recover and maintain social coherence during times of conflict, while also serving as a vital vector for mutual understanding and peacebuilding among communities.

Beyond anecdotal evidence, empirical research substantiates the claim that cultural engagement fosters social cohesion and mitigates hostility. Notably, a 2022 study conducted in Italy found that a mere 1% increase in cultural consumption was associated with a 20% reduction in hate-motivated crimes (European Commission, 2023a, p. 5). These findings underscore the preventative dimension of culture, highlighting its potential as a protective factor against social fragmentation and radicalization, in addition to its expressive and symbolic functions.

These insights into the societal impact of cultural participation are further reinforced by the evolving role of digital technologies in the cultural sphere. Digital platforms have amplified the reach of cultural content during crises, enabling both continuity and innovation. While digitalization was initially a response to physical restrictions, it has evolved into a structural feature of cultural resilience. Platforms such as *Europeana*, virtual art residencies, and EU-supported digital festivals have created new spaces for intercultural engagement and knowledge exchange, particularly among the younger generation.

However, this digital expansion also underscores the importance of cultural policy frameworks that ensure inclusivity, digital literacy, and equitable access to online cultural resources—especially in marginalized communities.

4. Culture and security

In the contemporary European context, the concept of security extends beyond military defense to include social cohesion, psychological resilience, and ideological integrity. Culture contributes to this broader understanding of security by addressing

root causes of conflict, promoting democratic values, and offering non-coercive means of building trust and dialogue. This section explores how culture functions as a tool for *conflict prevention, democratic stabilization, and resistance to radicalization and disinformation*.

Cultural diplomacy refers to the use of cultural initiatives and exchanges to foster mutual understanding, defuse tensions, and build long-term relationships between communities or states. In the European Union's external action, cultural diplomacy has gained increased visibility as a soft power strategy that complements traditional diplomacy, particularly in fragile or contested regions. As Gienow-Hecht and Donfried (2010) explain, the „science” of cultural diplomacy involves „the exchange of ideas, information, values, systems, traditions, and beliefs in all aspects of our societies, such as art, sports, science, literature, and music, with the intention of fostering mutual understanding” (p. 21). This definition underscores the multidimensional nature of cultural diplomacy and its capacity to bridge divides through non-coercive, culturally grounded engagement.

Through initiatives such as *EU4Culture, Creative Europe, and the European External Action Service's cultural diplomacy platform*, the EU promotes intercultural dialogue in the Eastern Partnership, the Western Balkans, and the Mediterranean. These programs aim to prevent radicalization by offering inclusive cultural narratives and collaborative spaces, particularly in areas marked by ethnic, religious, or political division (European Commission, 2016, p. 7).

Culture plays a pivotal role in transmitting and reinforcing core democratic norms, including freedom of expression, pluralism, and human dignity. Cultural institutions such as museums, libraries, theatres, and archives function as spaces for historical reflection and civic education, enabling citizens to engage with complex legacies and envision shared futures. Through participatory artistic practices, cultural programming fosters democratic agency and critical thinking, both of which are essential for the long-term consolidation of democracy. In doing so, these initiatives contribute to strengthening democratic citizenship and enhancing social cohesion (European Commission, 2023a, p. 106).

In post-conflict or transitional societies, culture is also used in reconciliation processes, helping to restore trust, acknowledge historical injustices, and facilitate restorative dialogue. For example, EU-funded initiatives in the Western Balkans have supported community theatre, documentary filmmaking, and heritage conservation as tools for intercultural healing and rights-based engagement. A similar approach has been implemented within the Republic of Moldova, including the Transnistrian region, where cultural cooperation projects have played a role in fostering dialogue and mutual understanding across divided communities. One notable example is the Confidence Building Measures Programme, supported by the European Union and implemented by UNDP Moldova, which includes joint cultural, educational, and historical heritage initiatives aimed at rebuilding trust between both banks of the Nistru River. These activities, such as common art exhibitions, youth

camps, and cultural heritage restoration projects, contribute to maintaining open channels of communication and to cultivating a shared cultural space despite political divisions (UNDP Moldova, n.d.).

The proliferation of disinformation and hybrid threats presents a significant challenge to democratic stability across Europe. Mass online disinformation campaigns are increasingly employed by both domestic and foreign actors to erode public trust and exacerbate societal divisions, with potentially severe implications for European security (European Commission, 2018). Cultural content, especially that produced locally and shared through trusted platforms, can help counter these threats by reinforcing credible narratives, fostering media literacy, and promoting critical engagement with information sources.

Cultural strategies are particularly effective when they operate at the intersection of *education, digital literacy, and creative innovation*. Arts-based approaches to counter-disinformation, such as satire, storytelling, and participatory media, enable engagement with vulnerable audiences in non-didactic ways, thereby strengthening cognitive resilience.

Radicalization often thrives in environments marked by *cultural exclusion, identity-based marginalization, and lack of social belonging*. Cultural inclusion through funding for minority-language media, intercultural education, and community-led cultural projects helps mitigate these risks. According to UNESCO, inclusive cultural programming reduces alienation and provides constructive outlets for identity expression, which are crucial in resisting extremist narratives (UNESCO, 2022, p. 12).

Furthermore, preserving and celebrating cultural diversity, both within and across national borders, supports the EU's broader objectives of *human rights, equality, and minority protection*, reinforcing its normative authority on the global stage.

5. Case study – the Republic of Moldova

The Republic of Moldova occupies a complex geopolitical and cultural position on the eastern border of the European Union. As a candidate country and part of the EU's Eastern Partnership, the Republic of Moldova serves as a compelling example of how cultural cooperation can foster Europeanisation, resilience, and civic engagement.

Moldova's historical and cultural landscape reflects overlapping layers of Romanian, Russian, and Soviet influence, alongside distinct regional traditions. This hybrid identity generates both opportunities and challenges in the process of European integration. *From the perspective of identity theory, Moldova illustrates how cultural narratives are continuously negotiated, with EU programs offering tools for constructing a European civic identity while balancing local traditions.*

In recent years, Moldova has faced significant internal pressures, including political instability, information warfare, and external interference. In this context, culture has emerged as a source of soft power, enabling the development of local resilience and democratic values at both community and institutional levels.

The European Union contributes to Moldova's cultural resilience through funding and initiatives. Under the EU4Culture programme, Moldova shares regional funds with other Eastern Partnership countries: dozens of local festivals and cultural NGOs are eligible for EU grants, and small cities are supported in developing local cultural strategies. One of the most significant European initiatives implemented in Moldova during 2021–2024 was EU4Culture. This project played a key role in supporting the Moldovan cultural sector, especially in cities beyond the capital.

Funded by the European Union and implemented by the Goethe-Institut in partnership with other institutions, the programme aimed to promote cultural development as a driver of social and economic transformation in the Eastern Partnership region. In Moldova, EU4Culture supported artist mobility fellowships, capacity-building workshops, local cultural strategies, and infrastructure aid for creative spaces. These initiatives reached small cities such Cahul, Ungheni, and Căușeni, where cultural participation had previously been limited due to underfunding. As a result, cultural institutions became hubs of community cohesion, intercultural dialogue, and youth engagement, promoting grassroots adoption of European values (EU Neighbours East, n.d.). Such municipal projects aim to empower civil society through culture, enhancing community resilience. They demonstrate the EU's commitment to a bottom-up approach to integration, with culture as a unifying force in regions vulnerable to external influence and internal divisions. Beyond their symbolic value, these projects *demonstrate measurable impacts in terms of increased cultural participation, community trust, and local governance capacity. However, their sustainability is often limited by financial fragility and dependence on external funding.*

Another transformative element in Moldova's Europeanisation process is the Erasmus+ programme, which facilitates academic and artistic mobility for both students and educators. The programme supports not only higher education cooperation but also cultural festivals, artist residencies, and interdisciplinary workshops promoting European citizenship and intercultural learning. In the 30 years of Erasmus+ in Moldova, over 5,000 students and teachers have benefited from international academic mobility, and numerous educational projects have been implemented in universities, vocational institutions, and youth and sports organisations, bringing innovation and valuable resources. Thanks to Erasmus+ support in Moldova, 83 Tempus projects, 35 higher education capacity-building projects, 37 Jean Monnet projects, and 10 VET capacity-building initiatives, among others, have been carried out (National Erasmus+ Office in Moldova, 2024).

For students in the arts and humanities, especially those at the Academy of Music, Theatre and Fine Arts (AMTAP), Erasmus+ offers valuable opportunities to

integrate into transnational creative networks. Participation in academic and artistic mobility enables them to return with enhanced professional skills, intercultural perspectives, and a strengthened European orientation. These experiences help shape young artists into cultural ambassadors, capable of building connections between Moldova's internal development and the cultural directions promoted at the European level. *In theoretical terms, these exchanges illustrate the production of social capital and the transmission of cultural memory, strengthening European belonging through lived experiences rather than abstract policy discourse.*

In this spirit, the Jean Monnet Module project „The European Identity Development through Culture in the Process of European Integration” (2022–2025), implemented at AMTAP, introduced an innovative interdisciplinary module on European cultural identity into the Academy's curriculum. (Academy of Music, Theater and Fine Arts, n.d.). Through this module, students from various specialisations, including music, theatre, visual arts, and cultural management, explored European themes through artistic, critical, and interdisciplinary lenses, developing civic and cultural competences and cultivating a proactive engagement with the European space and its values. This approach represents *a novel contribution, linking cultural policy with arts-based pedagogy in a candidate country context, an aspect underexplored in existing literature.*

The research activities conducted under the project resulted in a series of studies, international conference presentations, and academic publications, reinforcing AMTAP's role as a space for reflection on the cultural dimension of European integration. Thematic workshops organised in partnership with decision-makers at local, regional, and national levels, as well as academic and civil society actors, created an intersectoral dialogue platform. These meetings encouraged the exchange of best practices in cultural education and supported the development of concrete proposals for advancing social cohesion and European values through culture. Students' active participation in these activities has helped shape a generation of young artists aware of their role in promoting European identity and cultural democracy in Moldova.

A representative example of EU–Moldova cooperation is the MoldArte project, implemented in 2022 with the support of the Creative Europe programme (Creative Europe Desk Moldova, 2022). MoldArte functioned as a platform for contemporary artistic expression, connecting Moldovan artists with their European counterparts and facilitating performances, installations, and cultural debates. The initiative focused on critical dialogue, inclusion, and experimentation, giving voice to marginalised groups and emerging creators. (MoldArte, n.d.). MoldArte significantly contributed to the development of a participatory cultural ecosystem. Its activities enhanced the engagement of cultural actors and fostered a more inclusive understanding of public culture, thus reinforcing local community resilience. The project promoted collaboration between institutions, artists, and citizens, stimulating active cultural participation and encouraging a more democratic

and inclusive approach to community cultural life, thereby supporting social cohesion and strengthening resilience in the face of socio-political challenges.

Complementing these initiatives are several notable *Twinning projects* in the area of cultural heritage, through which EU member states support institutional reforms and capacity building in Moldova. Twinning projects such as „Support to Promote Cultural Heritage as a Driver of Sustainable Development” have focused on modernising heritage protection, training museum and archive professionals, and enhancing access to European best practices in conservation and cultural tourism. These projects serve both preservation goals and broader EU integration objectives, by aligning Moldova’s cultural governance with European standards (Ministry of Culture, n.d.b)

In addition, a cross-border initiative between the Republic of Moldova, a candidate country, and Romania, an EU Member State, titled „History and Music – Values That Unite Us”, stands out as a model of cultural rapprochement and shared memory. Co-funded through EU Cross-Border Cooperation instruments, the project facilitated collaboration among musicians, historians, and young people from both sides of the Prut River through joint workshops, concerts, and documentary film screenings. The project created a space where national narratives converged around shared European values, enabling dialogue and emotional connection through artistic expression. It fostered mutual understanding, counteracted disinformation, and celebrated a common cultural heritage in a region marked by historical fragmentation. (Ministry of Culture, n.d.a)

The MoldArte initiative, the Twinning heritage projects, and cross-border cultural actions like „History and Music – Values That Unite Us” illustrate how artistic expression and heritage collaboration open inclusive spaces for democratic dialogue and foster a sense of European belonging among citizens and youth. Together, these initiatives reinforce Hall’s argument that identity is not fixed but continuously constructed through cultural exchange.

Cultural collaboration between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, also is marked by numerous educational exchange programs and cultural initiatives. These exchanges of experience between representatives from Romania and the Republic of Moldova are a good way to exchange ideas, practices, which lead to new projects and successful collaborations. A great example being media collaboration, which includes joint television and radio programs that promote cultural ties and mutual understanding (Pîrlog, A., & Alexa, A., 2024, p.109).

Despite the progress enabled by EU-funded initiatives several challenges continue to limit the full alignment of Moldova’s cultural sector with European standards and opportunities. These include structural underfunding of public cultural institutions, insufficient administrative capacity to manage European projects at local levels, and a lack of strategic coherence in national cultural policy. Additionally, cultural actors in rural and economically disadvantaged regions often face difficulties accessing EU grants due to limited project-writing expertise and

infrastructural barriers. This tension between potential and constraint reflects Alexander's notion of resilience: while cultural initiatives provide adaptive capacity, without systemic investment their transformative effects remain fragile.

Overall, the Moldovan case study illustrates the central thesis of this article: culture operates as a strategic asset that builds resilience, fosters pluralism, and strengthens European belonging in contexts of vulnerability. By explicitly linking local cultural experiences to theories of soft power, identity construction, and resilience, this analysis contributes a fresh perspective to the literature on EU cultural policy. It demonstrates that the cultural dimension of integration is not only symbolic but has measurable and context-specific effects in shaping democratic values at the Union's borders.

Conclusions and recommendations

Europe today faces multiple challenges from geopolitical crises to internal polarization, but culture remains a potent means to address them. This interdisciplinary analysis has shown that culture contributes to social cohesion, democratic engagement, and collective resilience. Cultural participation literally glues communities together by fostering trust, empathy and dialogue while anchoring democratic values in people's everyday lives. Recognizing these dynamics, the EU has integrated culture into its strategic vision: through funding programs, heritage networks, and policy frameworks it seeks to cultivate a shared European identity and solidarity across its member states and neighbours.

The case of Moldova underscores that cultural investments can yield tangible geopolitical effects. Supporting Moldovan traditions, festivals, and arts enables both external and local actors not only to preserve heritage but also to strengthen societal resilience against divisive forces, drawing the country closer to Europe's orbit. This example, alongside others across Eastern Europe, suggests a broader pattern: when culture is treated as an integral dimension of policy rather than a luxury, it reinforces democracy and peace. At the same time, the Moldovan case illustrates limitations: structural underfunding, uneven access to EU programmes, and dependence on external financing highlight the fragility of cultural resilience when not backed by long-term systemic support.

Maintaining and expanding support for culture is therefore crucial. EU policymakers increasingly advocate for a stronger cultural dimension in enlargement and neighbourhood strategies. Scholars and practitioners argue that policies should continue to link culture with education, social inclusion, and even climate action. By doing so, Europe can harness its rich cultural tapestry to guide its future: a Europe that places culture at its core will be stronger, safer, and more resilient.

The evidence presented in this study confirms that culture is not merely symbolic in European integration but a strategic instrument, aligning with theoretical insights from soft power, identity construction, and resilience studies. Culture

advances democratic values, fosters regional cohesion, and equips societies to adapt in times of crisis.

Methodological reflections highlight certain limitations of this research. Reliance on qualitative and interpretive synthesis, while valuable for depth and contextual richness, does not provide quantitative measures of cultural impact. Future research could complement this approach with mixed methods, including surveys, statistical indicators, or longitudinal analyses of cultural participation. Moreover, while Moldova provides a compelling case, comparative research across other Eastern Partnership countries would clarify the broader applicability of the findings.

In light of these findings, this section outlines key policy implications and proposes actionable recommendations to guide future EU cultural strategies, particularly regarding *enlargement, security, and external relations*. Cultural policy should be more explicitly integrated into the EU's strategic frameworks, including the *European Green Deal, Digital Europe, and Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*. Culture contributes to climate awareness (e.g., through green festivals), digital literacy (e.g., through digital storytelling), and conflict prevention (e.g., through cultural diplomacy). The European Commission and the European External Action Service should recognize culture as a *cross-cutting policy dimension* relevant to both internal cohesion and external engagement.

- *Recommendation 1:* Embed culture as a horizontal priority in major EU policy frameworks, including resilience, security, sustainability, and innovation strategies. Given the increasing geopolitical relevance of culture, the EU should expand the resources and scope of its *international cultural relations*, particularly in the Eastern Partnership and candidate countries. Programmes like *EU4Culture and Creative Europe* should be scaled up and institutionalized with long-term mandates.
- *Recommendation 2:* Develop a dedicated *EU Cultural Diplomacy Fund*, targeting cultural cooperation, heritage protection, and intercultural dialogue in the EU Neighbourhood.
- *Recommendation 3:* Integrate culture into *Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)* dialogues with priority regions. To maximize the social impact of culture, EU institutions must support *bottom-up cultural initiatives* that reflect local needs, languages, and identities. Emphasis should be placed on *non-capital cities*, underrepresented communities, and cross-border cultural regions.
- *Recommendation 4:* Expand place-based funding mechanisms through *INTERREG, CERV, and the European Social Fund+* to support inclusive cultural infrastructure at the local level.
- *Recommendation 5:* Encourage Member States to adopt *National Cultural Resilience Strategies* aligned with EU values and coordinated through open dialogue with civil society.

- *Recommendation 6:* Introduce targeted cultural mobility schemes for *young artists, students, and cultural workers* in candidate and partner countries.
- *Recommendation 7:* Incorporate cultural participation modules into *citizenship education and youth programmes* at EU and national levels..
- *Recommendation 8:* Include cultural and creative sectors in *EU civil protection and crisis preparedness mechanisms*, alongside mental health and social cohesion resources.
- *Recommendation 9:* Support the creation of *Cultural Emergency Task Forces* to protect heritage, sustain artistic production, and ensure continuity of cultural life in crisis zones.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the academic debate by explicitly linking EU cultural policies to the theoretical dimensions of soft power, identity construction, and resilience. While acknowledging its methodological limitations, the study opens new directions for future comparative and empirical work on culture's role in European integration.

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Integration and sustainability strategies for European inland waterway transport

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Abstract: The transformation of European cities includes improving transport through the increasing use of digital technologies and the transition to zero emissions. The study focused on improving inland waterway transport, which is an integral part of urban transport hubs in many European cities. The aim of the study is to identify potential reserves for ensuring sustainable inland waterway transport both at the EU level and within individual countries and cities. The methodological basis of the study is the use of comparative and analytical methods, as well as the application of a cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary approach to the problems of implementing strategies for the integration and sustainable development of inland waterway transport. Analytical and synthetic methods were used to study the problems of inland navigation and ways to overcome them.

Keywords: strategies, waterway transport, legislation, development

Introduction

The economic situation in Europe has been deteriorating for a long time against the backdrop of the rise of the United States and China. The EU faces an urgent need to overcome the barriers and structural weaknesses that are holding back development. Due to lower productivity, the EU lags behind the United States in advanced technologies, while China has caught up in many sectors and is winning the race for leadership in some new growth areas.

The root cause of this is a lack of innovation. Europe is unable to translate its ideas into new, marketable technologies and is unable to integrate these technologies into its industrial base. At the same time, internal constraints are preventing European companies from fighting back. They are under pressure from high energy prices and a heavy regulatory burden. They also face an increasingly uneven global playing field, characterised by the widespread use of industrial subsidies abroad. Europe is also increasingly dependent on strategic resources and highly concentrated supply chains (European Commission, 2025). A review was conducted of selected elements of

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special strategies and legislation on inland waterway transport in the European Union and its member states, focusing on Germany and Romania, which are leaders in Danube freight transport. This article examines ways to improve the regulation of Danube navigation. Although EU transport policy is not the main subject of consideration, it forms the environment against which the legal and administrative components of inland navigation are being improved. The following part of the article is devoted to the consideration of the above-mentioned and related problematic issues of European inland waterway transport and possible ways to solve them.

1. Development of EU strategies (flagship actions)

The European Union uses various strategies to achieve its goals. These include global strategies (The Global Gateway) as well as those addressing specific, narrower issues (European Water Resilience Strategy, EU Maritime Security Strategy, etc.). In implementing the strategic transformation of the water sector, the EU relies on projects and the EU Strategy for Industrial Maritime Transport and the EU Ports Strategy (2025), confirming its commitment to climate neutrality and industrial resilience. Rivers and canals are extremely important for both cities and villages, and for ensuring the competitiveness of the EU's basic industries, small businesses, and large corporations (Inland Navigation Europe, European Barge Union, et al., 2025a). The water sector, which includes maritime and inland navigation, is a cornerstone of both the European economy and global sustainable development (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe [UNECE], 2015). It brings together a diverse ecosystem of shipowners, ports, infrastructure and service providers, shipbuilders, classification societies, equipment manufacturers, research institutions, etc. (Inland Navigation Europe et al., 2025b). The materials reviewed show that several EU strategies only touch upon the problems of inland waterway transport (European Commission, 2020) but there is currently no specific strategy dedicated solely to inland waterway transport (IWT). The result is that inland waterway transport does not receive the same support as maritime shipping and seaports under EU strategies.

Analysis of different EU transport strategies also reveals other individual shortcomings. In particular, the updated EU Maritime Security Strategy (Council of the European Union, 2023) does not address issues related to inland waterway transport. The Maritime Security Strategy of Ukraine (President of Ukraine, 2024) on the other hand, includes issues within its scope of activities. In other words, inland waterway transport is considered a component of maritime security and is given the status of a strategic resource. At the same time, the inclusion of inland water transport issues in Ukraine's Maritime Security Strategy indicates that this mode of transport is considered only as an auxiliary means in the maritime sector, rather than as an independent and competitive mode of water transport.

As part of the European Green Deal, the implementation of a strategy for the green and digital transformation of the transport sector has begun (European Commission, 2019). Among other things, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the development of a comprehensive European port strategy emphasizing the strategic importance of ports for the EU economy and the need to protect critical infrastructure (European Parliament, 2024).

The mission letter to the Commissioner for Sustainable Transport and Tourism, *Tzitzikostas*, emphasises the need to develop a new industrial maritime strategy aimed at improving the competitiveness, sustainability, and digitalization of the European maritime sector (EU commits to highly awaited industrial maritime strategy). The implementation of this strategy is reflected in the draft EU Industrial Maritime Strategy, the European Ports Strategy and the Sustainable Transport Investment Plan (Calderón-Rivera et al., 2024a), which are scheduled to be adopted by the strategy aim to accelerate the green and digital transition of the entire water transport value chain, and establish a roadmap for innovation, investment and sustainability. However, these strategies do not address the development of inland waterway transport. The above documents indicate that the EU is more favourable towards maritime transport than inland waterway transport, and confirm the need to change this situation. In our opinion, maritime transport is wrongly portrayed as a self-sufficient and unique activity within water transport, existing in isolation from the transport chain. Representatives of the IWT sector did not agree with these actions, which downplay the importance of IWT in the water management complex, and proposed additions to the maritime strategies in the form of a contribution. At the same time, representatives of the IWT sector and ports emphasised their vision for a number of key areas and called for policy measures that would enhance the importance of water transport as a whole (Inland Navigation Europe et al., 2025a). According to some reports, consultations are currently underway on the EU Strategy for Industrial Waterborne Transport (i.e., maritime, and inland waterway transport) and the EU Strategy for all ports, not just seaports. The revised strategies are also expected to cover the inland waterway transport and the port sector. These refined waterborne and port strategies aim to boost climate goals and industrial resilience (Ports Europe, 2025).

The European Union's strategies for waterborne transport and ports (Inland Navigation Europe et al., 2025a) form a comprehensive policy aimed at ensuring the competitiveness, sustainability, and digital transformation of maritime and inland waterway transport (Kolomiiets, 2019). These strategies are key elements of the European Green Deal and EU industrial policy. The contribution of inland waterway transport to the implementation of these strategies is significant (Inland Navigation Europe et al., 2025a).

The importance of inland waterway transport stems from the fact that it is a strategic and integral part of the European water system. Almost fifty per cent of Europe's population lives near the coast and in the valleys of the fifteen largest

rivers. The water sector is inextricably linked to the environmental integrity, economic viability, and social well-being of Europe. Oceans, seas, rivers, and lakes together form our ecosystems, regulate the planet's climate, and support biodiversity.

The European Union's common strategy on Ukraine is fragmented, as it contains only a general provision on the need to connect its rail and road transport networks to those of the EU, without mentioning inland waterway transport (European Council, 2000). Ukrainian legislation stipulates that the future Strategy for the Development of Inland Waterway Transport should include different development plans. Such a strategy is developed, considering forecasts of freight traffic, investment and sources of financing, plans for the development of the national transport system, river ports (terminals), and other inland water transport infrastructure, as well as measures for ensuring the safety of navigation and protecting the environment.

The Law of Ukraine 'On Inland Water Transport', stipulates that the Strategy for the Development of Inland Water Transport shall contain a plan for the development of the inland waterway network, including in accordance with international treaties of Ukraine.

The draft Strategy for the Development of Inland Water Transport in Ukraine for the period up to 2031 and the action plan for its implementation, as well as the draft order of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 'On the Approval of the Strategy for the Development of Inland Water Transport in Ukraine for the period up to 2031 and the Approval of the Action Plan for its Implementation', were posted on the internet for discussion (Frtukr, 2021). However, to date, there is no information about the approval of these documents by the Government of Ukraine.

The EU's water transport and port strategies aim to ensure the sustainable, competitive, and safe development of the sector (Pratas et al., 2023). They include investment in innovation, support for environmental initiatives, and strengthening the role of ports in the pan-European transport network.

It should be emphasized that there is interaction and mutual support between sustainable development of the transport sector and the rule of law (Mahmudovic & Alhamoudi, 2024). To address long-standing problems related to the uneven distribution of freight between modes of transport, the EU has adopted several legislative acts. Regulation (EU) 2024/1679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 on EU guidelines for the development of the trans-European transport network, emphasizes the need to increase the use of inland waterway transport. In this regulation, the term „urban nodes” is used twenty-two times. These nodes will be built with a population of 100,000 or more inhabitants (TEN-T Revision – Romania). The same regulation refers to Directive (EU) 2016/797 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 June 'On the interoperability of the rail system within the European Union. A few years ago, Directive (EU) 2016/797 prescribed the need to ensure growth in the volume of inland waterway transport at the expense of road transport.

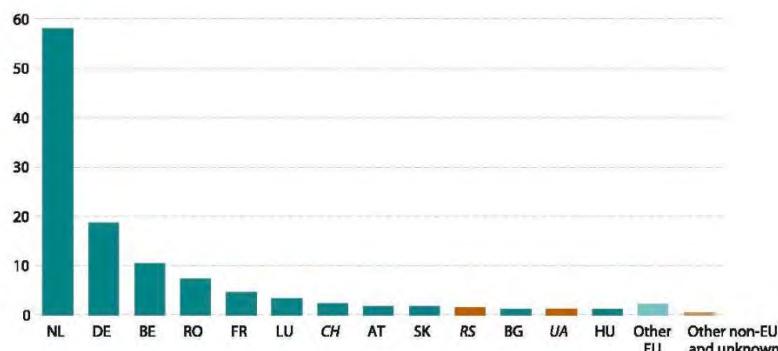
The Directive states that the development and modernisation of terminals should be implemented in such a way that intermodal transport is carried out mainly by rail, inland waterways, or short sea shipping. Any initial or final, or both, stages of transport by road, should be as short as possible (Regulation (EU) 2024/1679). Observations show that an increase in inland waterway transport due to a decrease in volumes on other modes of transport as of mid-2025 has not yet occurred.

2. Development of inland waterway transport, shipping and the law governing it

The development of inland waterway transport and shipping, as well as the legislation governing it, is mainly carried out in accordance with European Union strategic programmes and plans. European Union member states have developed their own strategies for development and sustainability. According to the General Plan for the Development of Inland Waterway Transport in Germany, ninety measures are to be implemented (Federal Ministry for Digital and Transport, 2024). In order to prevent significant losses in prosperity, for example due to a reduction in investment or jobs, measures are being implemented in Germany to improve competitiveness, network stability and the reliability of the entire waterway system. An efficient infrastructure, environmentally friendly and modern inland waterway vessels, optimal integration of inland waterway vessels into the multimodal logistics chain, skilled personnel, and the use of digital services, are key prerequisites for the competitiveness of waterway transport (Federal Ministry of Transport and Digital Infrastructure, 2019).

Inland waterway transport in Romania occupies a leading position against the backdrop of statistics from other European countries.

Figure. 1. Inland waterway freight transport, by nationality of vessel (billion tonne-kilometres, EU, 2023)



Source: Eurostat, 2025

Vessels registered in the Netherlands dominated this mode of transport, as their 58.1 billion tonne-km of inland waterway freight transport in the EU accounted for nearly half (49.9%) of the total. The next largest levels of transport were 18.7 billion tonne-km by German registered vessels (16.1% of the total), and 10.5 billion tonne-km by Belgian registered vessels (9.0%). Romanian-registered vessels accounted for 6.3% of the total, making it the fourth largest level of inland waterway freight transport in the EU at 7.3 billion tonne-km (Eurostat, 2025).

The port of Constanta is connected via the Danube Canal and the Danube to Ukraine, Moldova, Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Germany, and Austria. The navigable part of the Danube from Ulm, Germany, to the Black Sea is 2588 km long, of which 1075 km passes through Romania. The Danube crosses the territory of nine countries and four capitals and is an important historical waterway (Ciortan & Vasilache, 2018). The following strategies related to shipping are being implemented on Romania's inland waterways (Government Decision No. 665/2008 of 24 June 2008): National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Romania until 2030; National Long-Term Renovation Strategy (2020-2050); Romania's Territorial Development Strategy (SDTR) 2018-2035; General Transport Plan and Urban Mobility Plans; Romania's Urban Policy 2020-2035; National Strategy for a Digital Agenda for Romania – post-2020 (Ministry of Investment and European Projects, 2024).

Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) of 08.12.2023, includes reforms and investments aimed at mitigating the socio-economic impact of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the energy crisis, and the cost-of-living crisis. The plan amounts to €28.5 billion, or 12.8% of the country's gross domestic product in 2019 (European Parliament, 2022). Among other things, the plan includes measures for navigation on the Danube River, the main artery of Romania's inland waterways. However, Romanian experts acknowledge that the potential of the Danube is underutilised and cite reasons for this. In particular, the shipping channels have shortcomings in terms of width and depth, which negatively affect navigational reliability. Passage through the channels is less advantageous compared to other modes of transport.

There are thirty ports along the Danube and Romania's navigable canals, eight of which are located in the central TEN-T transport network. However, twelve of the Danube ports are not yet connected to the railway network. Poor maintenance, outdated infrastructure, lack of multimodal connections and slow handling procedures for existing flows, reduce the attractiveness of these ports for potential users. Even the location of the city of Constanta, Romania's most important seaport on the Black Sea does not fully compensate for the existing shortcomings, although it has direct connections to the Danube and its ports, and is connected to the central road and rail network, which are part of the TEN-T. Romanian researcher, Ionescu, cites a number of other factors that negatively affect the development of Danube shipping. In particular, the EU is unable to finance the strong sustainable

development of inland waterway transport. Only EU member states that have achieved a high level of economic development will be able to finance inland waterway transport. The economic disparities between coastal states are too great. In this regional context, Romania faces major challenges in supporting its Danube sector. The costs are too high, and the Romanian inland waterway fleet is too old. Even the Intermodal Transport Strategy in Romania and the General Transport Development Plan, do not provide for significant funding for inland waterway transport (Ionescu, 2016).

3. Measures to support the development of navigation on the Danube

To support navigation on the Danube, it is necessary to reduce the impact of shortcomings related to navigation, and to improve the reliability and attractiveness of inland waterways. There is a long-standing need to modernise infrastructure and improve access to Danube ports and cross-border sections. Romania's national transport strategy, along with international support programmes, provide for increasing the attractiveness of inland waterway transport by improving navigation conditions on the Danube, and by boosting investment in port infrastructure and connections with hinterland areas. It is planned to improve the reliability of navigation on the Danube channels to the Black Sea by strengthening the banks and modernising the locks, as well as modernising the Danube fleet operated by Romanian operators with environmentally friendly engines (European Commission, 2021).

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region covers countries that share borders with the Danube River, including Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Moldova, and Ukraine. The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (SUERD), is one of four macro-strategies existing at the European Union level. It is a joint initiative of Romania and Austria and represents a mechanism for cooperation between the Danube basin countries aimed at the economic, social, and territorial development of the Danube macro-region. The strategy is based on four main objectives, each corresponding to specific areas of activity, grouped into eleven priority areas. Each priority area is coordinated by two countries in the region. The strategy aims to improve mobility and multimodality on inland waterways through road, rail, and air connections.

The Integrated Strategy for the Sustainable Development of the Danube Delta aims to strengthen territorial links, in order to ensure access to markets in Tulcea and other cities in Romania and the European Union; ensure equal access for businesses, citizens and goods to the Danube Delta, with particular attention to the protection of the existing natural heritage; improving accessibility in the centre of the Danube Delta to support the development of tourism and fishing, as well as the mobility of residents of sparsely populated areas, taking into account the specific characteristics of the region. Currently, all ports need to be modernised to facilitate movement

between settlements in the Danube Delta and their connection to the TEN-T network (Ministry of European Funds, 2020).

4. Development of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T)

The further development of inland waterway transport as part of the European transport network, is in one way or another, linked to the results of the implementation of the revised TEN-T Regulation in the EU, Ukraine, and Moldova. The regulation establishes a specific framework for development, including for inland waterway transport. They enable member states to better coordinate cross-border actions and projects. To support the development of inland waterway transport, researchers recommend making use of the existing potential of small and medium-sized ports. This is because ports make a significant contribution to the sustainable and digital development of port ecosystems. The authors emphasize the importance of integrating such ports into the pan-European transport network (Gerlitz & Meyer, 2021).

Some Polish researchers note, that in Poland, inland waterways are largely excluded from the TEN-T programme due to their technical inadequacy (Zaloga & Kuciaba, 2016). However, other researchers, using the example of the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship, draw attention to the importance of sections that are part of the TEN-T international transport corridors, emphasising their logistical importance (Wasielewska-Marszałkowska, 2014).

The importance of the Danube inland waterways for Europe is demonstrated by their inclusion in the TEN-T to ensure efficient and sustainable transport links. Thanks to the European Commission's Strategy and the TEN-T guidelines, the following is planned for shipping on the Danube: completion of the missing links, especially the cross-border ones; improvement of infrastructure standards, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe; connection of different modes of transport for passengers and freight; reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in the transport sector by 60% by 2050 compared to 1990; and harmonisation of rules and requirements for all modes of transport to facilitate transport (Szabolcs, 2015).

At the same time, Central and Eastern Europe need further modernisation, expansion, and integration of the transport sector (Platz, 2009). The sections included in the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) must ensure economic, social, and territorial cohesion in the European Union (Luca et al., 2025). In the fight against climate change, as stated in the EU proposal on TEN-T, this programme is a driving force, as it requires both greater urgency and greater attention from the EU.

The evaluation of the TEN-T programme for 2007-2013 (Gleave, 2011) shows that waterways are underused. This is even though waterborne freight transport has a certain potential for reducing emissions. Recognising the potential of waterways in Europe, the European Commission intends to develop a 'European Maritime Transport Space without Barriers' (European Commission, 2009), to ensure free

maritime transport in and around Europe. The Blue Belt Initiative (European Commission, 2013) aims to promote maritime transport within the EU, and improve the functioning of the system by integrating the use of monitoring tools by all relevant authorities, ensuring full compatibility between transport systems in the water sectors, guaranteeing the monitoring of ships and cargo, and creating appropriate port facilities (Sys, 2020). To achieve this, administrative barriers in EU ports (such as customs, veterinary and plant protection controls) (Calderón-Rivera et al., 2024b) should be reduced, in particular through ‘Blue Lanes’ (fast-track procedures), which will ensure the rapid transport of goods (Mihić, 2012).

The EU is planning various measures to ensure the successful development of the TEN-T transport network. These include strengthening synergies between infrastructure planning and the operation of transport services. An example is the guaranteed adequate navigability of each river basin on the TEN-T inland waterways (De Nederlandse Grondwet, 2021). Innovative technologies such as 5G, are planned to be used to further digitise transport infrastructure, develop increased efficiency, and improve the safety, security, and resilience of the network.

The number of transhipment hubs and multimodal passenger terminals in cities will increase, which should promote multimodality, in particular for «the last mile» of passenger or freight travel (Anisimov & Uzakova, 2023). Only limited changes to the core network are proposed. Cities are important transfer points and «last-mile» connections within or between different modes of transport on the TEN-T. It is important to ensure that neither bottlenecks in capacity, nor insufficient network connections in urban nodes, hinder multimodality along the trans-European transport network. For this reason, the new provisions introduced by the revised TEN-T Regulation require that by 2040, at least one multimodal passenger hub and one multimodal freight terminal with sufficient transhipment capacity be established within, or in the vicinity of, an urban node.

According to the EU’s transport network development plan, 424 cities identified in the updated TEN-T Regulation are developing Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMP) (Ministry of Investment and European Projects, 2024), that include measures to integrate different modes of transport and promote zero-emission mobility. The implementation of the TEN-T Regulation will make the Trans-European Transport Network fit for the future. The regulation aligns the development of the TEN-T network with the objectives of the European Green Deal, and the climate objectives of the EU Climate Legislation.

5. Classification of inland waterways

The TEN-T guidelines set out priorities for inland waterway transport. These include measures to achieve inland waterway standards (IWW), including upgrading IWWs to class IV (Muškatirović, 2021). The list of basic standards and parameters for inland waterways is contained in the European Agreement on Main Inland

Waterways of International Importance (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 1996) and the Blue Book (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe 2012; 2023). The latter reflects details and current changes in the network. To classify an inland waterway according to a particular standard (class), it must first be classified according to certain criteria. Classification is necessary to improve the efficiency of IWT in urban and interurban transport, as it determines the characteristics of the waterway network and its infrastructure. The ability of IWW to provide uninterrupted, safe, and sustainable connections in a single multimodal network, optimally combining mobility and logistics, is determined by a number of factors. For waterways to have effective connections with other modes of transport, and to be the basis for physical, digital, and green energy infrastructure, their classification is again necessary. The classification of waterways can be defined as the ordering and organisation of river infrastructure components, according to a set of specified criteria. Classification reveals the potential of waterways (Alekseievska et al., 2023), organizes them, and allows for the clear definition of operating parameters and vessel dimensions within established parameters or the increase of vessel dimensions, particularly when planning road works.

Romania is increasingly attracting the attention of researchers of European transport problems due to its geostrategic position, which is important for the EU. Romania's location in the eastern part of the Danube-Main-Rhine Canal, with a powerful port in Constanta, the largest in the Black Sea basin, and connected to extensive river ports on the Danube, forms the axis with the Black Sea ports, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. As a result, Romania offers connections to any port in the world. The interest of carriers in using Romania's geostrategic position is confirmed by the construction of two major pan-European transport corridors that cross its territory from west to east (Săgeată, 2012). These circumstances also indicate the existence of a single intermodal transport chain, whose activities are related to the regulation of inland waterway parameters. The emergence of navigation rules in certain areas is linked to their regulation. Knowledge of the parameters of waterways is necessary to better determine their suitability for urban or interurban transport. Classification also plays a vital role in improving the efficiency and safety of inland waterways.

The parameters of inland waterways are determined by the ordinances of the Romanian Government, orders of the Minister of Transport and Infrastructure. These are Ordinances No. 42/1997 and No. 22/1999. The classification of inland waterways is regulated by Order of the Minister of Transport and Infrastructure No. 1.286/2012. In total, there are eighteen waterways of international importance in Romania - category 'E' (Blue Book database, 2025). In addition, Romania's inland waterways by Order of the Ministry of Transport No. 1.472 are divided into four zones. Zone 'R' includes those sections of inland waterways for which inspection certificates are issued in accordance with Article 22 of the Revised Convention for Rhine Navigation. Owners, operators, and masters of vessels flying the Romanian flag are

required to be familiar with and comply with the requirements arising from the classification of inland waterways. It should be noted that the classification of existing inland waterways, may be changed by the Romanian Ministry of Transport upon request to the European Commission.

The above-mentioned regulation implements Directive (EU) 2016/1.629 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 September 2016 and Directive 2009/100/EC, which lay down technical requirements for inland waterway vessels operating on inland waterways of different classes. Control over compliance with these requirements, in accordance with Article 37 of the Regulation, is entrusted to the Water Transport Directorate and the Romanian Maritime Authority. Romania also has another classification of Vessel Safety Classes. According to Romanian Government Decision No. 665/2008 of 24 June 2008, the list of Romanian IWW includes five types (Danube sector from kmD 170). These are the Danube and its main and secondary branches, navigable canals, internal border rivers, and navigable inland lakes. According to the Romanian understanding of the concept of „inland waterway,” the section of the Danube River (from km D 170 to the mouth of the Sulina Canal) has been given the status of a sea waterway. This means that sea areas are included in the list of inland waterways. A similar composition of inland waterways (river and sea sections) was contained in Resolution No. 640 of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, as well as in the first edition of the Water Code of Ukraine, which have been repealed. In the first edition of the Water Code of Ukraine, internal waterways of general use included canals, as well as waterways in internal sea waters and in territorial waters, which are currently unjustifiably excluded from the current list of IWWs. The Romanian decision to include maritime areas in the IWWs is a correct attempt to resolve the conflict of interests between maritime and inland water transport. In the United States, the Netherlands, and Belgium, certain maritime areas have also been granted the status of inland waterways.

Moldova has acceded to the European Agreement on Inland Waterways of International Importance. The Blue Book, which contains a list of existing and planned category E waterways and ports in Europe, states that Moldova has four category E waterways on the Prut and Dniester rivers of international importance. The Moldovan legislature pays considerable attention to inland waterways. The Moldovan Law on Inland Waterways contains five separate articles devoted to their operation, while the Ukrainian Law on Inland Water Transport does not contain any such articles. The aforementioned Moldovan law provides for the classification of inland waterways, the nomenclature of which is approved by a specialised central executive body. The categories of navigable vessels and the conditions for their operation, the guaranteed dimensions of navigable fairways, and the conditions for the operation of hydraulic engineering structures, are determined by a specialised body and published in the Official Gazette of the Republic of Moldova, in accordance with the established procedure.

European research and the activities accompanying it play a significant role in the development of transport and shipping law. This topic is also successfully developed at the University of Iasi (Romania), whose hallmark is the Centre for European Studies.

Conclusions

The study showed that the main prerequisites for increasing the competitiveness of inland waterway transport are the development of effective infrastructure, environmentally friendly and modern inland waterway vessels, optimal integration of inland waterway vessels into the multimodal logistics chain, improvement of specialists' qualifications, and expansion of the use of digital services. Accessibility to Danube ports and cross-border sections needs to be improved.

When developing European inland waterway transport and the legislation governing it, it is advisable to draw on the experience of implementing the national strategies and plans of Germany and Romania. In Ukraine, due to the lack of necessary regulations, it is advisable to make greater use of international law and European Union legislation. National programmes will have better results in terms of transport links between EU member states and their neighbours if they are unified and more closely aligned with the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) programme. The growing influence of the classification of inland waterways on the improvement, efficiency and safety of navigation should be used as the economic situation of European countries evens out and their contribution to inland waterway transport increases.

These conclusions are limited in nature, as not all issues of EU strategies on inland waterway transport were examined. In the future, it is necessary to deepen the study of economic and legal issues related to improving the status of inland waterway transport operators, in order to increase their competitiveness. It would also be advisable to study the regulation of relations concerning the use of autonomous and environmentally neutral watercraft.

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European colonialism, development and urbanization. Its legacy and path dependency patterns in post-colonial countries

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Abstract: From a pluridisciplinary perspective and based mainly on the historical institutional approach, the current research explores how colonialism has (re)shaped society, the economic developments and the urbanisation of the Global South, as well as its legacy. The extractive, settler, commercial and assimilationist/missionary colonial models are comparatively approached, considering the great colonial powers (mainly French, British, Belgian, Portuguese), and with an emphasis on the issues of path dependence and inequalities. The paper highlights the duality of colonialism's consequences: promoting economic development and urbanization, while reinforcing socio-spatial segregation, institutional weaknesses and environmental injustice. The subject is extremely relevant from the perspective of the dependence theories in international relations, which explain the underdevelopment of the former colonial countries from the Global South through the long term impact of the various forms of exploitation and domination by the Global North. Understanding these legacies and conditionalities is essential for adopting more effective growth strategies and evidence-based policies in accelerating the development of the global South, reducing North-South inequalities and adopting urbanization models in line with new approaches focused on sustainability, inclusivity and liveability.

Keywords: colonialism, path dependency, colonial legacy, urbanization, post-colonial patterns

Introduction

Understanding the current broader landscape of the global economic and social development, and also of the specific challenges for the contemporary urbanism, require a return to the colonial era. Numerous studies show that the present limits in the Global South development and urbanization of the post-colonialized countries, but also specific issues of urban planning, spatial and social organization

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of cities were laid in the organizational forms and governance practices from the colonial area (Hugill, 2017; King, 1990; 1976; Njoh, 2009; Shackleton & Gwedla, 2021; Watson, 2016;). The problem of colonialism in relation to current development challenges and urban planning is primarily linked to the colonial legacy and the path dependency patterns. Many scholars consider that the current limitations in the development paths and the cities transformation in the former colonized territories in accordance with new paradigms of growth (sustainability, inclusiveness or urban liveability) have their roots in the specific way in which these countries and cities developed in the colonial period and in the institutionalized governance models at that time (Celik, 1997; Home, 2013; Watson, 2016).

The colonial studies, as a scientific field of knowledge about the impact of the colonialism on the colonized territories from various perspectives (economic, socio-cultural, institutional, historical, architectural, political), explore the methods, tools and systemic approaches through which colonial powers established and maintained domination and control over occupied territories and populations, as well as the long-term consequences of this domination (King, 1990; Myers, 2011). There have been remodelling the economic and social structures, the institutions, the cultural patterns, the physical-spatial urban forms of spatial organization, but also of social organization, of governance models and practices (Celik, 1997). The consequences manifest themselves far in time, in the post-colonial period, including our days, reflecting the so-called „path dependence”, or „colonial legacy” (Watson, 2016; Shackleton & Gwedla, 2021). They are mainly reflected in the constraints on sustainable development, and modern urban transformation generated by the different characteristics of colonial urban models and in the limitations that the specific system of institutions, especially non-formal ones, generate on the development potential of former colonial countries and cities (Acemoglu et al., 2001; Beeckmans, 2013; King, 1976).

In the same time, the literature highlights important benefits of the colonialism, in terms of the economic growth (Grier, 1999), commercial integration through access to investments and foreign markets (Ferguson & Schularick, 2006), industrialization (Dell & Olken, 2020), architecture and urban built environment, infrastructure, health systems, education, socio-cultural transformation, institutions transformation, and governance (King, 1990; Gandy, 2006). For example, the Western European countries (the most powerful colonial powers) generated extensive processes of industrialization, large investment projects in infrastructure, and urban transformation in the colonized countries of Africa, America and Asia. Synergies and convergences resulted between the development and cultural patterns, between the architectural models and construction techniques of the colonizers and the colonized countries, which accelerated economic and urban modernization, and the integration with the global economy through trade, associated with a broad process of industrialization.

However, the impact and relationship between colonizing and colonized structures/entities experienced different manifestations, depending on the type of colonialism (Beeckmans, 2013; Hugill, 2017; Osterhammel, 2005). For example, in extractive colonialism, the development was focused on the creation of functional conditions for the exploitation of resources, with minimal investment in the built environment, and limited impact and improvements for the indigenous people (Acemoglu et al, 2001; Rodney, 1972; Tadei, 2014). The colonialism legacy was expressed in weak institutions and low/underperforming factors of growth, such as the infrastructure, good governance, and human capital. In the settler colonialism, the settlements transformation was radical, often leading to the replacement of local settlements with new settlements replicating the colonizers' urban models, a strict and aggressive spatial, social and legal segregation and to the displacement or at least the marginalization of the indigenous culture, identity and people (Hugill, 2017; Thiong, 1986). Settler colonialism, however, contributed to a strong process of the economic development and urbanization, creating favourable conditions for long-term development, despite negative postcolonial effects, such as poor quality of institutions and intra-urban inequalities, reflecting centre-periphery patterns, with informal peripheries (Dell and Olken, 2020; Porter and Yiftachel, 2017; Sokoloff & Engerman, 2000).

The colonial development paradigm and urban governance models also differed depending on the colonial power (British, French, Belgian, Japanese, etc.). For example, if the Western European colonialism pursued a civilizing mission (French and British colonialism) or a functional one (British), generating a segregated world (Perera, 2002), the Japanese colonialism manifested itself as a process of modernization and imperial integration, developing more cohesive and infrastructurally modernized cities (King, 1976; Moore, 2019).

Consequently, the colonialism generated a wide variety of models of development and urban planning in colonies, and the long-term impact in the post-colonial period depends essentially on the models of development and governance promoted by the colonists. Additionally, contemporary neo-colonial formulas and models (sino-colonialism, techno-colonialism, cultural and media globalisation, or real estate led-development with the gentrification effects) amplify the complexity of this landscape of international relations, with wide and controversial consequences on development, global inequalities, and urban development (Hughes, 2024; Perera et al, 2024; Watson, 2014;).

The main aim of the current paper is to advance the understanding of and to highlight (in comparative approach) the impact of the various colonial patterns on the contemporary development and the urbanization trends. In this respect, the specific objectives were: (1) to explore the global distribution of former European colonial powers, (based on the last known colonizer for each country) and the landscape of the colonised territories; (2) to identify the main colonialism forms and characteristics and their relevance on how the various colonial patterns influenced

the economic development, its legacy, and the urbanisation trends, and reshaped the social, economic, cultural and political structures and practices; (3) to assess the influence of colonialism on development and urbanisation highlighting some features of the colonial legacy.

The paper is based on the investigation of a large number of scientific contributions (reflected in various articles and books from different fields of expertise: area studies, international relations, political science, regional and urban studies, others), quantitative studies and analyses, as well as the use of maps. Spatial analysis (GIS- Geographic Information System) was used to reflect dimensions of the colonialism, urbanization and colonial legacy in the visualization form. The analysis was conducted in R. Quantitative analysis was also applied by using socio-economic, institutional and urbanization indicators to measure the impacts of various colonialism patterns. A detailed methodology is explained in Section 3. The main added value of the paper is the contribution to the deep understanding of the historical perspective of colonialism, with specific focus on the multidimensional issues of the economic development and urbanisation.

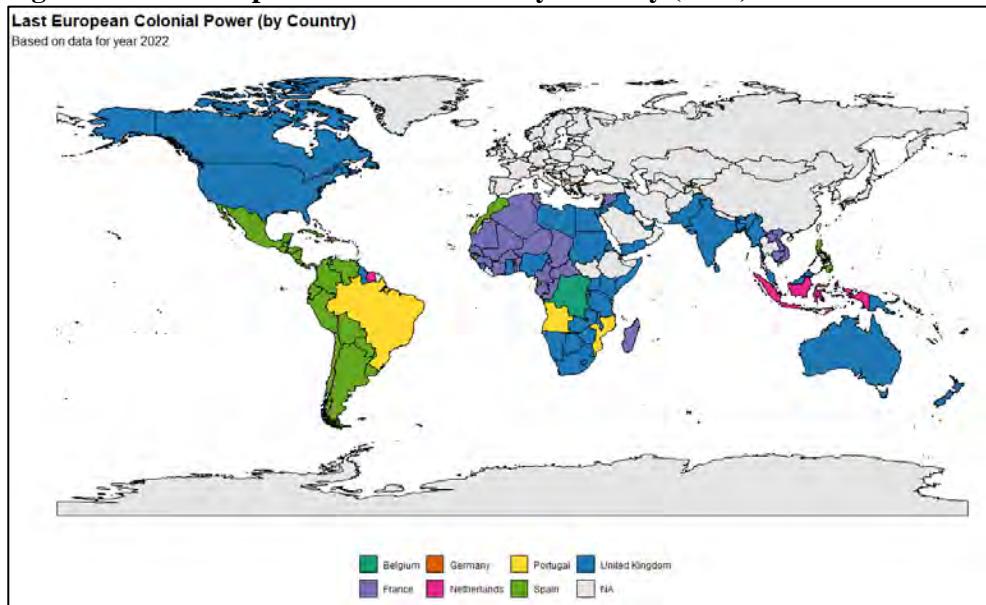
The paper is structured as follows. After the introductory chapter, highlighting the key coordinates of the paper (the relevance of the topic, the aim and the specific objectives), the next section provides a landscape of the colonialism at global level. The section 2 highlights in comparative perspective the key impact features of the various Western European colonial powers and patterns on the development and urbanisation in the colonised territories. Section 3 details the methodology and data issues, and the section 4 includes the statistical analysis (descriptive statistics) used to assess the development legacy of the colonialism, interpreted as path dependency. The paper ends with a section of conclusions and policy relevance.

1. The colonialism landscape at the global level

Colonialism refers to the set of methods, instruments, practices and ideological, cultural and political paradigms associated with the control that a dominant power (state or not) exercises over a territory and its indigenous population (Loomba, 1998; Njoh, 2008; Osterhammel, 2005). The main colonial countries were the European ones (Figure 1), and the colonialism history goes back to the late 15th century, in Africa (Figure 2) and South America (Figure 3)¹.

The map from Figure 1 highlights the territorial footprint of the main European empires and outlines regional patterns of colonial influence, whose effects persist to this day. Thus, this spatial representation illustrates not only the historical distribution of colonial power but also the institutional and geopolitical factors that sustain forms of path dependency in the current organization of international relations.

¹ Data used in this analysis comes from Our World in Data (Becker, 2023).

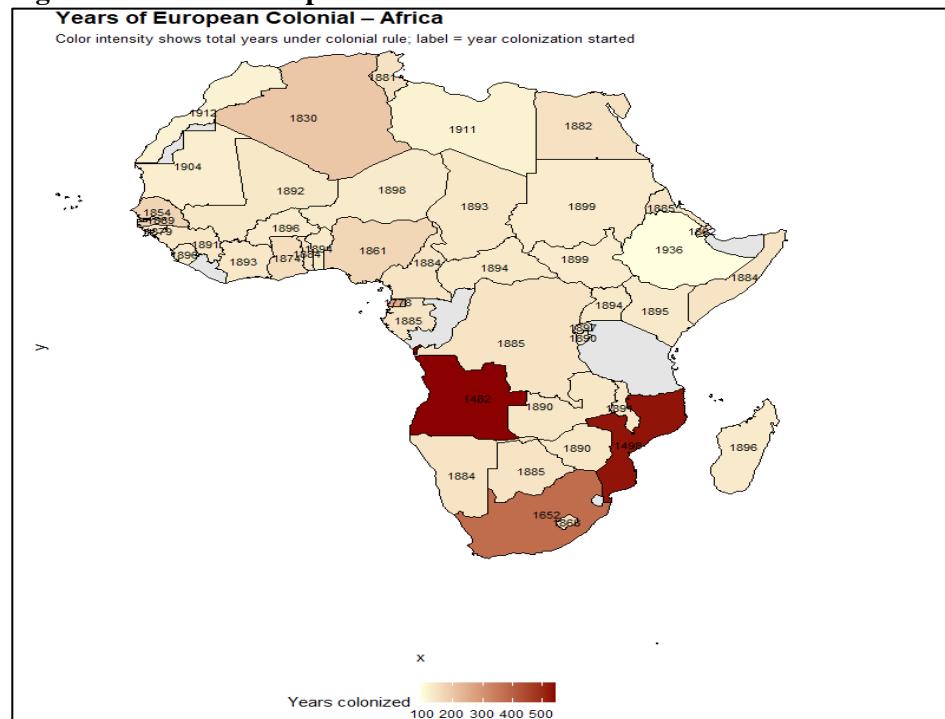
Figure 1. Last European Colonial Power by Country (2022)

Source: authors' representation based on data from Our World in Data

The visual representation of colonial rule shows the United Kingdom as the last colonial ruler for many countries in Africa, South Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean and Oceania. France dominated West and North Africa, with traces of French language, education systems, and legal frameworks in Southeast Asia. Spain was the last colonizer for most Latin American countries and the Caribbean, while Portugal maintained influence through linguistic and cultural ties. Belgium is associated with the Democratic Republic of Congo, while the Netherlands appears mainly in Indonesia and parts of the Caribbean².

Africa has historically represented the most extensively colonized territory globally, both in terms of surface area and the number of countries affected. Figure 2 illustrates the temporal intensity of European colonial domination, expressed by the total number of years spent under colonial control, as well as the year in which colonization began for each country.

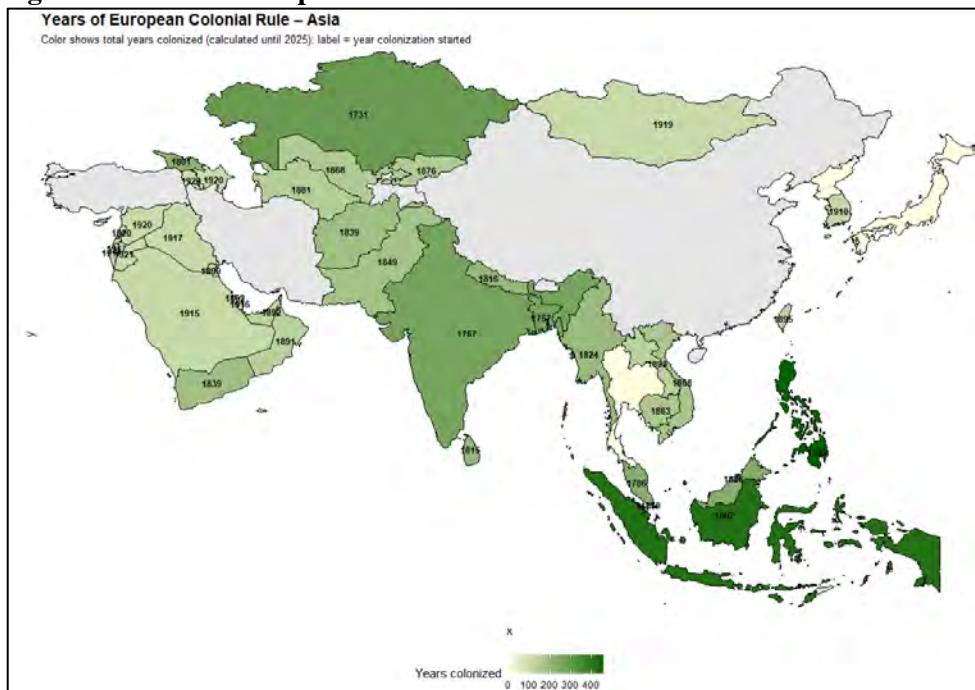
² Germany and Italy are absent from the final colonial footprints due to early loss of colonies or post-WWII redistribution. Countries in light gray were never colonized by a European power or for which no data is available, highlighting the global scale of European colonialism.

Figure 2. Years of European colonialism – Africa

Source: authors' representation based on data from Our World in Data

The map reveals that European colonial presence on the continent dates as far back as the late 15th century, with Angola colonized by Portugal starting in 1482, and Mozambique colonization beginning in 1498. These countries experienced over five centuries of colonial domination, highlighted by the darkest red shades on the map. The majority of African territories were colonized in the second half of the 19th century, particularly around the time of the Berlin Conference (1884–1885), which initiated the formal partitioning of Africa among European powers that began colonization in Africa around the 1880s-1890s, with some exceptions like Liberia and Ethiopia (Chamberlain, 2014). Northern Africa, particularly Algeria and Egypt, experienced earlier colonization than sub-Saharan states. Southern Africa, including Namibia, Botswana, and South Africa, was brought under European control early and retained colonial structures for longer durations.

Asia's colonial landscape was more fragmented and temporally varied, with a broad chronological span from the early 17th century in Southeast Asia to the early 20th century in the Middle East. Countries like Indonesia and India had some of the longest durations under European rule, exceeding 250 years. In South Asia (Figure 3), colonization spread through a combination of military conquest, trade dominance, and indirect governance.

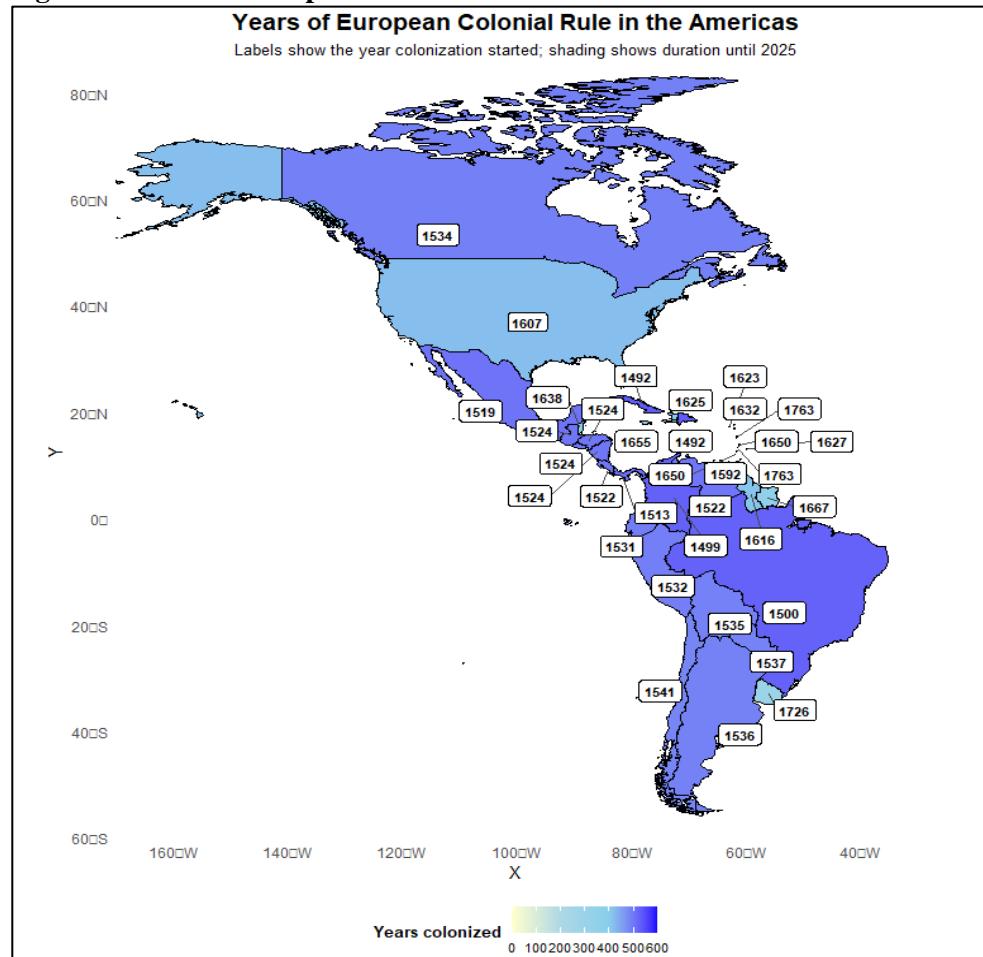
Figure 3. Years of European colonialism - Asia

Source: authors' representation based on data from Our World in Data

Sri Lanka (1815), Myanmar (1824), and Bangladesh (1757) follow similar timelines to India. Southeast Asia shows similar colonial longevity: Vietnam (1858) and Malaysia (1786) were colonized under French and British dominion respectively. The Middle East and Central Asia, on the other hand, reflect a much later colonial engagement. Many countries, such as Iraq (1920), Syria (1920), and Jordan (1921), were brought under British or French mandates following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. These colonial relationships were shorter, often lasting only a few decades. It is also important to note that several major Asian powers, China, Thailand, and Japan, were never formally colonized.

The first and longest-colonized world region, with the colonial era beginning soon after 1492 were the Americas (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Years of European Colonialism – North and South America



Source: authors' representation based on data from Our World in Data

Hispaniola, present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic, was the initial point of contact for European colonization, followed by rapid expansion into Mexico, Peru, Brazil, and Central America. The Caribbean region was particularly notable for its intense and prolonged colonization by European empires, such as Spain, France, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. North America's colonization began in 1534, followed by British rule. South American countries followed Spain's expansion, while Brazil remained a colony until the 19th century.

Regardless of the colonial power, the duration of colonization, or the territories colonized, the domination and the control primarily aim at the exploitation of resources, although colonialism has sometimes assumed a missionary/civilizing role (Perera, 2002; Nkomazana & Setume, 2016). Despite some favorable effects on

development, colonialism led to the marginalization and sometimes even the elimination of indigenous society, by imposing laws, governance structures, cultural values, norms and urban planning systems in the interests of the colonizers (Loomba, 1998). Significant inequalities, economic and governance structures, as well as systems of institutions have resulted in various colonial legacies that influence the development capacity of colonized countries and cities today (Rodney, 1972). Models of colonialism and colonial legacies differ depending on many factors, but in essence, the following played a key role: local characteristics (geography, resources, population, culture, pre-existing organization); the nature of control, as determined by colonial policies; and the development models, governance structures, and property rights that colonists established in the colonies.

2. The colonialism legacy: key features of the development patterns and urbanisation

From the perspective of the historical institutionalism, colonialism represented a „critical juncture”, a „moment” of radical change in the historical trajectory of the colonized territories’ development (King 1990). Colonialism interrupted the cycle of their organic development, significantly transforming space, economy, society, culture, political systems (Osterhammel, 2005; Oliver & Oliver, 2017). At the same time, colonialism accelerated the processes of development of markets and capital, economic growth, urbanization, generated extensive processes of industrialization and technological development, introduced modern formulas of administration and governance, shaping and remodelling the colonized and the colonizers (Dell and Olken, 2020; Ferguson & Schularick, 2006). However, based, for the most part, on an exploitation of local resources and preferential trade with the colonizing country, colonialism led to poorly performing urban industrialization models, with resource- and labor-intensive economic specialization, and created a durable system of center-periphery dependency relations that persist in the post-colonial period and create constraints for the contemporary development and urbanisation (Amin, 1976; Porter & Yiftachel, 2017). Various scholars have also emphasized that colonialism disrupted indigenous governance structures, creating economic dependency that persists in post-colonial contexts (Rodney, 1972).

2.1. Colonialism patterns and the colonized countries’ development

Depending on the purpose, methods, and type of relations generated between colonists and the occupied territories, the main relevant distinction, from the point of view of economic development and urbanization, is between extractive colonialism and settler colonialism.

The *extractive colonialism* (exploitation colonialism) was dominant in Africa and South Asia. The main aim was the exploitation of resources, and is linked to the

expansion of capitalism. Investments in infrastructure and the impact on urbanization were reduced, having a strongly functional dimension, strictly correlated with maximizing the benefits for the colonial power obtained from the exploitation of resources (Table 1). Despite a minimal presence of the settler population, the colonial powers established segregated cities, with a strict social and racial hierarchy (Beeckmans, 2013; Njoh, 2008; Rodney, 1972). The settler colonialism was essentially differentiated by the permanent occupation and the pollution transfer from the colonial power, replacing the indigenous societies with a settler society (Porter & Yiftachel, 2019; Wolfe, 2006). Relevant examples are: Australia (British), Canada (French and British), United States (British); Algeria (French), and South Africa (British). The settler population were naturalized, radically redefining the political geography and the urbanization patterns, through a replication of the colonial countries legal system, and of the urban and spatial planning methods and forms (Hugill, 2017; Veracini, 2010). The urban planning played a key functional role, but it was used also as a tool for social and racial segregation, and to the cultural and ideological assimilation of the indigenous population, conducting to their marginalization and in some cases to the erasing of the indigenous tradition and identity (Perera, 2002; Porter & Yiftachel, 2019).

In contrast, *commercial or trade colonialism* aimed to generate systems for economic domination and control, having also a wider political, cultural and ideological impact. This form was practiced, for example, by the Dutch in Indonesia, British East India Company in India, or the Portuguese in coastal Africa (Table 1). The colonial powers mainly targeted trade routes, developing strategic ports and specialized commercial cities, integrating them in the global economic networks (Osterhammel, 2005). Relevant cities developed on the commercial colonial basis were: Malacca (Portuguese), Batavia (Dutch), Hong Kong, Singapore, Aden (all British), and Shanghai (international).

A specific form is the *assimilation colonialism*. Specific to the French and Japanese colonial paradigm (Table 1), this form promoted a mixed spatial development, reflecting the colonial institutional, cultural and economic dominance. The colonialists forced the adoption of their specific values, language, religion, legal system. In urban planning it was a transfer of the colonial power patterns, considering the hegemony of the origins' superiority and aiming a kind of „civilization” mission. Moreover, missionarism emerged as a particular form of assimilationist colonialism. It was mainly promoted by the imperialist powers of Western Europe (British, French, Spanish and Portuguese) in America, Asia and Africa. It was mainly associated with the promotion of Christianity, in the name of a „supreme good” (Perera, 2002; Nkomazana & Setume, 2016). The missionarism in many cases sustained the colonial project, and in other cases opposed it, in a resistance movement. Regardless of the relationship with the colonial power, the missionarism has a strong colonial dimension in itself, by denying local values and culture, which led to their marginalization or even annihilation (Perera, 2002;

Thiong, 1986) and provided colonial authorities with a justification and moral authority in the name of a civilizing purpose.

Table 1. The main form of colonialism and key characteristics

Colonial pattern	Main characteristics	Examples	Authors
Extractive colonialism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Extractive economy, with investments based on the functional paradigm (the functional role in the resources exploitation); - Segregated cities, despite the minimal presence of the settler population; - Minimal investments in built environment; - Extractive institutions; - Short –term approaches in development patterns and urban planning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guinea (France); Nigeria (British); Democratic Republic of the Congo (Belgium); Indonesia (Netherlands) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Home (2013); Myers (2011); Njoah (2009)
Settler colonialism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Permanent settlement and displacement of the indigenous populations; - Contribution to the rapid urbanization and cities' industrialization; - Development of infrastructure, public and private buildings and settlements based on a strict spatial and social segregation; - Contribution to the institutional transformation and the implementation of modern urban planning; - Extractive institutions; - Dominant of the European urban and spatial planning forms; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> United States (British); Australia (British); Algeria (French); 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wolfe (2006); Veracini (2010); Hugill, 2017; Sokoloff & Engerman, 2000;

Commercial/ trade colonialism	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Marginalization /elimination of local values, culture, identity;- Important investment and infrastructure development (functional role);- Focus on the control of strategic points on the big trade routes, especially in the coastal areas (ports);- Limited direct control and intervention in urban governance;- Rapid integration of the colonial cities in the global economy, but promoting asymmetric dependency in the benefit of the colonial power;	India (British India Company); Indonesia (Dutch East India Company); Macau (Portuguese)	King (1976); Osterhammel (2005);
Assimilation & missionary colonialism	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Forcing the locals to adopt the colonialist culture, legal system, language, education models;- Mixed spatial and architectural patterns, reflecting the colonial dominance; in many cases, the assimilation has a missionary/ civilizing aim (e.g: Christianity missionarism), mainly associated with the British, and French colonialism.	Vietnam (French); Senegal (French); Korea (Japanese); Botswana (British);	Nkomazana & Setume (2016); Perera, 2002;

Source: authors' representation based on the literature review

As overall, we can mention that, despite some positive long term consequences on the economic development and urbanization, the transversal key dimension of all colonial patterns was the segregation (spatial, economic, cultural, and social) and in most cases the deep and radical transformation of the territories and societies, negatively impacting the post-colonial development. Usually, the urban planning served as a mechanism of domination, control and assimilation, establishing long-

term economic, socio-cultural and institutional inequalities, in a multifaceted segregated world.

2.1. Colonial powers footprint

The most important colonial powers were: British, French, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, Belgian and Japanese, with a net dominance of the British Empire. The colonial patterns, even for the same colonial state, presented various characteristics and generated different impact and legacy in the post-colonial stage, depending on the local conditions and the synergies between the colonist and colonized systems, values, cultures, institutions (Hugill, 2017). British colonies developed inclusive institutional and governance systems in the settler colonies and extractive institutions in the non-settler colonies (King, 1990; Acemoglu et al., 2001). The main characteristic of the British legacy is the dual dimension, contributing both to better conditions for growth and development of the colonial cities and to inequalities (spatial, social), weak local institutions and under-performant urban governance. Often, the governance paradigm was centred on the indirect approach, using the local system and providing more flexibility, and a favourable framework for long term development than the French colonialism (Hugill, 2017). In urban planning, the British system developed dual cities („Garden city”, strongly segregated), with the European characteristics in the core and underdevelopment with low quality of residential buildings and infrastructure in the native neighbour (Home, 2013; King, 1997; Njoh, 2008). The French colonies implemented centralized administration, very bureaucratic, based on a bottom-up approach focused on assimilation and control, and developing non-performant institutional systems dominated by extractive institutions (Celik, 1997; Njoh, 2008; Sokoloff & Engerman, 2000; Tadei, 2014). The French colonial cities were very standardized, and highly centralized, applying the French urban pattern, but with urban areas strictly racial zoned, similar with other colonial systems, despite a higher interest for assimilation. In the case of the French legacy, key challenges are related to: low transformation capacity of the urban space, governance and planning systems, and strong conflicts, cultural and institutional tensions having roots in the colonial identity assimilation policy.

Other forms of colonialism (Belgian, Portuguese) present specific characteristics, but overall, they were based on similar practices of exploitation, coercion, assimilation and economic, cultural and institutional transformation, replicating the colonists' models of development and urban planning, but integrating an evident spatial and social segregation and being the source of complex urban inequalities and systems of non-performing institutions (Kamalu, 2019).

A specific case is the South African colonialism. There, several forms and stages of colonization were intertwined (Dutch, 1652-1806; British, 1806-1961; Afrikaner/internal, 1961-1994). Commercial colonialism was combined with extractive colonialism and slavery, with settler colonial forms and with the Apartheid

system, with a colonial legacy dominated by inequalities, racial conflicts, deep spatial and social segregation, unjust institutions and property rights, difficult to eliminate and negatively influencing the contemporary urban development (Oliver & Oliver, 2017).

Comparatively, the British (India, Australia, Canada, South Africa, Nigeria, Singapore) favoured a more pragmatic, less extractive and less assimilating governance, creating dual relational outcomes and long term legacy, depending on the colonial system (extractive vs. settler). The French (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Vietnam) was defined by assimilation practices and the arbitrary transfer of the French system (law, governance, urban planning, education and culture), with centralized and bureaucratic patterns. Strongly exploitative and assimilating, with rigid hierarchies and shaping long term the social structures, local identities and governance were the Belgian (Congo, Rwanda), the Spanish (Mexico, Peru, Chile) and the Japanese (Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines – during the WWII). The Dutch colonialism (Indonesia, South Africa) was mainly commercial but with a strong extractive dimension, resulting in long-term persistent disparities, and economic dependence. Finally, the Portuguese promoted a more missionary and civilizing approach.

From the complex set of colonialism's consequences and the possible ways of highlighting the path dependency patterns in the development dynamics of the colonized countries, the current research is focused on the economic development, government effectiveness and urbanization issues, looking to the various colonial patterns and colonizer countries from Europe. For comparability, 159 colonized countries from all continents and from all categories (colonial models) and non-colonized countries were included in the analysis.

3. Methodology and data

To analyse the impact of colonialism on contemporary economic development, it was used the *GDP per capita* (expressed in current US dollars), available in the World Bank database (code: NY.GDP.PCAP.CD). The data covers the period 1960–2023 and was complemented by a historical classification of countries according to their colonial status. Thus, each country was labelled either as „Colonized” or as „Never Colonized”, and in the case of colonized ones, the colonizing state was also specified (e.g. France, United Kingdom, Spain, etc.). In a first step, it was calculated for each country the average GDP per capita over the entire available interval, even in the presence of missing values. Subsequently, we compared the mean levels, medians and standard deviations of GDP for colonized versus non-colonized countries. Comparatively, we also analysed groups formed on the basis of the dominant colonizer, in order to identify possible systematic differences between former colonial empires. Boxplots provided a clear visual perspective on these variations. By examining spatial inequality and development

trajectories over time, thematic maps for the years 1960, 1990, and 2022 have been produced, which display both the distribution of spatial inequality and the evolution of these trajectories. These maps were used to visually analyse the distribution of GDP per capita worldwide, with countries classified into income quintiles. Finally, from the economic perspective, we analysed the dynamics of economic development by calculating the annual growth rates of GDP per capita for each country. The formula applied was:

$$GDP\ Growth\ rate = \frac{GDP_t - GDP_{t-1}}{GDP_{t-1}} * 100$$

By analysing means and standard deviations, we compared colonized and non-colonized countries, as well as former colonies, grouped according to colonizing power. In the corresponding boxplots, the central tendencies and internal variations of each group have been highlighted.

The second issue integrated in our analysis was the governance quality, considering the strong impact of the colonialism of the institutions systems, and also the wider agreement in literature on the key role of institutions in growth and development (Acemoglu et al., 2001; Home, 2013; Njoh, 2009). From this perspective, it was analysed *the government effectiveness*, using data provided by the World Bank, specifically the indicator „*Government Effectiveness: Estimate*” from the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) dataset³, for the 1996-2023 period. Descriptive statistics and boxplots were used to compare governance scores by colonial status and former colonial power. Annual averages of governance scores were computed to explore temporal trends in performance. Line plots contributed to visualize these trends, providing a dynamic understanding of institutional quality evolution over nearly three decades. This approach offers a static and dynamic perspective on colonial history’s relationship with governance effectiveness and the colonial legacy.

To particularly reflect the colonial legacy on urban development, the study explored the *urbanization trends*. The data was analysed using the World Bank’s Urban Population indicator, covering over six decades from 1960 to 2023. The data was categorized into two groups: colonized and never colonized, and countries were assigned to their former colonial powers. The study uses descriptive statistical analysis to compare urbanization rates across these groups, with two boxplots comparing colonized vs. never colonized countries and the other showing variation

³ This variable captures perceptions of the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of the government’s commitment to such policies. The indicator is expressed as a standardized score ranging from approximately -2.5 (weak) to +2.5 (strong) governance performance. For each country, we calculated the average governance score across all available years, allowing for cross-sectional comparisons of long-term governance quality.

by former colonizer. The study also calculated the average annual growth rates of urbanization for each country and compares these dynamics between groups. A second round of boxplots visualized differences in annual growth performance based on colonial status, assessing whether formerly colonized countries experienced slower or faster urban transitions compared to countries that retained full political autonomy. The approach aimed to provide a descriptive and statistically robust understanding of how colonial history may relate to contemporary urban concentration and demographic modernization.

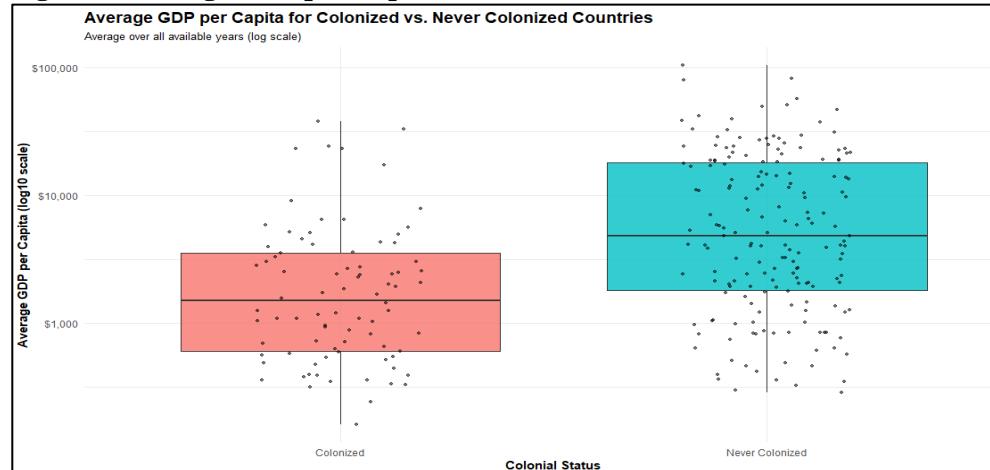
For all the three variables (GDP/capita, governance effectiveness and urbanization rate), we tested the statistical significance of the differences between colonial groups, applying the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test (Eskridge, 1994), followed by the Dunn post-hoc test for multiple comparisons. The Benjamini-Hochberg correction was used to adjust p-values, taking into account the control of the type I error rate in the context of multiple testing (Hollestein et al., 2021) (Annexes 1-3).

4. Results and interpretations

The statistical analysis proposed by the current research highlights critical constraints in the economic development, with key differentiations between the colonized and never colonized countries, and also between the various colonialism patterns, in terms of growth trends, inequalities, institutions quality and urbanization.

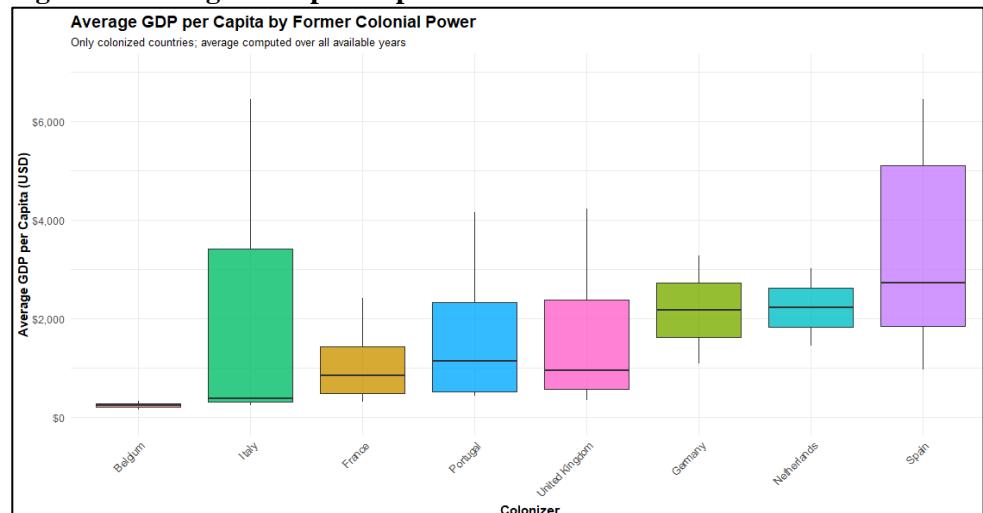
4.1. GDP per capita analysis

Based on GDP per capita analysis, the key conclusions is that the never-colonialized countries performed better compared to the colonialized ones, with important differences by the colonial power. Figure 5 shows a significant gap in median income levels between countries that experienced colonial domination and those that remained independent. Never-colonized countries have higher average GDP per capita and more stable economic performance, supporting the hypothesis that colonial legacy is associated with long-term economic disadvantages. Former colonies often integrated into global trade, leading to limited investment in local industrial development and infrastructure.

Figure 5. Average GDP per Capita for Colonized vs. Never Colonized Countries

Source: authors' representation based on data from World Bank

The distribution of average GDP per capita for former colonies, highlighting persistent economic differences (Figure 6). The former Belgian colonies have the lowest average levels and low internal variation, indicating weak and homogeneous economic performance.

Figure 6. Average GDP per Capita

Source: authors' representation based on data from World Bank

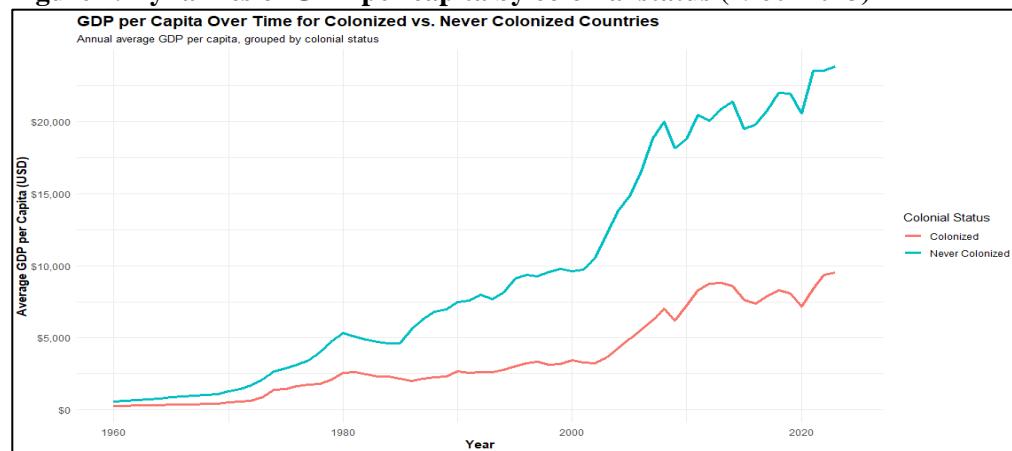
The former Italian and Spanish colonies show greater variation, suggesting uneven economic trajectories. The former British colonies have moderate average

GDP but considerable internal dispersion, with regional and institutional differences. The former French and Portuguese colonies have low average levels and little variation, while Germany and the Netherlands have superior economic performances. The identity of the colonizer significantly influences post-colonial economic trajectory.

The Dunn post hoc test from Annex 1 reveals that former Spanish colonies have significantly different GDP per capita values compared to French colonies, suggesting that the Spanish colonial model has been associated with higher economic performance. By comparing the former Spanish and Belgian colonies, we can argue that Spain left behind, as a result of the colonization process, states with better economic performance. However, the analysis shows us that no major differences are identified between the former colonies of France, Germany, Portugal, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, suggesting a modest homogeneity of postcolonial economic performance. The results highlight that it is not only the fact of a country being colonized that matters, but also who colonized it, but they are quite different from other studies highlighting for example better performance of the British compared with the French colonialism.

In dynamic, it can be observed (Figure 7) a persistent economic divergence between colonized and non-colonized countries over 1960-2023. Non-colonized countries have a higher average GDP per capita since the 1960s, with a widening gap after the 1990s. Former colonies have steady economic progress but with more volatility.

Figure 7. Dynamics of GDP per capita by colonial status (1960–2023)



Source: authors' representation based on data from World Bank

This suggests the colonial legacy influences post-colonial countries' economic performance through weak institutions, dependence on exports, and infrastructure imbalances. The figure supports the idea of incomplete or absent

convergence between former colonies and countries that did not experience colonization, reinforcing the conclusions drawn from previous figures regarding the persistence of global economic inequality. These observations can serve as a basis for formulating more equitable international policies focused on recovering historically inherited structural gaps.

Non-colonized countries have a slightly higher average growth rate (6.43%) compared to colonized countries (6.21%), (Table 2). The identified variation is due to the different economic trajectories of the post-independence states, while the non-colonized countries have more stable economic growth, a possible reason may be due to institutional continuity and internal control.

Table 2. Annual GDP per Capita Growth Rate by Colonial Status

Colonial Status	Average Growth Rate (%)	Standard Deviation (%)
Colonized	6.21	17.00
Never Colonized	6.43	14.40

Source: authors' representation based on data from World Bank

Significant differences are between the average values of the economic growth rates, considering the colonial power (Table 3). The lowest average rate is associated with the Belgian colonies, with only 2.28% and a relatively small standard deviation (SD = 11.4%), which reflects a weak and relatively uniform economic performance among them. This result reinforces the historical hypotheses regarding intensive exploitation and lack of investment in local development within the Belgian colonies.

Table 3. Annual GDP per Capita Growth Rate by Former Colonial Power

Colonizer	Average Growth Rate (%)	Standard Deviation (%)
Belgium	2.28	11.40
France	6.03	16.30
Germany	8.75	24.60
Italy	5.65	11.50
Netherlands	6.51	14.90
Portugal	5.44	16.30
Spain	6.28	13.80
United Kingdom	6.38	18.90

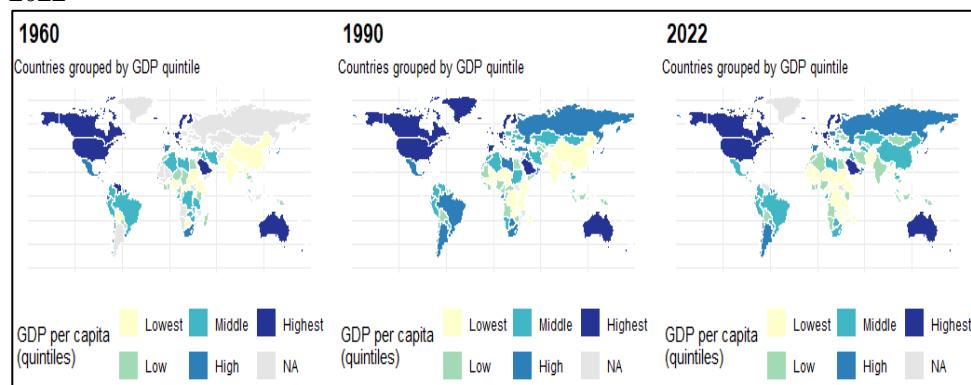
Source: authors' representation based on data from World Bank

In contrast, the former German colonies recorded the highest average growth rate, of 8.75%, although in this case the variation is high (SD = 24.6%), indicating major differences between countries. The former Dutch (6.51%), British (6.38%) and Spanish (6.28%) colonies were above the overall average for the former colonies.

Also, the former colonies of the United States achieved growth comparable to the average of the European colonies (6.15%), suggesting that not all forms of colonialism have had a similar long-term economic impact. Thus, administrative models, investments in infrastructure, education, as well as decolonization factors influence the economic trajectory of the respective countries in the post-colonization period.

Finally, the Figure 8 reflects a comparative view of GDP per capita for the reference years 1960, 1990, and 2022, grouping countries into quintiles according to average income levels; both historical and contemporary patterns of global inequality are highlighted, with a focus on the trajectory of colonized nations.

Figure 8. Global Distribution of GDP per Capita Quintiles in 1960, 1990, and 2022

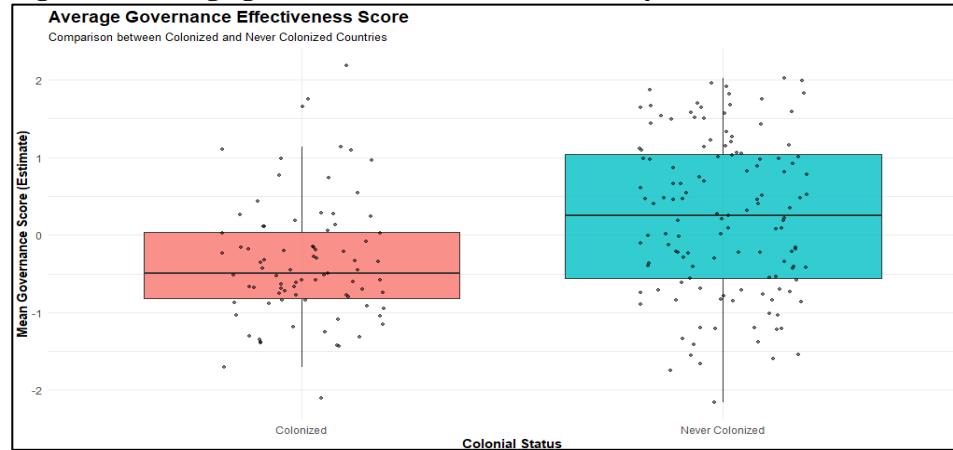


Source: authors' representation based on data from World Bank

Africa, South Asia, and Latin America have had the lowest GDP per capita rates since 1960, while Western Europe, North America, and Australia have had the highest rates, but some regions converged in 1990, with Sub-Saharan Africa remaining the lowest. In 2022, the global landscape is more diverse, with some formerly colonized countries showing upward mobility.

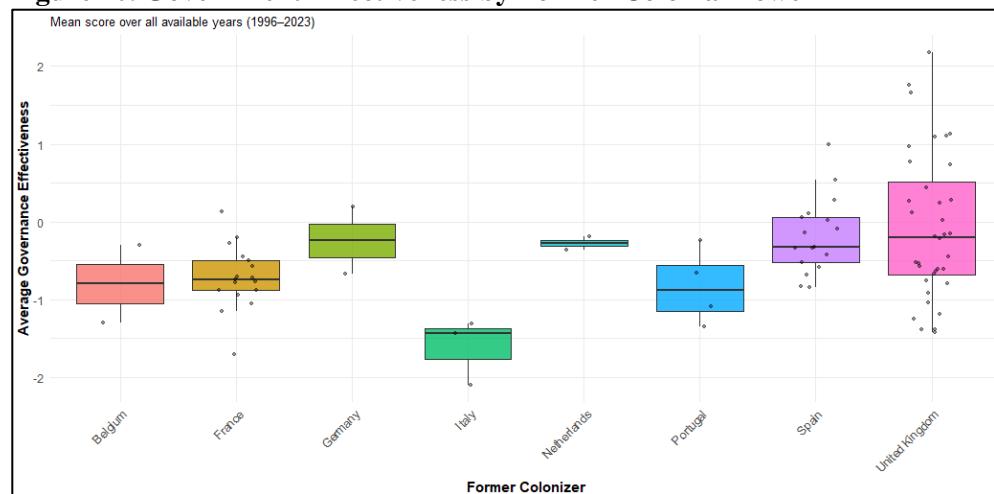
4.2. Governance effectiveness

The average governance effectiveness scores (as estimated by the World Bank) across all available years (1996–2023), comparing formerly colonized countries with those that were never colonized are reflected in the Figure 9. The distribution shows a clear divergence: countries that were never colonized generally exhibit higher governance scores, while colonized countries cluster around lower values, including negative effectiveness scores. The boxplot highlights persistent structural differences in governance quality potentially rooted in historical institutional legacies of colonization.

Figure 9. Average governance effectiveness score by colonial status

Source: authors' representation based on data from World Bank

Considering the colonial power (Figure 10), significant variation occurs between colonial powers, for example, the UK and Spanish colonies have higher governance scores, while those previously colonized by Italy, Portugal, or Belgium have consistently lower performance.

Figure 10. Government Effectiveness by Former Colonial Power

Source: authors' representation based on data from World Bank

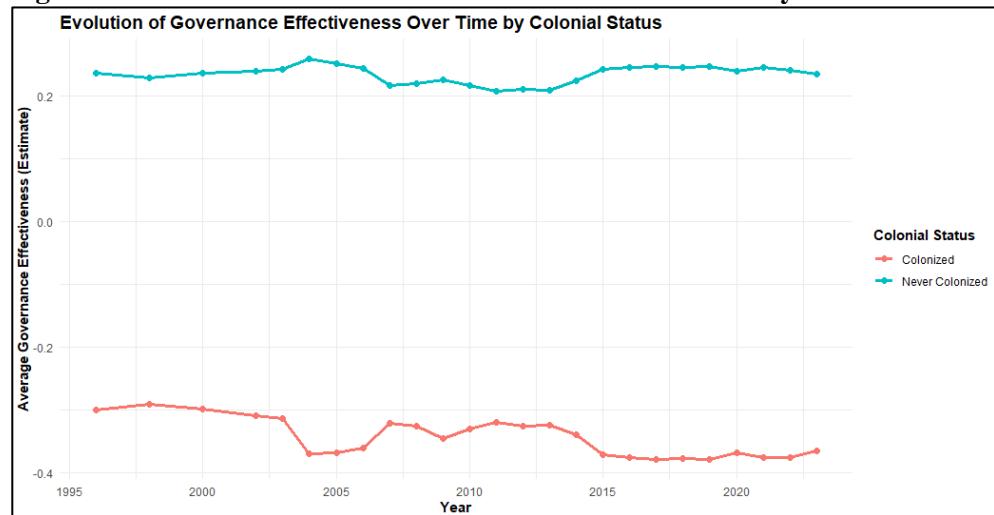
Heterogeneity in this case suggests that the identity of colonizing countries has long-run institutional impacts, with an emphasis on state capacity and administrative efficiency.

Dunn's test (Annex 2) shows few significant differences in government efficiency scores between former colonies, depending on the colonizing power. However, a few comparisons reach significance, suggesting institutional legacy. Italy and the United Kingdom have significantly higher government efficiency scores than those colonized by Italy, suggesting British institutions may have induced more effective post-colonial governance. France and Spain and Italy and Spain have marginally significant differences, suggesting a possible institutional advantage of Spanish colonies.

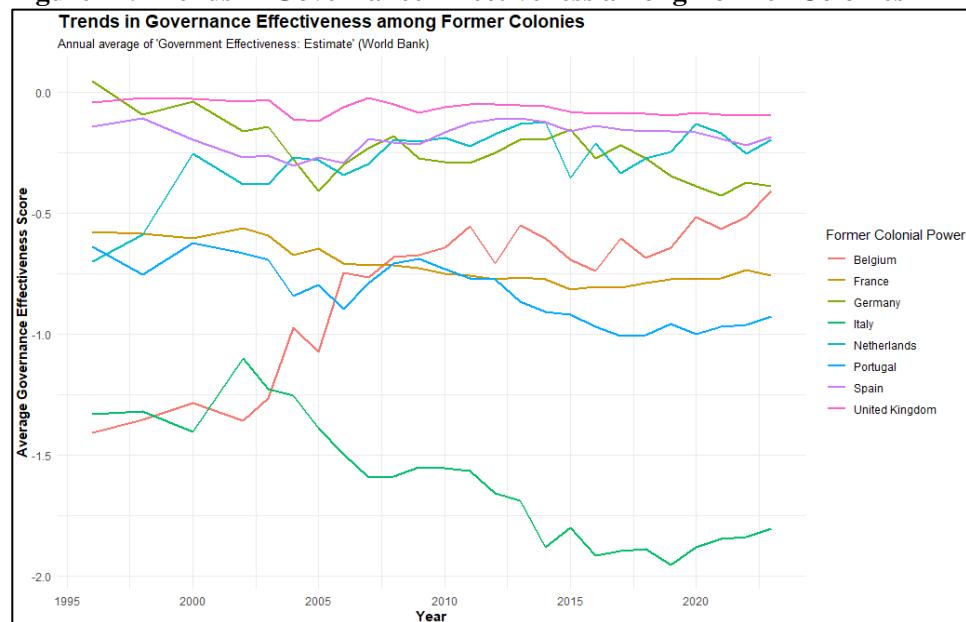
The gap between colonized and non-colonized countries remains relatively stable across time, with non-colonized countries maintaining a consistent advantage in governance performance (Figure 11). The existence of minor fluctuations and recorded trajectories suggest structural divergence, thus reinforcing the notion of path dependence in governance results.

The temporal trends in Governance Effectiveness across countries grouped by colonizing state (Figure 12) show differentiated trajectories, for example the former British colonies maintain higher average governance scores, while those colonized by Italy, Portugal and Belgium show lower or stagnant performance. Thus, some colonial powers (e.g. Spain and the Netherlands) show average results with relative stability.

Figure 11. Evolution of Governance Effectiveness over Time by Colonial Status



Source: authors' representation based on data from World Bank

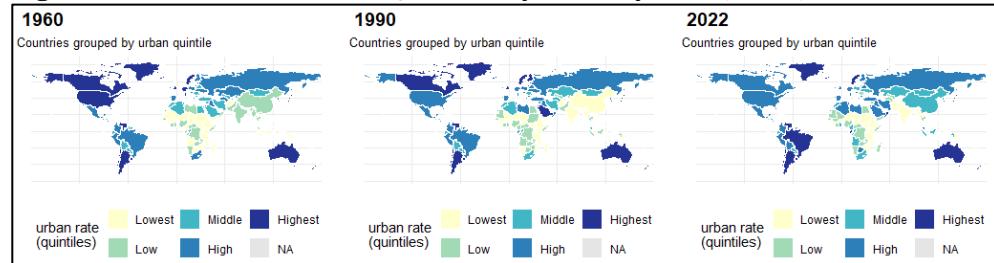
Figure 12. Trends in Governance Effectiveness among Former Colonies

Source: authors' representation based on data from World Bank

These patterns support the hypothesis that colonial administrative legacies contributed to persistent differences in institutional quality among postcolonial states.

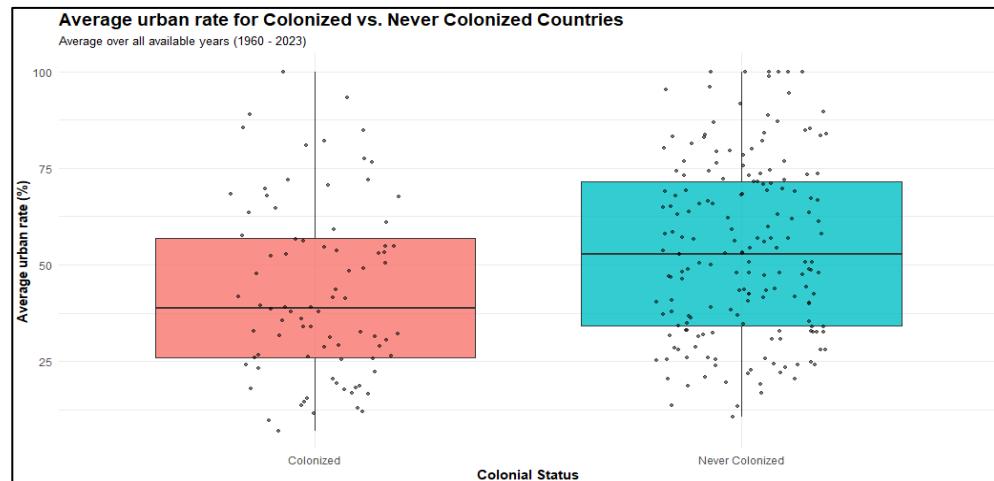
4.3. Urbanization trends

Considering the spatial distribution of countries grouped into quintiles based on the share of the urban population in three reference years: 1960, 1990, and 2022 (Figure 13), it can be distinguished that in 1960 Africa and parts of Asia belonged to the lower quintiles, while Europe, North America and Australia were already urbanized. By 1990, many countries in Latin America and Asia had increased towards the upper quintiles, and by 2022 the gap persisted, with a slight narrowing reflected in the global urbanization trend. However, many of the countries that were colonized remain overrepresented in the lower urbanization quintiles in all periods, suggesting long-term development disparities.

Figure 13. Urbanization Rate Quintiles by Country (1960, 1990, 2022)

Source: authors' representation based on data from World Bank

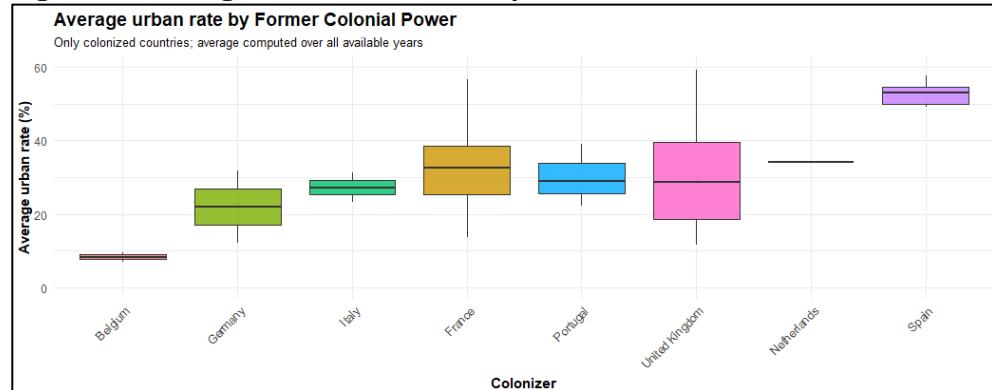
The boxplots from Figure 14 compares the average urban population share between countries that experienced colonization and those that did not.

Figure 14. Average Urbanization Rate for Colonized vs. Never Colonized Countries

Source: authors' representation based on data from World Bank

On average, countries that have never been colonized show a higher degree of urbanization over the entire period (1960-2023), and the distribution for colonized countries is more leftward representative, with a lower median and a wider dispersion, indicating a lower overall level of urban development.

A clear heterogeneity is observed among former colonial powers (Figure 15). Colonies of Spain and the Netherlands show notably higher median urbanization levels, while those previously governed by Belgium and Germany appear to lag behind. The existence of more persistent British and French colonies indicates an internal variation between the former territories, so this variation may reflect different colonial strategies and legacies in terms of infrastructure, administration, and post-colonial state formation.

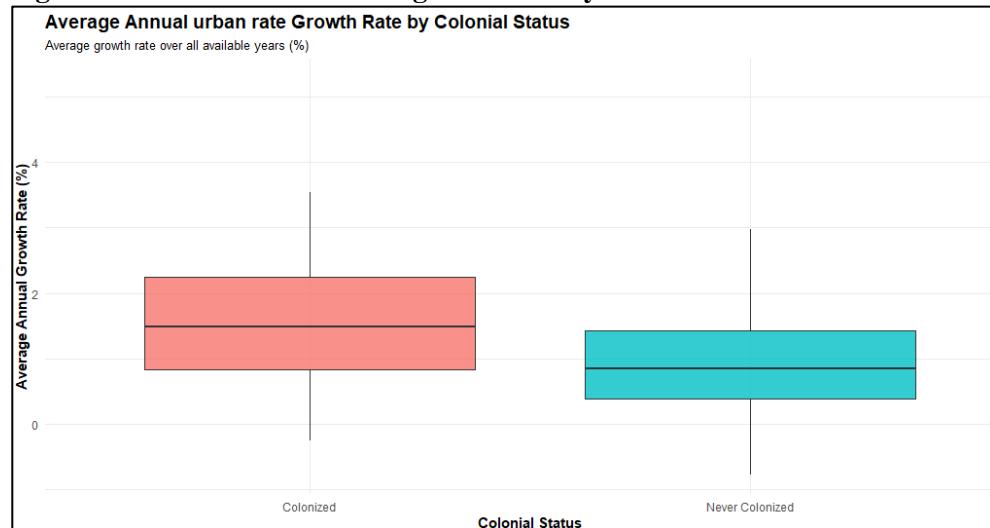
Figure 15. Average Urbanization Rate by Former Colonial Power

Source: authors' representation based on data from World Bank

According to Annex 3, the former Spanish colonies experienced average rates of urbanization compared to other colonial empires, the difference recorded is 10% at the significance level. When analysing the differences between Spain and Belgium, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, they are statistically significant, adjusting for multiple comparisons. The results show that post-colonial urban development in the former territories of Spain has been more pronounced, due to historical, cultural, or geographical influences favourable to urbanization. On the other hand, for other former colonial powers, the differences in average urbanization rates are not statistically significant, registering a homogeneity of urbanization rates across these countries. In the case of the Spanish colonies, they stand out, explaining the different postcolonial trajectories in terms of demographic transition and urban development. According to the result, it is in line with previous visualizations and can serve as a starting point for a more detailed analysis of the determinants of urbanization in the postcolonial context.

At the same time, comparing the average annual growth rate in urbanization between colonized and never-colonized countries, colonized countries exhibit slightly higher urban growth rates, with a wider range, indicating faster but more uneven urban expansion (Figure 16).

This pattern may reflect rapid urbanization due to late-stage industrialization or migration from rural areas, contrasting with more stable urban growth in countries that were never colonized.

Figure 16. Annual urbanization growth rate by colonial status

Source: authors' representation based on data from World Bank

As overall the research results confirm the existence of the colonial legacy generating different development pattern ways between the former colonies and the non-colonialized countries, with various manifestations depending the colonial power.

Conclusions

Colonialism, in its various forms, from settler colonialism as having the strongest impact on the economic development and urbanization trends („hard colonialism”), to soft forms such as commercial colonialism, has a dual dimension from the perspective of the conditions and challenges it implies for the contemporary development (Loomba, 1998; Said, 1978). Colonialism contributed to the rapid growth and urbanization of occupied territories, and to a radical process of institutional transformation through the implementation of new models of governance, creating a favourable context of determinants and conditions that support the long-term development. Also, colonialism developed the built environment and the critical infrastructure, created new frameworks for education and health infrastructure, making colonial cities as poles of growth and development and creating the foundations of post-colonial urban development, industrialization and modernization (Grier, 1999; Acemoglu, et al., 2001; Ferguson & Schularick, 2006; Dell and Olken, 2020). At the same time, colonialism meant the alteration or even destruction of local values and culture, the exploitation of local populations and resources, socio-economic segregation and spatial inequalities that limit the capacity

of countries and cities to promote sustainable and inclusive development models. Colonialism generated institutional and governance systems that have remained dominated in some cases by extractive institutions (Sokoloff & Engerman, 2000; Wallerstein, 1974), hindering the economic development and perpetuating inequalities.

A stronger bottom-up approach in growth-based policies and urbanisation are required, with a particular focus on key determinants of sustainability, social segregation and inclusiveness, looking also to a (re)calibration of the territorial characteristics of cities. As the current research highlighted, including aspects based on the statistical analysis, improving the quality of institutions and increasing the performance of government mechanism are necessary to reduce the post-colonial path dependency.

Acknowledgements: This research has been conducted with the support received through the project „City-Focus - City: Future Organisation of Changes in Urbanisation and Sustainability”, project code CF 23/27.07.2023, financed through National Recovery and Resilience Plan for Romania within project call – PNRR-III-C9-2023-I8 PNRR/2023/Component 9/Investment 8. [Financed by the European Union – NextGenerationEU].

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Annex

Annex 1. Pairwise Comparisons of GDP per Capita among Former Colonial Powers (Dunn Test with Benjamini-Hochberg Adjustment)

Comparison	Z	P.unadj	P.adj (BH)
Belgium - France	-1.5095	0.131172	0.333892
Belgium - Germany	-1.90631	0.056609	0.264177
France - Germany	-1.04809	0.294596	0.549913
Belgium - Italy	-1.20505	0.228182	0.532425
France - Italy	0.040174	0.967954	0.967954
Germany - Italy	0.883208	0.377124	0.621145
Belgium - Netherlands	-1.98831	0.046778	0.261956
France - Netherlands	-1.1581	0.246825	0.531623
Germany - Netherlands	-0.08199	0.934653	0.96927
Italy - Netherlands	-0.97303	0.330541	0.578446
Belgium - Portugal	-1.56216	0.118251	0.331102
France - Portugal	-0.41203	0.680321	0.865863
Germany - Portugal	0.639064	0.522781	0.731893
Italy - Portugal	-0.331	0.740641	0.864081
Netherlands - Portugal	0.733741	0.463107	0.682473
Belgium - Spain	-2.99528	0.002742	0.038387
France - Spain	-3.29389	0.000988	0.027667
Germany - Spain	-0.44518	0.656191	0.874921
Italy - Spain	-1.81891	0.068925	0.2757
Netherlands - Spain	-0.3355	0.73725	0.897522
Portugal - Spain	-1.59476	0.110766	0.344607
Belgium - United Kingdom	-2.40615	0.016122	0.150471
France - United Kingdom	-2.15783	0.030941	0.216588
Germany - United Kingdom	0.217885	0.827518	0.891174
Italy - United Kingdom	-1.07828	0.28091	0.561819
Netherlands - United Kingdom	0.330747	0.740836	0.829736
Portugal - United Kingdom	-0.74976	0.453402	0.705292
Spain - United Kingdom	1.668749	0.095167	0.333085

Source: personal processing based on data from World Bank

Annex 2. Pairwise Comparisons of urban rate among Former Colonial Powers (Dunn Test with Benjamini-Hochberg Adjustment)

Comparison	Z	P.unadj	P.adj (BH)
Belgium - France	-1.93729	0.05271	0.21084
Belgium - Germany	-0.67643	0.498765	0.698271
France - Germany	1.029758	0.303124	0.565831

Belgium - Italy	-1.71402	0.086525	0.242269
France - Italy	-0.19357	0.846515	0.948096
Germany - Italy	-0.97303	0.330541	0.578446
Belgium - Netherlands	-2.0293	0.042428	0.197995
France - Netherlands	-0.78531	0.432275	0.711982
Germany - Netherlands	-1.35287	0.176098	0.410895
Italy - Netherlands	-0.50897	0.610775	0.814367
Belgium - Portugal	-1.83435	0.066602	0.233106
France - Portugal	-0.26164	0.793602	0.925869
Germany - Portugal	-1.05327	0.292216	0.584432
Italy - Portugal	-0.03131	0.975021	0.975021
Netherlands - Portugal	0.508885	0.610833	0.777424
Belgium - Spain	-3.41465	0.000639	0.008941
France - Spain	-3.27804	0.001045	0.009756
Germany - Spain	-2.50978	0.012081	0.084566
Italy - Spain	-1.57759	0.114661	0.291863
Netherlands - Spain	-0.70003	0.48391	0.752749
Portugal - Spain	-1.73471	0.082793	0.257578
Belgium - United Kingdom	-2.11615	0.034332	0.192258
France - United Kingdom	-0.32348	0.746334	0.90858
Germany - United Kingdom	-1.18505	0.235999	0.508306
Italy - United Kingdom	0.045481	0.963724	0.999417
Netherlands - United Kingdom	0.677169	0.498299	0.734335
Portugal - United Kingdom	0.097231	0.922543	0.993508
Spain - United Kingdom	3.449947	0.000561	0.015699

Annex 3. Pairwise Comparisons of Government Effectiveness among Former Colonial Powers (Dunn Test with Benjamini-Hochberg Adjustment)

Comparison	Z	P.unadj	P.adj (BH)
Belgium - France	-0.00816	0.993488	1
Belgium - Germany	-0.78825	0.430549	0.634493
France - Germany	-1.04629	0.295425	0.486583
Belgium - Italy	1.158891	0.2465	0.530924
France - Italy	1.699103	0.0893	0.277822
Germany - Italy	2.022379	0.043137	0.201307
Belgium - Netherlands	-0.87123	0.38363	0.596758
France - Netherlands	-1.15729	0.247154	0.494308
Germany - Netherlands	-0.08297	0.933872	1
Italy - Netherlands	-2.11327	0.034577	0.193634
Belgium - Portugal	0.167668	0.866845	1
France - Portugal	0.27227	0.785415	1

Germany - Portugal	1.077864	0.281095	0.491916
Italy - Portugal	-1.19502	0.232078	0.649819
Netherlands - Portugal	1.173674	0.240526	0.561227
Belgium - Spain	-1.18014	0.237944	0.605676
France - Spain	-2.55427	0.010641	0.074487
Germany - Spain	-0.12569	0.899981	1
Italy - Spain	-3.09813	0.001947	0.054528
Netherlands - Spain	-0.01469	0.988279	1
Portugal - Spain	-1.8488	0.064487	0.257947
Belgium - United Kingdom	-1.08503	0.27791	0.518766
France - United Kingdom	-2.65784	0.007864	0.0734
Germany - United Kingdom	0	1	1
Italy - United Kingdom	-3.07221	0.002125	0.029747
Netherlands - United Kingdom	0.114213	0.909069	1
Portugal - United Kingdom	-1.77111	0.076542	0.267898
Spain - United Kingdom	0.319273	0.74952	1

From progressive to regressive? Income tax reform and inequality in the Republic of Moldova

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Abstract: This study examines whether the Republic of Moldova's 2018 transition from a progressive income tax system to a flat 12% tax altered the trajectory of income inequality. The research objective is to empirically assess both the immediate and long-term distributional effects of the reform. Using Interrupted Time Series Analysis (ITSA) on annual data from 2014 to 2023 and the Gini coefficient of disposable income as the primary inequality proxy, the study evaluates changes in both level and trend before and after the reform. Newey-West standard errors address mild negative autocorrelation. Results indicate an initial decline in inequality following the reform, but a subsequent sustained increase, suggesting regressive long-term effects. The findings show the reform disproportionately benefited high-income earners and weakened the redistributive role of the tax system. These outcomes challenge the presumed neutrality of flat taxes and underscore the need to reintroduce progressive elements for fairer income distribution in Moldova.

Keywords: taxation, inequality, Moldova, fiscal reform, flat tax

Introduction

A tax system is appropriate if it is efficient, equitable and simple (Slemrod, 2002, p. 8). The primary purpose of a tax system is to lead to revenue generation, while also fulfilling distributive and regulatory functions. In addition, the tax system can play a vital role during times of uncertainty by promoting stability and supplying essential information to guide government policies be it in economic, social, health, or environmental domains (Daly, 2023, p. 542). Given its wide range of functions, it's only natural for governments to rely on tax systems to address certain issues, even systemic problems, seeking immediate results and sometimes ignoring long-term circumstances. Tax systems change over time due to two main factors: government demands, i.e. what they want the tax system to achieve and external forces such as economic shifts, technological developments, globalization, and fiscal decentralization (Tanzi, 2018, p. 1). These factors are considered in the literature to

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influence what kind of tax system is possible and effective in a given country. Moreover, the optimal tax theory, in its current form, is sometimes criticized for being incomplete for guiding real-world tax policy because it overlooks the coercive nature and resource costs of tax collection, as different tax systems vary significantly in administrative costs, which is crucial for policy design (Slemrod, 1990, p. 168).

Inequality, whether it refers to economic disparities between individuals, groups, social classes, or countries (European Commission, 2018), represents a phenomenon that can be mitigated through government intervention via appropriate fiscal, social, and economic measures. The tax system is recognized as being one of the main instruments to ensure a balance in the income distribution to achieve equity in such a way mitigating the inequality-related market failure. Progressive taxation is widely regarded as an effective tool to prevent the deepening of income inequality. However, some countries advocate for flat rate taxation due to its simplicity in administration.

The Republic of Moldova currently applies a flat personal income tax (PIT), meaning that a single uniform rate is levied regardless of income level. Prior to 2018, Moldova operated under a progressive taxation model, which differentiated between income groups. Specifically, individuals earning up to 33,000 MDL were taxed at 7%, while income exceeding this threshold was subject to a higher 18% rate. This structure reflected the principle of vertical equity, whereby higher earners contribute proportionally more to the state budget.

The fiscal reform of 2018, codified in Article 15 of the Fiscal Code, fundamentally altered this framework by introducing a flat 12% income tax applicable to most individuals and legal entities. This marked a decisive policy shift, with far-reaching economic and social implications. The reform applied broadly, encompassing employees, entrepreneurs, and professionals in sensitive sectors such as justice and healthcare. At the same time, exceptions were maintained for specific categories: farmer households continued to pay a reduced 7% rate, while economic agents with estimated income faced a corrective mechanism whereby 15% was levied on any earnings surpassing their declared estimates (Republica Moldova Parlamentul, Codul Fiscal [Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Fiscal Code], 1997).

Another component of the reform was the adjustment of the non-taxable income threshold. The ceiling was raised to 24,000 MDL annually, aligning it with the subsistence minimum. This measure aimed to provide relief to low-income households and mitigate, at least partially, the regressive nature of the flat tax. In policy terms, the government justified the reform as a tool to simplify tax administration, attract investment, and stimulate business activity by reducing compliance costs. Indeed, flat taxation is often praised for its administrative efficiency and potential to limit tax evasion by removing complex brackets that incentivize misreporting.

Nevertheless, the reform also carried important distributive consequences. Under the previous progressive model, the PIT was one of the most effective fiscal

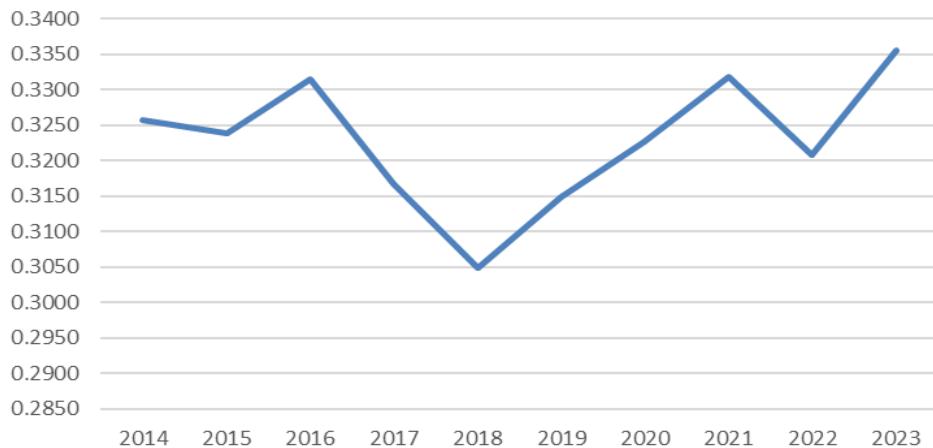
instruments for reducing inequality through redistribution. By contrast, the flat system weakened this redistributive effect, raising concerns that higher-income groups would disproportionately benefit from reduced marginal rates. Empirical analyses conducted after the reform (Cojocaru et al., 2019) suggest that the progressivity of the tax system declined significantly, eroding its capacity to correct market-driven income disparities. This shift coincided with broader debates in Eastern Europe, where several post-Soviet states experimented with flat taxes in the 2000s, often achieving mixed results in terms of equity.

For Moldova, the reform's implications extend beyond fiscal efficiency. A flatter tax structure risks exacerbating income inequality at a time when social cohesion and inclusive growth are critical for economic stability and EU integration prospects. While low-income earners gained slightly from the higher non-taxable threshold, middle- and upper-income groups benefitted far more from the reduced overall tax burden. This imbalance has fueled debates among policymakers, economists, and civil society about whether efficiency gains justify the social trade-offs. Thus, while the 2018 reform streamlined Moldova's PIT and aligned it with broader regional experiments in flat taxation, it also marked a retreat from progressivity and redistribution. The resulting tension between efficiency and equity remains central to understanding the evolving role of taxation in Moldova's economic development model.

Moreover, according to Ionita (2018), an economist from IDIS Viitorul think tank, the flat tax reform of 12% has also led to significant budgetary losses, estimated at over 1 billion lei annually, primarily affecting local budgets. While the reform aimed to simplify tax administration and provide relief to low-income earners, only 10% of the total tax savings benefit them, with high-income earners receiving the most substantial advantages. The flat tax has reduced personal income tax revenues by 35%, with the capital city alone losing approximately 350 million lei annually. Although low-income earners save around 74 lei monthly, high earners gain significantly more, with top executives saving over 6,000 lei monthly (Ionita, 2018). In a report issued soon after the shift from a progressive to a predominantly flat tax system acknowledges that although this transition sought to stimulate investment and economic growth it also posed challenges for income distribution and social equity (Agenția de Stat pentru Proprietatea Intelectuală [State Agency on Intellectual Property], 2019).

Thus, even though the flat tax system aimed to simplify tax administration and improve fiscal efficiency, concerns have been raised about its long-term impact on social inequality, as it may disproportionately benefit higher-income groups while reducing the state's capacity to fund social programs.

Concurrently the Gini trend from 2014-2023 shows a sharp increase in the income inequality after 2018 when the flat tax system was introduced (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Gini coefficient by disposable income

Source: author's representation based on data from National Bureau of Statistics of Moldova (NBS, 2014-2023).

The line chart above shows the Gini coefficient by disposable income, illustrating the trend of income inequality in Moldova from 2014 to 2023. The Gini coefficient is a commonly used measure of income inequality, where 0 represents perfect equality and 1 represents perfect inequality. From 2014 to 2016, inequality rose, peaking at 0.3314 in 2016. A significant decline followed in 2017 and 2018, reaching the lowest point at 0.3049. From 2019 onward, the Gini coefficient began rising again, reaching 0.3356 in 2023, the highest level in the dataset. Thus, while Moldova made progress in reducing income inequality in the late 2010s, inequality has increased again in recent years.

Given the above, in this research a first step is made to assess empirically (1) Has the implementation of a flat tax system altered the trajectory of income inequality in the Republic of Moldova? (2) If so, did inequality increase following the reform? The hypothesis is that the flat rate system might have been related to the increase in income inequality in the Republic of Moldova.

This study contributes to the Moldovan and regional tax equity debate by providing an empirical assessment of whether the 2018 flat tax reform altered the trajectory of income inequality. While earlier discussions focused on theoretical or fiscal impacts, this research applies Interrupted Time Series Analysis (ITSA) to test the relationship between the reform and changes in inequality, thereby filling an existing gap in the literature.

1. Literature review

The debate on tax reform in Moldova has long revolved around the balance between efficiency and equity. Vragaleva-Sirețeanu (2010) contributed to this discussion by simulating the effects of replacing Moldova's dual-rate progressive tax (7% and 18%) with a flat rate of 15% alongside a higher personal deduction. While her findings showed that low- and high-income earners would benefit, middle-income groups would face a heavier burden, potentially eroding trust in institutions. Although the flat tax would yield higher revenues, the study cautioned that without strong social policies, such a reform could exacerbate inequality which is a concern echoed in broader fiscal literature that warns of equity trade-offs under flat tax regimes. The implications of Moldova's actual shift to a flat tax in 2018 have been critically examined after the tax reform. A study shows that in the case of Moldova there is limited redistributive capacity within the current national tax system. The evidence highlights the importance of institutional quality and the structure of tax systems in shaping income distribution, aligning with broader findings in the literature that progressive taxation remains a key lever for promoting inclusive economic development (Balan, 2021). Serduni (2023) finds that this reform disproportionately favored high-income earners, notably millionaires whose effective tax burden dropped from 10.3% in 2017 to 6.49% in 2019. In contrast, low- and middle-income earners experienced minimal benefit and, in some cases, increased fiscal pressure. Structural inequities are further reinforced by the lower taxation (6%) of capital income like sources dividends, royalties, and interest primarily accessed by the wealthy. A more favorable view of the reform is provided by Noroc (2022), who highlights its positive impact on formalizing the labor market, raising declared wages, and reducing employer costs. However, these benefits did not resolve the regressive nature of the system. This is consistent with Hutsebaut (2021), who attributes Moldova's persistently high informal economy (estimated at 23%–44% of GDP) to structural flaws in the tax system, including the flat tax's regressive burden, poor public services, and weak tax morale.

Comparative perspectives, in the cases of other countries, reinforce the above concerns. Ban and Buciu (2023) critiques Romania's experience with a flat tax, citing a low tax-to-GDP ratio, sectoral exemptions, and growing inequality. He argues for a return to moderate progressive taxation, improved compliance, and stronger institutions, recommendations that are highly applicable to Moldova, given similar structural weaknesses. More broadly, Wiśniewska-Kuźma (2020) introduces the Steepness Progression Index (SPI) to measure personal income tax (PIT) progressivity across OECD countries. Her study finds that post-socialist states, display regressive progression, with tax burdens increasing more steeply for low-income than for high-income earners. This reflects the widespread adoption of flat taxes and limited redistributive features in the region.

The effectiveness of tax policy in reducing inequality is not solely determined by tax design. A longitudinal panel study (1981–2005) finds that the institutional quality of a country is a crucial determinant of how effective progressive taxation is in reducing inequality. In countries with weak administrative capacity, even well-designed progressive tax systems have limited redistributive impact (Duncan & Sabirianova, 2016). Moldova's relatively weak institutions suggest that tax reform must be accompanied by enforcement and administrative improvements. Supporting this, a cross-national study (2014–2018) comparing progressive and flat tax systems finds that countries with progressive regimes achieve lower Gini coefficients, better poverty reduction, and slower wealth concentration. While inequality rose under both systems, its increase was sharper under flat tax regimes, particularly those lacking strong redistributive mechanisms (Celestin, 2019). A comparative analysis of EU-28 countries finds that progressive taxation is associated with stronger automatic stabilizers and better equity outcomes. In contrast, flat tax regimes tend to have regressive effects, especially when paired with consumption-heavy taxes or minimal welfare spending (Popescu et al., 2019).

Taken together, the literature highlights significant concerns about flat taxation and its distributive effects, both in Moldova and internationally. However, despite these warnings, there is still no empirical study that directly tests whether Moldova's 2018 flat tax reform altered the trajectory of income inequality. This research addresses that gap by applying Interrupted Time Series Analysis (ITSA) to annual inequality data, thereby moving beyond theoretical and descriptive accounts to provide an empirical assessment of the reform's distributive impact, which to the best of our knowledge has not been done before.

2. Data and methodology

The data on income inequality, proxied by the Gini coefficient (disposable income), was collected from the National Bureau of Statistics for the period of ten years (2014–2023). To assess the impact of the transition to a flat rate tax of 12%, the Interrupted Time Series Analysis (ITSA) was used. The Interrupted Time Series Analysis (ITSA) is particularly suitable for this study because the 2018 flat tax reform in Moldova represents a clearly defined intervention point within a continuous time series of annual inequality data. Unlike simple descriptive analysis, ITSA allows for the separation of immediate (level) effects from longer-term (trend) changes, providing a more nuanced assessment of how inequality evolved before and after the reform. Moreover, since the analysis focuses on a single country without an appropriate control group, alternative methods such as difference-in-differences are not applicable. ITSA is therefore an appropriate quasi-experimental design to take a first step in evaluating the causal impact of the tax reform on inequality dynamics.

The trend in the inequality indicator (Gini disposable income) over time is modeled, introducing a dummy variable for the tax reform period. Then an

assessment is carried out of whether the trend in inequality changed significantly after the reform. While a line chart offers a helpful visual narrative, it is descriptive, but ITSA quantifies immediate (level) change to answer the question of whether inequality suddenly increased or decreased after the reform, as well as whether the slope, i.e. the rate of change of inequality, increased or decreased afterward.

First, the dataset is analyzed for suitability (Table 1). The main insights that the dataset in the table below provides are that the Gini values show minimal variation, but the post-reform period appears dominant. The range of the time_post variable indicates a clear period after the reform which is essential for assessing trend changes in inequality. The descriptive statistics further suggest that while the variation in the Gini coefficient appears limited, the temporal structure of the data is crucial for ITSA. The clear identification of a pre- and post-reform period allows for testing both level and slope changes in inequality. Although the post-reform observations dominate the dataset, the inclusion of several pre-reform years strengthens the model by establishing a baseline trend against which to compare subsequent developments. This balance between pre- and post-intervention periods is vital for ensuring that any observed changes in inequality can plausibly be attributed to the 2018 flat tax reform.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variable	Observation	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
GINI	10	.32283	.0091558	.3049	.3356
time	10	8.5	3.02765	4	13
post	10	.6	.5163978	0	1
time_post	10	6.3	5.598611	0	13

Source: author's representation based on data from National Bureau of Statistics of Moldova (NBS, 2014-2023), processed in Stata18.

The descriptive statistics also highlight several additional aspects of the dataset. The mean Gini coefficient of 0.3228, with a narrow standard deviation of 0.009, confirms relatively stable inequality levels over the observed period, though the minimum and maximum values indicate noticeable fluctuations around the reform years. The time variable, ranging from 4 to 13, reflects the balanced coverage of years required for ITSA, while the post variable average of 0.6 suggests that most observations fall after the intervention. Importantly, the time_post variable's mean of 6.3 demonstrates that sufficient post-reform data points are available to detect both immediate and trend effects.

Then, the ITSA is run and given that autocorrelation in the residuals of the regression model was suspected, the Durbin–Watson statistic was run to detect it. The Durbin–Watson d-statistic = 2.60 suggested the presence of mild negative autocorrelation, which is generally not a serious issue, but the decision was to run the Newey-West standard errors which is a common solution in this situation. Thus,

further the Interrupted Time Series Analysis (ITSA) with Newey-West standard errors was resorted to.

The formula of the model is:

$$\text{GINI}_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \text{time}_t + \beta_2 \cdot \text{post}_t + \beta_3 \cdot \text{time_post}_t + \epsilon_t \quad (1)$$

Where:

Dependent Variable:

GINI_t - is the Gini coefficient at time t , which measures income inequality.

Independent Variables:

1. β_0 (Intercept)

- This is the estimated level of the Gini coefficient at the start of the time series (baseline year), i.e., when time=0. It gives the starting point of the inequality trend before any tax reform occurs.

2. $\beta_1 \cdot \text{time}_t$ (Pre-reform trend coefficient)

- time here is a continuous variable counting years.
- β_1 captures the underlying trend in inequality *before* the reform was implemented.

3. $\beta_2 \cdot \text{post}_t$ (Level change due to reform)

- post is a dummy variable:
 - 0 for years before 2018
 - 1 for years 2018 and after
- β_2 estimates the immediate shift in the Gini coefficient in the year the reform was implemented.

4. $\beta_3 \cdot \text{time_post}_t$ (Post-reform trend change)

- time_post is an interaction term defined as:
 - 0 for years before the reform
 - Starting at 1 in 2018 and increasing by 1 each year after
- This term measures how the trend in inequality changed after the reform compared to the pre-reform trend.

Error Term (ϵ_t):

- Captures all other unexplained variations in inequality at time t .

The output is presented below (Table 2).

Table 2. Interrupted Time Series Analysis (ITSA) with Newey-West standard errors

Linear regression		Number of obs = 10 F(3,6) = 8.94 Prob > F = 0.0124 R-squared = 0.6656 Root MSE = .00648				
GINIdisposable (GINI Disposable Income):		Coefficient	Robust std. err.	t	P> t	[95% conf. interval]
time	(Time variable):	-.00191	.0022063	-0.87	0.420	-.0073085 .0034885
post (Tax Policy Change Dummy)						
time_post	(Interaction Term for Post-Reform Trend):	.0070757	.0025414	2.78	0.032	.0008572 .0132942
cons		.33493	.0100658	33.27	0.000	.3102998 .3595602

Source: author's representation based on data from National Bureau of Statistics of Moldova (NBS, 2014-2023), processed in Stata18.

As seen in Table 2, overall the model is statistically significant. The Newey-West correction accounts for heteroskedasticity and mild negative autocorrelation. The pre-reform trend is negative but not statistically significant, indicating inequality was relatively stable before the reform. A statistically significant decrease in inequality is noted immediately after the tax reform. There is a statistically significant increase in inequality over time after the reform and this suggests that while the immediate effect was a reduction in inequality, the trend reversed, and inequality began to rise steadily in the post-reform period.

Thus, the results presented in Table 2 provide valuable insights into the dynamics of inequality in Moldova during the period under analysis and the implications of the 2018 flat tax reform. The first important observation is that the model itself demonstrates good explanatory power. With an R-squared value of approximately 0.666, the specification explains approximately two-thirds of the variation in the Gini coefficient over time, which is substantial given the relatively short time series of only ten annual observations. Moreover, the F-statistic of 8.94 with a p-value of 0.0124 indicates that the joint contribution of the independent variables is statistically significant at conventional levels. This suggests that the inclusion of time, post, and time_post captures meaningful variation in inequality beyond what could be expected from chance alone. The use of Newey-West standard errors further reinforce confidence in the results by correcting for heteroskedasticity

and mild negative autocorrelation, which, if left unaddressed, could have biased inference.

Turning to the specific coefficients, the pre-reform time trend ($\beta_1 = -0.00191$) is negative but not statistically significant. This implies that prior to 2018, income inequality in Moldova, as measured by the Gini coefficient, was not undergoing a significant directional change. In fact, this result is consistent with the descriptive evidence, where inequality was relatively stable in the years immediately preceding the reform, with only minor year-to-year fluctuations. In other words, Moldova entered the 2018 reform from a baseline of relative stability in distributional outcomes.

The immediate effect of the reform is captured by the post dummy ($\beta_2 = -0.0674$, $p = 0.005$), which is both large in magnitude and statistically significant. Substantively, this indicates a sudden drop in the Gini coefficient following the introduction of the flat tax. At first glance, this result may appear paradoxical, as theoretical expectations and prior evidence from other countries would suggest that a flat tax reduces progressivity and therefore increases inequality. Several explanations could be advanced for this finding. One possibility is that the concurrent increase in the non-taxable threshold to 24,000 MDL provided an immediate and relatively more beneficial effect for lower-income groups, which translated into a temporary equalizing effect. Another explanation could be related to short-term behavioural adjustments, such as increased compliance or shifts in reported income in the first year of the reform, which temporarily masked longer-term inequality dynamics.

The interaction term for post-reform trend ($\beta_3 = 0.0071$, $p = 0.032$) paints a more concerning picture. Its statistical significance and positive sign indicate that inequality began to increase steadily after the reform, at a rate of roughly 0.007 points in the Gini coefficient per year relative to the pre-reform trend. This suggests that while the reform may have produced an immediate reduction in inequality, this effect was not sustained. Instead, the longer-term trajectory points to a reversal, with inequality climbing to levels higher than those observed before the reform by the end of the period (2023). This finding aligns with the broader critique of flat tax systems in post-transition economies: while they may simplify administration and initially offer relief to low- and middle-income households, they erode the redistributive function of the tax system over time, disproportionately benefiting high-income groups.

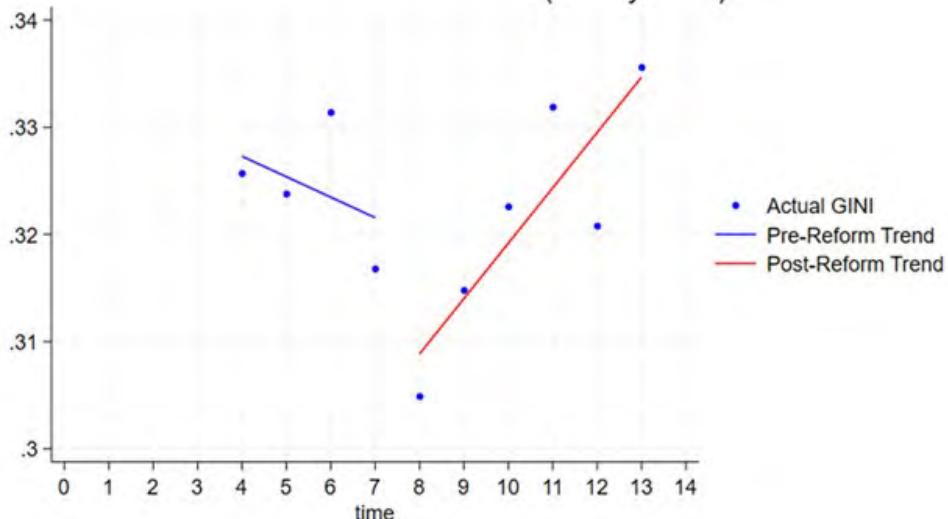
From a policy perspective, the pattern uncovered by the ITSA carries important implications. The short-term decline in inequality might have been presented politically as evidence of the reform's success, but the longer-term rise undermines its equity rationale. By 2023, the Gini coefficient had reached 0.3356, the highest in the series, highlighting that the flat tax's redistributive weakness eventually outweighed any initial benefits. For policymakers, this underscores the importance of distinguishing between immediate and structural effects when evaluating tax reforms. A reform that produces short-lived relief but drives

inequality upwards in the medium term may exacerbate socio-economic divisions, reduce the capacity to finance social services, and undermine inclusive growth.

3. Discussions

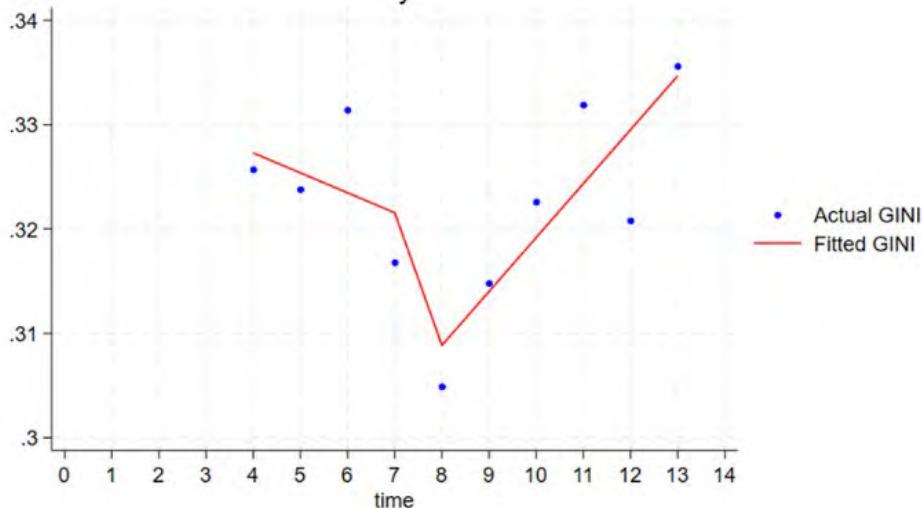
The charts below (Figure 2 and 3) illustrate via the blue dots the actual Gini values over time. The Interrupted Time Series Analysis (ITSA) plot with Newey-West standard errors shows the trend of Moldova's Gini coefficient before and after the taxation reform, where the country transitioned from a progressive to a regressive taxation system.

Figure 2. ITSA with pre- and post-reform trends (New-West)



Source: author's representation based on data from National Bureau of Statistics of Moldova (NBS, 2014-2023), processed in Stata18.

Thus, in Figure 2, the blue line that represents the pre-reform line shows that the Gini coefficient was relatively stable with a slight downward trend, suggesting a modest decrease in inequality over time. The red line represents the post-reform trend which indicates that after the reform, the Gini coefficient exhibits a sharp upward trend, indicating a notable increase in income inequality. There seems to be an immediate level shift after the reform, with the Gini coefficient increasing almost instantly after the tax policy change. The slope of the post-reform trend is steeper compared to the pre-reform period, implying that inequality not only increased immediately after the reform but continued to worsen at a faster rate afterward.

Figure 3. ITSA results with Newey-West standard errors

Source: author's representation based on data from National Bureau of Statistics of Moldova (NBS, 2014-2023), processed in Stata18.

The red line in Figure 3, displays the fitted Gini values from the Interrupted Time Series Analysis model (ITSA) with Newey-West standard errors. The left side of the graph shows the pre-reform period. One can observe that the inequality is relatively stable with a slight downward trend before the tax reform, as shown by the gentle slope of the fitted line. At the same time the graph shows a sharp drop in inequality immediately after the tax reform which matches the significant negative coefficient for post in the model, indicating that the shift to regressive taxation initially reduced inequality. However, in the post-reform period which is reflected in the right side of the graph, after the initial drop, shows a steady increase in inequality over time. This aligns with the positive and statistically significant time_post coefficient, suggesting that inequality started rising in the years following the tax reform.

The transition to regressive taxation therefore appears to have had a dual effect: a short-term adjustment that temporarily lowered inequality, followed by a sustained upward trend that eroded equity in the longer term. The initial decline may be linked to one-off policy measures such as the simultaneous increase in the non-taxable threshold, which temporarily favored lower-income groups. However, as redistribution weakened under the flat tax, the benefits became increasingly concentrated among high-income earners, consistent with the arguments advanced by Ionita (2018) and Serduni (2023).

The evidence from Figures 2 and 3, reinforced by the ITSA estimates, highlights the dual effect of Moldova's 2018 transition to a flat personal income tax. In the short term, inequality declined modestly, likely reflecting concurrent measures

such as the increase in the non-taxable threshold and transitional compliance effects. Yet this adjustment proved temporary. Over the medium term, inequality resumed an upward trajectory, with the Gini coefficient rising steadily and ultimately reaching its highest level in a decade by 2023. This dual pattern is crucial for interpreting the reform: while policymakers may have claimed success based on immediate outcomes, the structural consequences were regressive and long-lasting.

Before the reform, inequality in Moldova was relatively stable, with a slight downward trend visible in both descriptive statistics and fitted pre-reform trends. This stability strengthens the causal interpretation, as ITSA relies on the assumption of a predictable baseline against which intervention effects can be measured. The reform thus represents a clear structural break, visible both in statistical estimates and in the divergence between pre- and post-reform lines in Figure 2. The discontinuity at 2018 confirms that taxation policy rather than unrelated shocks played a central role in altering inequality dynamics.

An apparent paradox arises when comparing the regression results with the visual evidence. The ITSA coefficient for the post dummy indicates a statistically significant decline in inequality immediately after the reform, while Figure 2 appears to suggest an upward jump. This discrepancy can be explained by the coding of the interaction term in the regression model, which conflates the level change with slope effects. Figure 3 helps reconcile this tension: it clearly shows a small post-reform dip consistent with the regression estimates, followed by a sustained upward climb. Substantively, this reflects a dual mechanism: a short-term equalizing shock from the raised non-taxable threshold, quickly overtaken by the longer-term redistributive weakening inherent in a flat PIT system.

The Moldovan case confirms long-standing critiques of flat taxation. Optimal tax theory emphasizes the need to balance efficiency with equity (Slemrod, 1990). Flat taxes are often promoted for their administrative simplicity and potential to reduce distortions, particularly in transition economies with weak compliance. However, as Tanzi (2018) argues, the distributive dimension of taxation cannot be overlooked. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate that by prioritizing simplicity, Moldova compromised equity: the PIT lost its redistributive function, and inequality accelerated. The charts demonstrate that evaluating reforms at a single point in time is insufficient; their trajectory over several years reveals deeper structural effects.

The charts, combined with regression results, suggest several mechanisms driving the long-run increase in inequality. One of them is the redistributive erosion. With a flat rate of 12%, high earners benefited disproportionately, while progressivity was eliminated. Also, fiscal losses, i.e. the reform reduced PIT revenues by an estimated 35% (Ionita, 2018), constraining social spending and local budgets, thereby indirectly worsening inequality. In addition, events like the COVID-19 pandemic and the energy crisis amplified disparities, but the upward slope in Figure 3 shows that inequality was already rising structurally even before these shocks.

The visual evidence from Figures 2 and 3 carries strong implications for fiscal policy. First, reforms should not be judged solely on immediate effects. Policymakers may highlight short-term improvements, yet these can be misleading if long-run outcomes move in the opposite direction. Second, flat taxes in transition economies require compensatory mechanisms to safeguard equity. Options include indexed allowances, targeted transfers, or parallel reforms in social protection. Without such measures, inequality is likely to rise steadily, undermining inclusive growth. Third, the Moldovan case illustrates the importance of transparent communication: clear visuals like Figures 2 and 3 make long-term trends visible, countering the tendency to focus only on immediate outcomes.

Moldova's trajectory offers broader lessons for small transition economies balancing the goals of investment attraction, administrative simplicity, and social equity. The evidence shows that sacrificing progressivity in pursuit of simplicity may yield only temporary fiscal relief, while entrenching inequality that threatens social cohesion and political stability. This insight is especially relevant as Moldova advances its EU accession process, where alignment with European social standards will require credible strategies to reduce disparities and promote inclusiveness.

While the Gini coefficient provides a useful summary measure, future work could extend this analysis by examining distributional effects across income groups. For example, percentile ratios (P90/P10, P50/P10) or income shares of the top decile would reveal whether inequality growth was driven by gains at the top, losses at the bottom, or stagnation in the middle. Complementary approaches, such as synthetic control methods, could strengthen causal claims by comparing Moldova's trajectory with a group of similar countries that retained progressive taxation. Such extensions would deepen the empirical evidence base and provide more granular guidance for policy.

Broader economic events between 2018 and 2023 may have amplified these dynamics. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021 disrupted labor markets and disproportionately affected low-income workers, contributing to rising inequality across many countries, including Moldova. The energy crisis of 2022, coupled with regional instability linked to the war in Ukraine, also placed additional pressure on household budgets, particularly for vulnerable groups. While such shocks are external to the tax reform, the regressive structure of the PIT likely limited the state's fiscal space to respond with redistributive measures, thereby reinforcing the inequality-increasing trend. This interaction between tax policy and external shocks highlights the importance of fiscal resilience and equity in times of crisis.

In light of the broader literature, these findings resonate with studies showing that flat tax systems tend to weaken redistributive capacity and exacerbate inequality over time (Popescu et al., 2019; Wiśniewska-Kuźma, 2020). At the same time, they echo Duncan and Sabirianova's (2016) argument that institutional quality shapes how tax policy translates into equity outcomes: in Moldova, weak administrative capacity and a large informal economy may have magnified the regressive effects of

the flat tax. The evidence also parallels regional experiences, such as Romania's, where flat taxes combined with exemptions and low compliance undermined fiscal equity (Ban & Buciu, 2023).

Taken together, the results suggest that Moldova's 2018 tax reform cannot be understood in isolation. While the ITSA identifies a significant structural break in inequality following the reform, the persistence of rising inequality afterward reflects both the regressive design of the flat tax and its interaction with broader economic vulnerabilities. The policy implication is that restoring progressivity in the PIT, alongside improving tax administration and strengthening social protection, is critical for ensuring that fiscal policy contributes to a more equitable distribution of income.

Conclusions

By running the Interrupted Time Series Analysis (ITSA), this study identified a dual effect of Moldova's 2018 tax reform. Immediately after the reform, the Gini coefficient dropped, indicating a short-term level effect of reduced inequality. However, the trend effect shows that inequality began rising again in the following years, with a steeper upward trajectory than in the pre-reform period. This pattern suggests that while the reform initially generated temporary relief, it ultimately contributed to a sustained increase in inequality. Given the abrupt nature of the taxation reform and the absence of other major domestic policy changes at the time, the timing and magnitude of the observed trend break point to the reform as a significant factor in shaping Moldova's inequality dynamics.

These results reinforce existing concerns in the Moldovan and regional literature. They align with Ionita's (2018) argument that the flat tax disproportionately benefited high-income earners while generating fiscal losses that constrained public budgets. They also support Serduni's (2023) findings that the effective tax burden of wealthy individuals declined sharply, and Hutsebaut's (2021) claim that weak redistribution and high informality were exacerbated by regressive fiscal design. More broadly, the results echo Ban's (2023) critique of flat taxes in post-socialist countries and Wiśniewska-Kuźma's (2020) observation that such systems reduce progressivity and tend to deepen inequality in weaker institutional contexts.

The findings carry important policy implications. They suggest that flat taxation, while administratively simple, undermines the redistributive capacity of the state and limits fiscal space for social spending. The Moldovan case illustrates how regressive tax structures can interact with external shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the energy crisis, to intensify income disparities.

Restoring progressive elements in personal income taxation, strengthening enforcement to reduce informality, and aligning fiscal policy with equity objectives are therefore critical steps for ensuring inclusive growth and convergence with European social standards.

At the same time, this study faces limitations stemming from the small sample size, the absence of a counterfactual, reliance on a single inequality measure, and the assumption of linear and immediate reform effects. Future research could address these shortcomings by incorporating control variables, extending the dataset, and applying comparative methods such as the Synthetic Control Method. Such approaches would help capture broader socio-economic factors and provide more robust evidence on the causal relationship between tax reforms and inequality.

The findings of this study extend beyond the national context and carry significant implications for Moldova's broader economic and political trajectory. The regressive effects of the flat tax reform underscore the importance of aligning fiscal policy with the principles of equity and inclusion enshrined in the European Pillar of Social Rights (PEDS). As the Republic of Moldova advances on its EU integration path, convergence with European social standards requires not only strengthening administrative capacity but also ensuring that fiscal systems promote fairness and cohesion.

The European Union has consistently emphasized the role of progressive taxation and adequate social protection in reducing income inequality and supporting inclusive growth. Comparative evidence from EU member states shows that progressive tax systems are associated with stronger automatic stabilizers, better poverty reduction, and more resilient economies during crises. In contrast, flat tax regimes, particularly in countries with high informality and weak enforcement, tend to exacerbate disparities and limit fiscal space for social investment.

For the Republic of Moldova, this implies that fiscal reforms cannot be evaluated solely on the basis of efficiency or simplicity. A more progressive income tax system, supported by improved compliance and transparency, would strengthen redistribution and enhance the country's ability to address external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the recent energy crisis. Moreover, by restoring progressivity and improving equity outcomes, the Republic of Moldova would take an important step toward meeting EU accession criteria related to social policy, labor markets, and inclusive development.

In this sense, the analysis presented here provides not only an academic contribution but also a policy message: fiscal reforms must be designed to balance efficiency with fairness, and to reinforce the Republic of Moldova's trajectory toward inclusive and sustainable growth within the European Union.

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Moldova and Ukraine's EU path for membership: a new strategy for Europeanization or integration?*

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Abstract: The European Union has engaged proactively with its neighbourhood since the early 2000s, combining the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership with incentive-based conditionality as to export its values and, in selected cases, the prospect of membership. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine marked a critical juncture, accelerating Moldova and Ukraine's EU accession processes at an unprecedented pace. This article examines their accelerated progression from application to the opening of accession negotiations within less than two years. It explores whether this shift reflects a recalibration of conditionality and the emergence of a 'candidate-without-deadline' status; a differentiation of pre-accession as a strategic distancing from Russia; or continuity in formal methodology with exceptional political sequencing. Methodologically, the article is conceptual and documentary. Using a conceptual and documentary approach, it reviews EU primary documents and academic literature on Europeanization, differentiated integration, conditionality, and historical institutionalism, covering the period from 2004 to 2025.

Keywords: enlargement, Moldova, Ukraine, Europeanization

Introduction

The war in Ukraine, which began in 2022, brought a geopolitical turn in the world order, and, more specifically, in the case of the European Union (EU), the urgency in reviewing its foreign policy towards its borders. Geographically located close to the EU, the Eastern neighbours have been on the EU's radar in its search for cooperation or development promotion initiatives, and the Union has been engaged in supporting their development since the transition towards democracy.

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*This paper is part of a wider research agenda the authors have been working on the Europeanization of Moldova and Ukraine. Previously this year, an immediate version of this paper was published at *Relações Internacionais R:I* journal, in Portuguese, as part of the authors' research agenda. (see Renne & Tostes, 2025) This contribution comprises a more detailed on the methodological note, as well as further thoughts on the final considerations.

Concomitantly, the region is also under Russia's attention, and demographic issues stem from the reorganisation at the end of the Cold War, as the Russian diaspora living on the borders of the new countries founded as new liberal democracies oriented toward the EU influence. Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova are two multi-ethnic countries having unsolved separatism issues, and that have recently become a focus of territorial disputes, even before the invasion of Ukraine by Russia.

The Union has proactively had policies to engage and relate with countries outside of its borders, especially to the East and South. Considering the limits of EU enlargement, as well as the lack of projections for the membership of several third countries, the EU external governance can be noted from EU efforts to generate actions and promote its norms abroad, reinforcing European values of democracy, liberal economy and democratic institutions. Policies for the neighbourhood were essential strategies to maintain a radius of institutional security and cooperation with the region, seen as a zone of Russian influence, with more or less proximity to the European liberal model. The recent geopolitical crises have brought about a critical juncture (Collier & Munck, 2024; Pierson, 2000; 2004) and a shift in strategy towards the Eastern borders. The war in Europe appeared as a critical juncture, bringing uncertainties that required choices in a short time, a few unanticipated and provoking consequences with no return.

In the article, we consider one of the most relevant characteristics of the concept of a critical juncture, which is the fact that it „may involve a relatively brief period in which one direction or another is taken or an extended period” (Collier & Collier, 2002, p.27). The EU political authorities have made choices that affect „the outcome of interests” (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007, p. 348) and should have lasting effects. In short, the decision to create differentiated accession negotiations appeared as a new trajectory in the EU's history of candidacies.

Ukraine and Moldova are two of the EU's neighbours that hold frozen conflicts, influencing the countries' political stability (Tostes, 2022). Although there is no clear term for Ukraine and Moldova to meet the Copenhagen criteria for EU accession, the European Council of June 2022 has decided to grant Ukraine and Moldova candidate status, just a few months after the start of the war. Why and how did the European Council conduct it? Has the EU created new criteria for accepting membership applications? Or should we consider the accession negotiations period as a new strategy for EU influence by granting pre-accession benefits without any rigorous pressure to speed up compliance with the sectors and chapters of the negotiations?

In examining the dynamics of membership within the EU, Fromage (2024) focuses on the ‘uniqueness’ of membership conditions, or the ‘unitary status’ of Member States. She suggests there is diversity and, to some extent, differentiation in conditions that can be analysed around four aspects of the ‘tensions facing the concept of a unitary and formal EU membership’. These analyses are complemented by a reflection on the concept of membership itself (Fromage, 2024).

Since the classical Stubb (1996) contribution on Differentiated Integration (DI), we have seen the foundation of research and debates on DI associated with the protection of diversity, or the combination of political, geographic and geopolitical particularities by states that would not like to be tied to EU-level measures or policies. Historical examples of DI include the opt-outs accepted by some members regarding the adoption of the euro or entry into the Schengen area. The categorisation of DI, as the risks and benefits (Kroger & Loughran, 2021; Schimmelfennig, 2019) of it are valuable reflections on the current and future EU scenario, conducted through a diversity of policy implementation (Bellamy & Kröger, 2017; Bellamy et al., 2022).

Despite the inspiring and current debate on DI, the article proposes that there is a novelty concerning the function and status of candidacies without a deadline for their completion. This article argues that these new candidacies of Eastern countries, former members of the USSR, are part of a strategy to bring countries that hold frozen conflicts (Coyle, 2019; European Parliament, 2016) within their territory closer to the EU and farther away from Russia.

This paper is divided into four parts, in addition to this introduction and the final considerations. Firstly, we highlight the importance of neighbourhood policies to the EU. With that in mind, we ground our research in the Europeanization literature and explain how the phenomenon of Europeanization can also be applied to countries outside the Union. The new geopolitical juncture affected the Eastern Partnership Policy (EaP), which was once launched to make the six neighbouring countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine) closer to the EU. New candidacies to EU membership and the rise in intentions from others appeared as a non-anticipated consequence of the war in Ukraine. In this research, we focus on the cases of Moldova and Ukraine. Both of which were granted their candidatures shortly after the start of the war, while simultaneously being countries directly affected by it.

The second section aims to illuminate the internal socio-political complexity in Ukraine and Moldova, which has affected their interaction with the EU since the beginning of the EaP and the meaning of the change of status of the countries when they become candidates for membership in the EU. Following this, we analyse the shift from neighbourhood Europeanization relationship to candidate status and accession countries, conceptualising the war event as a critical juncture for the change (Collier & Munck, 2024; Pierson, 2000; 2004). The final section presents the preliminary findings of this research agenda. It draws on possibilities for the paths these candidacy processes might take, considering the limits of the research because of the developments so far.

1. Methodology and contribution

This paper is conceptual and documentary. A structured, focused review is applied to investigate the cases of Moldova and Ukraine. These two countries have

been selected because they (a) belong to the EaP, (b) face active or frozen conflicts, and (c) advanced from application to opened negotiations at a record pace (2022–2024). The temporal scope is 2004–2025, spanning the ENP’s launch, the EaP, and the post-2022 wartime context. In order to assess it, both primary and secondary sources are used. Primary sources include European Council/Council conclusions; Commission Opinions and Enlargement Packages; factsheets on the accession methodology and chapters/clusters; and documents on Global Gateway and NDICI-Global Europe. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed literature on Europeanization, DI, conditionality, and historical institutionalism. Recent, authoritative documents and classic theoretical references have been prioritised, and where multiple official versions exist, the choice was to rely on the most recent.

A process-tracing logic is used to map key decisions and their sequencing (application → candidacy → negotiations), triangulating official texts with scholarly interpretations. As for this work, the 2022 invasion is interpreted as a critical juncture that altered the EU’s choice set and payoffs, and it assesses whether observed choices imply a methodological change or a political reprioritisation.

This article aims to contribute in three ways. First, conceptually, it proposes the notion of a ‘candidate-without-deadline’ configuration to capture situations in which candidacy and negotiation openings are granted for strategic reasons. At the same time, credible accession timelines remain open-ended pending security and fundamentals – an unprecedented situation until recent years. This adds precision to debates on Europeanization outside membership and to DI within an enlarged Union.

Second, empirically, it offers a structured mapping of Moldova’s and Ukraine’s status evolution over time (application → candidacy → opened negotiations) and situates it in a comparative perspective, clarifying in what ways the acceleration departs from or aligns with earlier enlargement cycles. Third, methodologically, it articulates a transparent documentary approach—sources, selection, and limitations—that can be replicated or extended to other cases (e.g., Georgia, Western Balkans).

It is noted that the ongoing negotiations limit the availability of granular, comparable indicators of chapter-level progress. The articles’ inferences are therefore bounded and subject to revision as events unfold. This work does not attempt quantitative measurement of compliance; instead, it focuses on conceptual clarity and causal narratives consistent with historical institutionalism.

2. The Neighbourhood has always mattered - Europeanization then and now

In addition to the EU’s eastward expansion, since 2004, the former Soviet republics have been challenged by the influences of two different models of institutions and norms. A historical example is the Baltic Republics, which, upon joining the EU in 2004, became part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

(NATO), consolidating their adherence to the political model and international coalitions that distanced the countries from Russia after the end of the USSR.

However, not only did membership become an instrument of EU influence, but other mechanisms of Europeanization and specific policies for the EU's eastern borders gained prominence from the 2000s onwards.

There is a broad debate on the EU's effects and influence on its member States and vice versa. Radaelli (2000) and Exadaktylos and Radaelli (2009; 2012) drew on the debate on research design and causal analysis in European integration by acknowledging Europeanization as a sub-field to be considered.

As European integration advanced, the EU has developed a special interest not only in influencing and creating a governance model for its member states, but also for third countries close to it. It was even more so after the 2004 enlargement. In this sense, it is not wrong to say that even „countries outside the EU are also going through the same process of change—for example, because they are part of the global process of diffusion” (Levi-Faur, 2004, as cited in Radaelli, 2000; Saurugger, 2005). Gawrich et al. (2010) understand there are three distinct phases and dimensions of Europeanization research, each new dimension drawing on and adding to the previous one. These are Membership Europeanization (the impact of the EU on member States); Enlargement Europeanization (the impact of the EU on countries with a clear EU-membership perspective); Neighbourhood Europeanization (the impact of the EU on „outsiders”, countries with no immediate accession perspective) (Gawrich et al., 2010).

This enlargement context changed the geopolitical dynamics in the region, when many of the recent democratic Eastern European countries from the former Soviet Union joined the integrated region, creating new foreign policy objectives for the EU. A new EU foreign policy toward its boarders included the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) as a EU programme for EU's South and Eastern neighbours to foster development, political stability, and democracy launched in 2004. Soon after, the EaP appeared as a pragmatic EU foreign policy orientation for a region in geopolitical struggle between European and Russian influence (Tostes & Renni, 2021). Greater market integration under the ENP and enhanced political dialogue with the EU was seen by Eastern neighbours as a positive alternative for partnerships and cooperation.

In Europeanization literature, Börzel and Risse (2003) propose a theoretical framework with two types of research design, known as top-down and bottom-up models of the EU spreading its values, norms, institutions, policies, and ideas. In this article we consider the ENP, the EaP and the agreements within its framework as an example of top-down Europeanization process. Europeanization processes do not occur exclusively with EU members, there is also a process of influencing countries at the borders of the EU. The EU aspired to create a „ring of well governed, stable, democratic and prosperous states in the neighbourhood, while avoiding talks over EU accession for countries like Ukraine or Moldova” (Batt et al. 2003, as cited in

Popescu, 2005). The ENP is an instrument the EU has for developing countries in its neighbourhood that are willing to be closer to the EU. Under the ENP umbrella, the Union proposes to its neighbours strengthened political partnership (Popescu 2005, p. 35).

The ENP process is supported by an Action Plan (AP) prepared for neighbouring countries that are not in the EU's enlargement agenda. The APs introduced specific degrees of goals in different countries in order to implement ENP's policies. The APs would draw on a common set of principles and bilateral relations to contribute for regional and sub-regional cooperation to reinforce efforts to meet the objectives of the ESS.

3. Understanding Moldova and Ukraine as *near abroad* countries

Both Ukraine and Moldova are non-EU member countries in Eastern Europe that retain part of their population culturally and ethnically aligned with Russia. They have been referred to as *near abroad* countries (Charillon, 2004). The author highlights the use of the term *near abroad* to indicate the border zone, in designation of countries located in a sphere of influence relevant to guaranteeing security and achieving conditions for implementing European Community policy. EU's incentive policies, trade concessions and aid for *near abroad* countries are usually conditional on progress towards democratic consolidation and protection of human rights, as well as the establishment of a free trade system and standards aligned with the liberal democratic model (Charillon, 2004, pp. 257-258). Nonetheless, the concept was first coined to refer to the foreign policy of the USSR (Hopf, 1999; Skak, 1996), seeking to describe the Soviet position on its geographic neighbourhood, considered a priority for security and for key sectors of domestic policy, and not just for its foreign policy.

The two countries have not represented a strong or stable economy since their formation. Ukraine is one of the top three grain exporters in the world (OECD, 2021). Geographically, it guards the passage from the Black Sea to the Azov Sea, with an exit to the Mediterranean (through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits), which is why we have seen historically disputed events in the region since before the Russian imperial period. In turn, Moldova's economy has struggled since the country's independence. Its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has fallen by over 70 per cent within a decade of independence, and the country lacks domestic sources of energy (Ronnas & Orlova, 2000).

As different national projects in Ukraine had to coexist since its foundation in 1991, political leaders alternated between pro-Russian and pro-EU governments. In 2014, a sequence of tensions and domestic events that had been ongoing for nearly a decade, since the Orange Revolution of 2004 (D'Anieri, 2005; Dickinson, 2020), culminated in a territorial split with regional and global consequences. The Orange Revolution of 2004, which occurred in the same year as the EU's enlargement, understood in its complexity, contributes to the understanding of the motivators and

consequences of the Revolution of February 2014, designated as Euromaidan Revolution. Both of Ukraine's recent revolutions have been marked by social divisions and political alignments by the contending influences of Russia and the West, initially more represented by the rapprochement with Europe than with the United States of America (USA).

Although the 2014 Revolution culminated in the electoral victory of Petro Poroschenko, from the party European Solidarity, it left a legacy of territorial conflicts with the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the self-proclamation of autonomous Russian republics in the east of the country. In 2016, a new Global Strategy (EUGS) was launched, replacing the former 2003 Security Strategy. Among other issues, the document noted EU-Russia relations in the context of a weaker balance among interests, interdependence, and ambitions to influence countries bordering the EU. Incompatible interests became clear (Danilov, 2017), and an escalation of tensions culminated in conflicts in Ukraine and, finally, the invasion of the country in February 2022.

Moldova also faced internal contradictions on its national project, with a frozen conflict to date. Moldova declared its independence in 1991 while facing internal conflicts in the left-bank areas and south of the country. With cultural and ethnic foundations, opinions diverged between an approximation to the West and Romania and the identification with Russia. From the civil war emerged a devise in the country, with the Transnistria region governed as the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR) and keeping close ties with Russia since the ceasefire in 1992¹.

The Republic of Moldova has alternated between governments more aligned with the West and those more aligned with Russia. Nevertheless, the country has maintained its neutral position, as outlined in its 1994 Constitution. The breakout of the war in Ukraine also posed risks for the neighbouring country with its own unsolved internal issues. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has increased concerns about the possibility of neighbouring Moldova being next on the Kremlin's incursion, fuelling Transnistria's expectation and highlighting the country's potential vulnerability to Moscow (Lutsevych & Pasha, 2024). Since the beginning of the war, Moldova has also faced national elections and a referendum about its future membership of the EU. In this sense, we understand that Moldova and Ukraine are both in a peculiar condition under the new geopolitical scenario, hence our interest in focusing on these cases. Lutsevych and Pasha (2024) consider Moldova's internal conditions as opportunities for Russia to strengthen its influence over the country and to undermine its possible EU integration. In another parallel to Ukraine, the EU decided to open accession negotiations with Moldova in December 2023, and

¹ The ceasefire was signed in July 1992 and established the trilateral control of a joint Moldovan, Russian and Transnistrian peacekeeping mission of the border area and ensured the *de facto* independence of the PMR which it enjoys until today (Walters, 1997, as cited in Orbán, 2002).

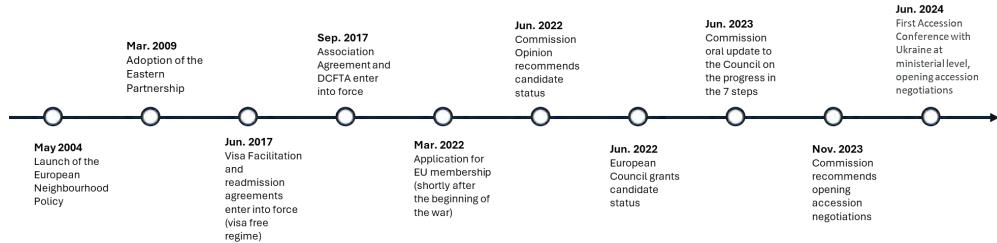
so far, both countries have advanced at a similar pace on this membership path. The figures below summarise the main milestones in this path, where it is possible to identify parallels between the two countries.

Figure 1. Moldova-EU relationship timeline



Source: authors' representation

Figure 2. Ukraine-EU relationship timeline



Source: authors' representation

Since 2022, Ukraine and Moldova have opened exceptional conditions for candidacy and accession negotiations. This is because the criteria for fulfilling reforms in sectors and chapters of the accession negotiations are not expected to be met without the end of the war. The figures above show the timeline of the steps completed for the start of receiving pre-accession benefits. However, there is no progress on fulfilling the fundamental criteria for EU membership.

4. Critical junctures and responses

Arguments about the concept of critical junctures have become increasingly relevant in foreign policy studies. The concept's application can vary in comparative studies, helping to trace choices and different trajectories and consequences (Blyth, 2002; Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Capoccia, 2016). The EU has answered a few critical junctures over the last years, which help explain the exceptionalities this article introduces.

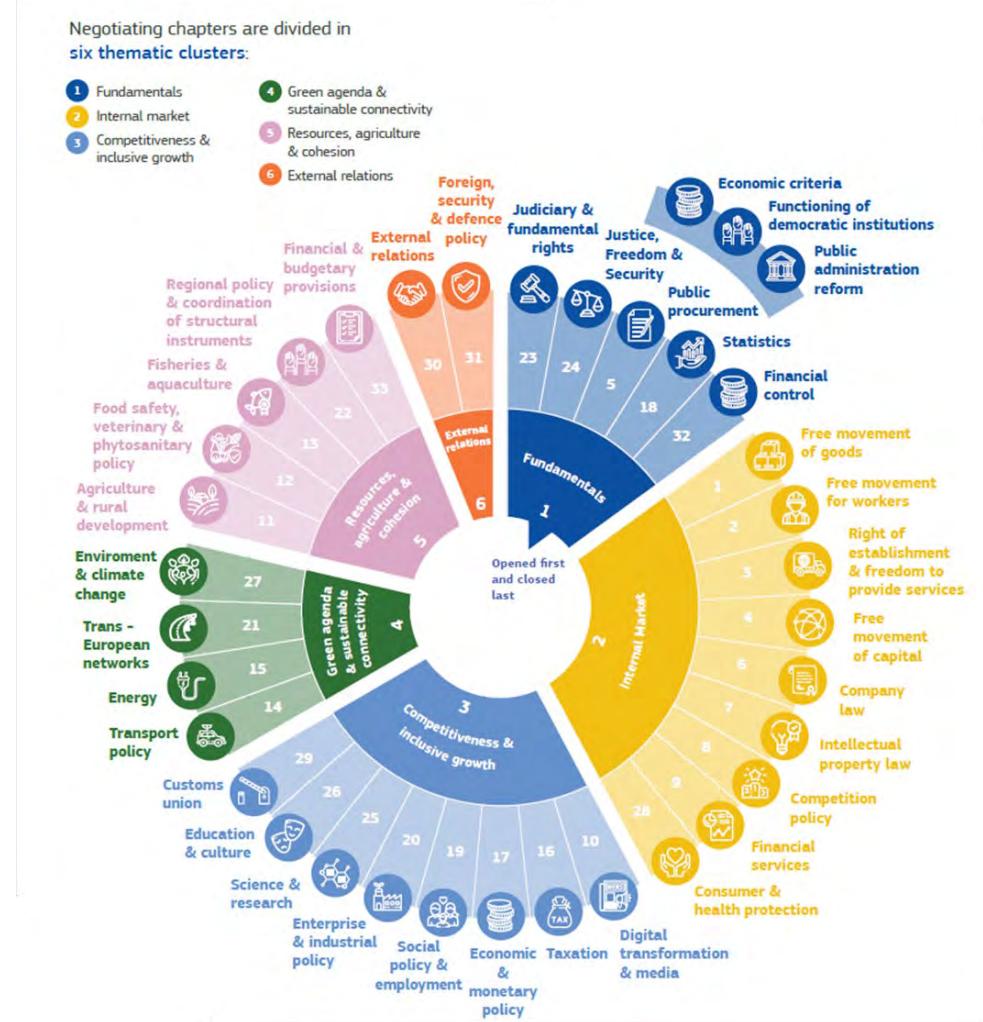
The EU Commission President von der Leyen launched a value-based strategy in December 2021, entitled the „Global Gateway Strategy”, at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic also represented a critical juncture for the configuration of the

geopolitical landscape. Under that scenario, the overall objectives of the Global Gateway were to maintain and expand political and economic cooperation, support partners, and improve infrastructure and connectivity in regional and international contexts undergoing a green and digital transition. Among other instruments designed to meet the objectives of the global gateway was the new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI-Global Europe) (European Commission, 2021). The NDICI-Global Europe was also a response to the COVID-19 crisis to contribute to the achievement of the international commitments of the 2030 Agenda and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the Paris Agreement. According to the Commission, the NDICI-Global Europe „is based on the ENP objectives and priorities outlined in the regional strategies, such as the renewed Eastern Partnership and the new Agenda for the Mediterranean” (European Commission, 2021). Currently, it is considered the EU's main financing instrument for external cooperation aimed at eradicating poverty and promoting sustainable development, prosperity, peace, and stability in third countries.

The war has presented a new challenge to be addressed under the NDICI-Global Europe and the increased international pressure for full support for Ukraine. Initially, expectations for a quicker war led to discussions on the candidacy of EAP countries, such as Ukraine, being postponed. However, time has led European leaders to recalculate their ability and urgency to have more influence on Ukraine's current and future political status, which has been followed by the candidacy requests of Moldova and Georgia.

However, there are no clear deadlines on the horizon of the accession process, considering the atypical timings this enlargement process is taking. In order to become an EU member, countries must submit a membership application to the Council of the EU for the yearly review and be granted candidate status, with the agreement of all member States, to begin formal negotiations for accession. Then, membership negotiations begin, a process in which the country prepares to adapt its internal functions and implement EU laws and regulations. The negotiations follow chapters to implement the *acquis communautaire* in six thematic clusters: fundamental thematic, which requires the accomplishment of economic criteria, the functioning of democratic institutions, and public administration reforms. Negotiations on each cluster open as a whole; however, „progress under the Fundamentals’ cluster determines the overall pace of negotiations” (EU NeighboursEast, 2024), as shown in Figure 3. The others are considered associated with internal market, competitiveness and inclusive growth, green agenda and sustainable connectivity, resources, agriculture, cohesion and external relations.

Figure 3. Sectors and chapters of accession negotiations



Source: EU Factsheet, EU NeighboursEast (2024)

Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate status in June 2022 and received the recommendation to open accession negotiations in November 2023. This marks a record pace in moving forward on negotiations compared to existing cases, where, on average, it took nine years overall, and the beginning of negotiations, on average, took three years to start (Leppert, 2022). However, Figure 3 illustrates how far the countries' candidacy status is from accomplishing, within a predictable period of time, the four fundamental (the opening and the last to be closed) criteria for accession negotiation.

In line with the reflection on the need to expand and introduce different experiences of EU membership, the exceptional consideration of admitting countries previously outside the association forecast leads us to examine which kind of status will be revealed by the condition of being candidate without clear previsions for accomplishing the following stages of association: to complete formal negotiations and implement reforms to meet the EU criteria for a full membership. There are advanced debates on DI, due to divergences in policies between member states, recognising the conditions and capacities of countries to coordinate with regional standards. The coordination of non-supranational standards is an ongoing effort that occurs in parallel with the construction of European law. The impacts of differentiation on the Union can be debated (Leruth et al., 2022), even considering previous membership paths. With the expectation of exceptions for new members from the East, the problem of DI may worsen.

The EU's opening statement at the Ministerial meeting on the first Intergovernmental Conference on the Accession of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine states that the negotiations aim at both countries „integrally adopting the EU *acquis* and ensuring its full implementation and enforcement” with a revised enlargement methodology and focusing on the fundamental reforms (Council of the European Union, 2024a; 2024b). At the current stage, it is expected that Moldova and Ukraine will start preparing to implement EU laws and standards in the areas of judiciary & fundamental rights, justice, freedom & security, public procurement, financial control, and statistics.

Considering the average time to complete the membership process so far has been nine years. For countries without active or frozen conflicts, it is not expected that Moldova's and Ukraine's membership processes will take less time. The swift advance from candidate status to the start of accession negotiations does not necessarily indicate a change in the EU's methodology – it is on the accession process that the candidate countries need to align with the *acquis Communautaire* by implementing changes in their laws and regulations as to align with the EU, as well as to achieve minimum economy thresholds.

However, the accession process can be understood as not purely technical, but also political (Plesca, 2024). Depending on how the negotiations unfold, the current situation of Moldova and Ukraine can be considered a new EU strategy for Europeanization. This enlargement process is not comparable to either other candidacy experiences or norms export dynamics, although it signals a different degree of approximation with EU norms and values.

Final considerations: from neighbourhood Europeanization to accession

The EU has long sought to extend its influence beyond its borders through the diffusion of values, norms, institutions, and policies. This process, often referred to as Europeanization, encompasses a wide range of mechanisms through which the

EU shapes the political and institutional landscapes of neighboring countries. As Montesano et al. (2016) emphasize, within the framework of the ENP, Europeanization is closely tied to the EU's normative power—its ability to promote stability, development, and democratic governance in countries of strategic interest.

The EU's ambition to foster a ring of stable, democratic states along its eastern and southern borders has been a consistent theme in its external relations. Moldova and Ukraine, situated at the geopolitical crossroads between the EU and Russia, have become focal points of this strategy. Their location, combined with internal vulnerabilities and external pressures, has made them particularly relevant to the EU's broader goals of regional stability and security. Montesano et al. (2016) remark that the inclusion of Moldova in the ENP in 2003 and the EU-Moldova AP from 2005 can be considered evidence of the EU's aim to invest in countries with separatist movements and demographic issues. These initiatives were further developed with the EaP policies from 2009, leading to the signature of an AA and a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). Of the six EaP countries, only Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine have such type agreements with the EU.

Since the establishment of dedicated policies, the EU's relationship with both Ukraine and Moldova has deepened and widened in scope, even though there were periods in which the political leadership were less aligned with the West. Despite their proximity to the EU, the relationship between the two countries was primarily one of cooperation. With actions and funds invested to align regulatory frameworks, commercial standards, and to approximate Moldova and Ukraine to the EU's minimal standards and promote cooperation in security and home affairs, the relationship followed a track of foreign policy under the ENP and EaP policies, which have been revisited over time to adapt to this evolving relationship.

However, membership was not on the table for either. Both countries faced a delicate scenario regarding political stability. There has been a constant dispute of influences in the region, alternating periods of more significant Russian or European influence. The period from 2014 to 2019, despite the annexation of Crimea by Russia, was marked by oscillations between actions of cooperation and tensions between Western supporters in Ukraine and pro-Russia politics and defenders of a closer alignment of the country with Putin's Administration and protection. The status of frozen conflicts regarding territorial rights in Ukraine, particularly to the south and east, as well as diplomatic relations between the EU and Russia, may have impacted the country's political stability. As for Moldova, in addition to maintaining the frozen conflict situation in the Transnistria region, the country faced internal political issues related to corruption and bank fraud that became public (Mukherjee, 2018).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a dramatic shift in the geopolitical landscape. For the first time, the EU was confronted with a full-scale war on its borders, prompting a reassessment of its enlargement strategy and neighborhood policies. The invasion underscored the urgency of reinforcing the EU's eastern frontier and supporting countries that share its values and aspirations.

In this context, Moldova and Ukraine were granted candidate status in June 2022—a decision that would have been unthinkable just a few years earlier. This moment represents a critical juncture in EU external action, where geopolitical imperatives have accelerated processes that were previously stalled or deprioritized.

Since 2022 and with no prospects for the end of the war in Ukraine, the debate on accession negotiations for previously blocked candidates, such as some Western Balkan countries, has been reopened, and enlargement has reached the top of the EU agenda as it is expected to discuss new paths for accession negotiations. As a result of the new European agenda on enlargement, motivated by the decision of the European Council to grant Ukraine and Moldova candidate status, a report entitled „Fit for 35? Reforming the Politics and Institutions of the EU for an Enlarged Union” (Börzel et al., 2023) was published after bringing together some of the leading European researchers on European integration, who reflect on Europeanization and DI and inspired by the debates within the framework of the European Council in Granada in 2023.

In this article, we asked whether the accelerated candidacies of Moldova and Ukraine represent a fundamentally new status within the EU enlargement framework or a strategic deployment of existing tools in response to extraordinary circumstances. Our analysis suggests that while the legal and methodological foundations of enlargement remain consistent — particularly the *acquis communautaire* and conditionality principles — there has been a significant innovation in sequencing. The granting of candidate status and the opening of negotiations were used not merely as technical steps but as geopolitical instruments to stabilize the region and signal commitment to democratic partners under threat.

This approach has resulted in what we term a „candidate-without-deadline” configuration. Unlike traditional candidates, Moldova and Ukraine have entered a prolonged pre-accession phase characterized by deep engagement but without clear timelines for membership. This model blends conditionality with security-driven differentiation, allowing the EU to maintain its standards while responding flexibly to geopolitical realities. The emerging evidence suggests that this *de facto* status may become a more common feature of EU enlargement, particularly in cases where strategic interests outweigh immediate institutional readiness.

The experience of Moldova and Ukraine is broadly compatible with existing theories of Europeanization and DI, but it also stretches their conceptual boundaries. Europeanization, traditionally understood as the domestic adaptation to EU norms and rules, must now account for the role of geopolitical urgency and external threats in shaping accession dynamics. Similarly, DI, which focuses on the coexistence of multiple levels of integration within the EU, must consider how pre-accession differentiation can serve both functional and strategic purposes. The cases of Moldova and Ukraine foreground geopolitical logics within a conditionality framework, pointing to a more layered and flexible Union.

This article contributes to the literature by offering a complementary reflection on differentiation in the EU. Beyond the expected forms of DI within the Union, the candidacies of Moldova and Ukraine illustrate a new type of differentiation at the accession stage. This status fulfills a distinct objective: it grants candidacy not solely based on technical readiness but as a strategic gesture of support and alignment. It also demonstrates how the accession process itself can be a tool of European influence and Europeanization, even in the absence of immediate membership prospects.

Importantly, neither the existing literature on DI nor on Europeanization provides a comprehensive analytical model for understanding this new form of candidacy. The impacts of the accession negotiation period, particularly in the context of active conflict and geopolitical competition, require new categories and frameworks. Moldova and Ukraine's experiences signal the emergence of a potentially new niche in Europeanization studies — one that integrates security considerations, strategic sequencing, and differentiated engagement. This niche warrants further investigation, both to refine theoretical models and to inform policy decisions in an increasingly complex and contested European neighborhood.

In conclusion, the EU's response to the war in Ukraine and its engagement with Moldova and Ukraine reflect a significant evolution in its external action. While rooted in established principles, the Union has demonstrated a capacity for strategic adaptation, using enlargement tools to advance geopolitical stability and democratic resilience. The „candidate-without-deadline” model may become a template for future engagements, offering a flexible yet principled approach to accession in uncertain times. As the EU continues to navigate the challenges of enlargement, institutional reform, and global competition, the experiences of Moldova and Ukraine will remain central to understanding the future of European integration.

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Venice Commission standards and the Romanian party system: imperative mandate and majoritarian tyranny

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Abstract: Since its founding in 1990, the Venice Commission has advised post-communist states, including Romania, on constitutional reforms. Although Romania was not a full member initially, it received guidance during the drafting of its first democratic constitution. This research examines how well Romanian legislation aligns with the Commission's standards on democratic governance and political party regulation, identifying any gaps or inconsistencies. Given Romania's totalitarian past, special focus is placed on protecting political opposition, freedom of expression within parties, and the limits of imperative mandates. The study uses legal analysis, case studies on political controversies and Constitutional Court decisions, and reviews from think tanks—especially following the 2015 political party law reform. It concludes by proposing legislative directions to better align Romania with European democratic norms.

Keywords: Venice Commission, Romanian party system, democratic governance, imperative mandate, political pluralism

Introduction

This paper aims to explain the complex interactions between the new, post-communist normative body regarding the organization of political parties and the communist legacies upon which these regulations were imposed, contributing to a broader discussion about the slow consolidation of the party system and the absence of genuine intra-party democracy. The Romanian legal framework will be studied from the perspective of historical institutionalism, which focuses on how individual choices concerning reform are shaped by institutions, making them resistant to change (Hall & Taylor, 1996). By adopting this historical-institutionalist perspective on post-communism and political culture and values, the study will focus on how the

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various iterations of the law on the organization of political parties have responded to the Venice Commission's recommendations and shaped collective behaviours, expressed through the statutes adopted by parties and, subsequently, the decisions of party executives. Leaning on older contributions to the argument that law is a paradigmatic example of institutionally embedded values and that courts are political institutions, with a lasting impact on policy-making, state building or the legitimization process (Shapiro & Stone, 1994), this article will also provide an assessment of the concrete impact on party politics that this voluntary cooperation body at the European level has had on the development of the regulatory framework.

This article employs a qualitative research design, combining legal-institutional analysis with case studies. Primary data include constitutional texts, party legislation (1989, 1996, 2003, 2015), Constitutional Court decisions, and Venice Commission reports and guidelines. These are complemented by secondary sources, such as academic literature and think tank reports, particularly those analysing the 2015 reform. The study applies process-tracing to follow the evolution of Romanian party law and situates findings within the framework of historical institutionalism, highlighting how communist legacies shape reform trajectories. Case studies of major controversies and rulings were chosen because they illustrate tensions between formal alignment with Venice Commission standards and actual political practices. While this approach allows for in-depth analysis of critical junctures, it is limited by reliance on documentary sources and the interpretive nature of assessing compliance with non-binding international standards. Furthermore, Venice Commission recommendations are often „soft law,” so measuring compliance requires interpretation.

To ensure consistency with the entire research on mechanisms for ensuring internal democracy, the study on the degree of conformity of the Romanian regulatory framework with the Venice Commission's recommendations will address the same dimensions regarding organizational structure, candidate and leader selection, and the contribution and control exercised by internal party bodies over the political program and its translation into political action.

Since it was established in 1990, the Venice Commission (the European Commission for Democracy through Law) has served as an advisory body to the Council of Europe, aiming to support constitutional reforms in post-communist countries. Although Romania was not yet a full member, it benefited from recommendations as early as the drafting of its first democratic constitution. The purpose of this research is to answer two questions: to what extent does Romanian legislation reflect the Venice Commission's standards on democratic governance and political party regulation, and whether there are inconsistencies or deficiencies in how Romania applies these recommendations.

This policy area is „so full of policy and courts that one has no choice but to confront them” (Shapiro & Stone, 1994). Given Romania's totalitarian past, as well as that of other non-member states that have received guidance since the 1990s in

strengthening their pro-European path through the promotion of the rule of law, democracy, and the republican model of representative, pluralistic democracy, this paper will pay particular attention to how internal contestation is tolerated or not, from guaranteeing freedom of expression of opinions within political parties to banning imperative mandates. The assumption underlying this study is that the institutionalization of elections and freedoms can be considered synonymous with fulfilling the conditions of „polyarchy” (Dahl, 1971). However, As Guillermo O’Donnell (O’Donnel, 2002) recommends, I will avoid comparing with idealized Western standards of polyarchy consolidation, based on observations of older democracies, which may lead to the generalization of the „underdevelopment” label but, consistently with earlier positions expressed by Radu Carp (2013), I will make a case of thoroughly explaining why current restrictions on legal registration of new political parties are both unconstitutional, limiting the right to vote and be elected, and non-compliant with Venice Commission recommendations.

The study by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004) made a lasting impression in Europeanisation studies because it succeeded in advancing a different approach in comparative studies, one that focused less on the results than on the mechanisms by which the European Union succeeded in transferring norms and rules to Central and Eastern European candidate countries during the pre-accession period. Their main conclusion - that the transfer of European rules takes place when conditionality is clear, monitoring is strict, and the costs of non-compliance are higher than those of compliance, or, in other words, that the EU’s transformative power depends on the attractiveness of accession and the institutional capacity of candidate states to implement reforms, supports earlier debate over the slow and hesitant adherence to pluralist, democratic norms in the first years of transition.

Democratic conditionality is one of the mechanisms available to the EU, referring to adherence to the union’s fundamental principles: liberal democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. This type of conditionality was essential in the 1990s, in the context of post-communist transformations in Central and Eastern Europe, with the main external incentive of strengthening institutional relations with the EU (association and then accession negotiations). However, once accession negotiations began, democratic conditionality became secondary, although the European Commission continued its monitoring. Of all conditionalities, the democratic ones were the weakest, so governments with authoritarian tendencies preferred to reject the offer of accession rather than bargain giving up some or all their power through the adoption of liberal democratic rules. National leaders estimated that the power costs generated by conformation to the *acquis conditionality* - the transposition of technical and sectoral EU norms- would be lower and would not directly affect internal political power structures, and were, thus, less hesitant in accepting it.

Specifically, regarding the impact of EU conditionality on democratization in Central and Eastern Europe, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier’s (2004) study highlights a paradoxical effect: during the accession process, legislative activity in

candidate countries focused more on the formal transposition of the EU acquis, resulting in reduced space for substantial parliamentary debate and real competition between political parties. The proliferation of autonomous state agencies, imposed by the technocratic logic of alignment with EU norms contributed to weakening political institutions' accountability to voters. The EU accession thus had an ambivalent impact on democracy: while it contributed to the adoption of formal democratic institutions, it simultaneously undermined them by, transferring power to supranational structures and technocratic agencies, reducing space for internal political deliberation and widespread understanding of and adherence to democratic values.

Heather Grabbe's (2006) work supports a complementary view. According to her study, EU conditionality played a significant transformative role, especially by linking the prospect of EU accession with the adoption of democratic values and institutional reforms. However, she too admits that the EU's impact was often diluted by internal political resistance, authoritarian institutional legacies, and the reduced administrative capacity of some states to implement reforms effectively. In some cases, conditionality only led to formal compliance, where democratic norms were adopted at the legal level but without a profound transformation of democratic practices.

Grabbe (2006) emphasizes that, despite this perception, there are very few clear examples where the European Union has caused democratic change through the direct application of sanctions or by withdrawing benefits. Moreover, during the Eastern enlargement, the EU did not have a well-defined set of political values of its own but rather technocratic models of public policies. Nevertheless, the EU's influence cannot be ignored. The so-called „demonstration effect” of Western democracies had a significant impact in candidate countries, and the attractiveness of EU accession reinforced their commitment to the political values promoted by bodies such as the Council of Europe, especially in the areas of democracy, human rights, and minority protection.

1. The constitutional context – opening the electoral competition after 40 years of totalitarianism

Romania benefited from the guidance of a task force of the European Commission for Democracy through Law as early as 1990, when rapporteurs for Romania issued the first recommendations to the parliamentary committee tasked with drafting the original version of the Romanian Constitution. Simultaneous processes were also underway at the time in Poland, Bulgaria, Albania, Estonia, and Latvia. Following an open dialogue with representatives of the targeted states, to formulate recommendations for institutional arrangements they could adopt, the Working Group on Constitutional Justice researched the mechanisms of constitutional control already in place in older democracies. The report, „Models of Constitutional Jurisdiction” (Steinberger, 1991) presented to the plenary session of

the Venice Commission in May 1991, advanced the recommendation to establish permanent Constitutional Courts, especially in new democracies. Their responsibilities were to include verifying the constitutionality of laws, resolving conflicts between central and regional state authorities, and protecting individuals' constitutional rights.

As noted by Cristian Preda in his work on the relationship between voting and power, and on the institutionalization of the concepts of citizenship and political representation, constitutionalism, the separation of powers, and the legal structuring and practical organization of voting have been distinguishing elements in the construction of the Romanian nation since the modern era, though this phenomenon has mostly been studied in Romania through historiographical tools (Preda, 2011, p. 18). The author credits the National Salvation Front Council with reinventing political pluralism through Decree No. 8 of December 31, 1989, which introduced minimal conditions for recognizing a political party (Decret-lege nr. 8 /1989 [Decree-law no.8/1989]). This was the legal provision that allowed the registration and legal recognition of the first 30 political parties that were also invited to join the Provisional Council of National Unity (CPUN). CPUN would go on to propose the first legislative framework for organizing parliamentary elections using a proportional representation system. The May 1990 elections established a Constituent Assembly tasked with drafting the first post-revolutionary constitutional text, through a debate held between July 11, 1990, and November 21, 1991 (Preda, 2011, p. 295).

It is worth remembering that the last Constitution to affirm the freedoms of association and assembly before the communist regime was the 1938 Constitution, issued by King Carol II, which, however, inaugurated an authoritarian monarchy. After a hiatus of over 50 years, during which the Constitutions of 1948, 1952, and 1965 not only failed to recognize pluralism but explicitly stated that „In the Socialist Republic of Romania, the political leading force of the entire society is the Romanian Communist Party” (Sbârnă, 2012), the 1991 Constitution, adopted by the Romanian Parliament, became the first constitutional act to state that the form of government was a republic and that „Romania is a democratic and social state governed by the rule of law, in which human dignity, human rights and freedoms, the free development of human personality, justice, and political pluralism are supreme values and are guaranteed” (Constitution of Romania, 1991/2002) – under Art. 1(3).

Constitutionalism and the rule of law are essential elements of democratic order, in which the government and state apparatus are accountable to citizens, establishing the procedures by which public offices are filled. Constitutionalism requires broad consensus on the fundamental text and a clear hierarchy of laws, enforced by an independent judiciary. In fact, it manifests as the synergy between „a vibrant and independent civil society; a sufficiently autonomous political society; and a functional consensus on governance procedures and constitutionalism based on the rule of law” (Linz & Stepan, 1996, p. 55). In early 1990, „The Constituent

Assembly drew from various sources of inspiration and fused them into a blend of parliamentary and semi-presidential regimes" (Preda, 2011), where parliamentary logic—through the procedures for cabinet investiture and oversight by the two chambers—coexists with presidential logic—through the direct election of the head of state, though without the powers enjoyed in the French semi-presidential model, such as the power to dissolve Parliament.

Amendments adopted in the Constitutional revision of 2002 served only to reinforce the already established principles, emphasizing that these were „(...) in the spirit of the democratic traditions of the Romanian people and the ideals of the December 1989 Revolution." The 1991 Constitution provided a practical expression of political pluralism in Article 8, which stated that „(1) Pluralism in Romanian society is a condition and a guarantee of constitutional democracy" and „(2) Political parties shall be formed and shall operate under the conditions provided by law. They contribute to the definition and expression of the political will of citizens, while respecting national sovereignty, territorial integrity, the rule of law, and the principles of democracy." (Constitution of Romania, 1991/2002, p. Art. 8.2). This was the first clear constitutional recognition of political pluralism and of the role that political parties play in a democratic regime in defining and expressing political will. The importance of political party legislation is indirectly confirmed by the role of Parliament within the regime. The Constitution defines it as „the supreme representative body of the Romanian people and the sole legislative authority of the country" (Constitution of Romania, 1991/2002, p. Art. 61(1)).

2. The official opening of the political space through the creation of a legal framework for the establishment of political parties

This was the context that led to the adoption of Decree-Law No. 8/31 of December 1989 on the registration and functioning of political parties and public organizations in Romania (Decret-lege nr. 8 /1989 [Decree-Law No. 8 /1989]), just a few days after the removal from power of President Nicolae Ceaușescu. The decree established minimal conditions for founding political parties, while Decree-Law No. 92/1992 (Decree-Law No. 92 for the organization and functioning of political parties) introduced public funding from the state budget for political parties participating in electoral campaigns. The only explicit prohibition concerned the establishment of organizations that claimed fascism as a doctrinal foundation. Notably, the threshold for founding members was very low—only 251.

Amendments to the legal framework regulating political party life adopted over the years focused less on intra-party democracy and more on the number of founding members, which increased progressively from 251 in 1989, to 10,000 members from at least 15 counties (with a minimum of 300 members per county) in 1996, and later to 25,000 members, as of 2003. Law No. 27/1996 on political parties (1996) had specifically intended to limit non-functional parties by raising the

founding threshold, to standardize formal founding requirements, and introduce basic principles of internal democracy and transparency. It remained in force until 2003, when it was repealed and replaced by Law No. 14/2003, which retained many of its principles but significantly increased the founding requirements to 25,000 members from 18 counties, with at least 700 members in each county.

Law No. 14/2003 on political parties -updated- (2003) was the first legal act to thoroughly regulate the founding conditions, the registration process with the Bucharest Tribunal, obligations regarding party statutes and political programs, rules of internal democratic functioning, as well as suspension and dissolution. Electoral participation is governed by a separate legal framework, including Law No. 115/2015 on local elections (2015), Law No. 208/2015 on parliamentary elections (2015), Law No. 33/2007 on European Parliament elections (2007), and Law No. 370/2004 on the election of the President of Romania (2004). Additionally, the increasing financial benefits from public subsidies for parties obtaining parliamentary seats or notable electoral results drew attention to Law No. 334/2006 on the financing of political parties and electoral campaigns (2015).

The removal of the numerical threshold, marking a return to a more liberal and pluralist vision (only partially achieved in 1996), was the consequence of a ruling by the Romanian Constitutional Court (2015). The amendments to Law No. 14/2003, instituted by Law No. 114/2015, credited as a „flexibilization” of the criteria regarding the number of founding members (Pârvu, 2023), further deregulated the relationship between central and territorial branches, under the argument that these would enjoy more autonomy. Although the law appeared to allow parties to organize at the national or local level, it maintained a significant safeguard to prevent excessive political fragmentation: a rule stating that a political party would be dissolved if it did not nominate candidates in two consecutive elections, except for the presidential election, in at least 75 local electoral districts or at least one parliamentary district.

The dominant electoral framework has been proportional representation, except for the 2008 and 2012 parliamentary elections, which used a mixed-member (uninominal) system. From the second post-communist election onward, all electoral laws introduced a threshold: 3% for parties and 8% for alliances in 1992 and 1996, later stabilizing at 5% for parties, plus 3–5% for alliances depending on the number of partners, after 2000. These thresholds played a moderating role in electoral competition. In 1990, 27 political entities were represented in the Chamber of Deputies (16 parties and 11 minority organizations); after 2000, this number ranged between 5 and 7 parties, and 17–19 minority organizations. Between 1990 and 2008, exactly 200 parties submitted candidacies, of which 60% did so only once, indicating high volatility of the political party system. Only 13 parties participated in all six elections during that period—11 of them representing national minorities. The only two parties present in every election from 1990 to 2008 were the PER and PNL (Preda, 2011, p. 312).

2.1. Internal structures

The Romanian legal framework requires that all political parties present a written political program, endorsed by the governing bodies according to provisions laid out in the statute. This requirement aims to ensure that the program is subject to an internal debate process, thereby emphasizing the importance that the legislators placed on consultative bodies tasked with the formation of political will.

However, it is worth noting that the law only covers a standardized democratic nomination process for electoral candidates and makes no mention of the other dimensions of power exercised through politically appointed political party officials. The fact that the law included provisions regarding European Parliament candidates only starting with 2015 speaks to the importance the parliamentary parties attributed to this electoral competition, as well as to the importance of the formal rules in the internal candidate selection process.

2.2. Selection of leaders and candidates

The mechanism for selecting executive positions within a party is left to the discretion of each party, provided it is clearly defined in its statute. The law requires that all territorial structures consist of a general assembly of members and at least one executive body, with the option to establish additional consultative bodies, whose responsibilities must also be set out in the statute. The only binding rules regarding leadership elections are that the vote must be secret and that the length of terms must be clearly defined.

As for candidates nominated for public elections, the statute must designate which body is empowered to validate candidacies for local, parliamentary, and presidential elections. However, the law does not institutionalize a single nomination procedure (e.g., list voting, uninominal voting, or team selection) but only requires that the vote be secret and that decisions be made by a majority of the votes cast.

2.3. Formulating programs and policies

By law, all political parties must present a written political program, officially adopted by the party's governing bodies, as specified in the statute. This requirement is meant to ensure that the program undergoes an internal debate process, emphasizing the legislator's intent to strengthen the role of consultative bodies in forming political will.

However, this legal provision is tailored specifically to standardizing the democratic nomination process, making no mention of how power is exercised through politically appointed officials. It is also notable that rules concerning the nomination of candidates for European Parliament elections were also only introduced starting in 2015.

Law No. 27 of April 26 (1996), was the first post-communist legal act in Romania to thoroughly regulate the organization, registration, and functioning of political parties. It replaced the provisional regulations of the 1990s and remained in force until Law No. 14/2003 was adopted, which remains the main legal framework today. Although it was widely criticized for the large number of founding members it introduced, the official aim was not to reduce pluralism, but extreme party fragmentation and political volatility, which had made it difficult to form governing coalitions. This revised legal framework significantly intensified the administrative burden imposed on political parties, establishing stringent conditions to avoid legal dissolution. Under this threat, parties were required to convene a general assembly at least once every five years, to nominate candidates in a minimum of 18 counties, and to secure no fewer than 50,000 votes in two successive electoral cycles, whether local or general. These measures aimed to ensure a higher degree of institutional coherence and electoral legitimacy, yet they also introduced considerable operational constraints, particularly for smaller or emerging political formations. Following pressure from NGOs, which urged President Ion Iliescu to return the draft law to Parliament, the originally proposed 50,000-member threshold was reduced to 25,000, spread across 18 counties and Bucharest, with no fewer than 700 in each administrative unit.

The main criticism these laws received was that they were only successful in „simplifying the political landscape”, as „organizations adapt both programmatically and structurally to the inputs they receive from the institutional, economic, social, and cultural environment in which they operate” (Preda & Soare, 2008, p. 233).

However, this updated version of the party law also brought clarifications regarding social categories which were restricted from political association (e.g., military and national security personnel, magistrates, and publicly funded journalists) and introduces elements of internal democracy and accountability for the first time: party statutes must explicitly define member rights and responsibilities, as well as the disciplinary sanctions and the mechanisms for applying them.

While the law imposes a high degree of uniformity, the tension between raising the founding members’ threshold, thus imposing a high level of popularity as establishing criterion, and maintaining internal control and centralization of power determined parties to adopt diverse organizational strategies. The 2015 reform that allowed parties to be registered by only three founding members (Legea nr. 114 privind modificarea și completarea Legii partidelor politice nr. 14/2003, 2015, p. Art. 19(3) [Law No. 114 amending and supplementing Law No. 14/2003 on political parties, 2015, p. Art. 19(3)]) significantly reduced the need for thorough internal organizing before formal registration but introduced the new challenge of negotiating the already adopted statute and political program to the expectations of a growing organisation, considering that a large body of members is critical to register candidates in electoral competitions and running for office is mandatory to avoid being erased from the registry of political parties.

3. The role of the Venice Commission in defining the regime and political pluralism

The European Commission for Democracy through Law, commonly referred to as the Venice Commission, functions as an independent consultative body engaged in cooperation with member states of the Council of Europe, as well as with non-member states and other international organizations interested in democratic governance. Its primary objectives include fostering mutual understanding among different legal systems, particularly with a view to their harmonization, advancing the rule of law and the principles of democracy, examining challenges encountered by democratic institutions; and contributing to the development and strengthening of such institutions (Venice Commission, 2002). The Statute of the Venice Commission outlines its structure, objectives, and functions, and reinforces its commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. These values also underpin principles vital to political party functionality and democratic safeguards, including pluralism, non-discrimination, and transparency.

The Commission functions as the Council of Europe's main institution dedicated to the rule of law. Its work focuses on several core areas: the reinforcement of democratic institutions through constitutional, legislative, and administrative expertise, the protection and promotion of public rights and freedoms, with particular emphasis on those facilitating active citizen participation, and the enhancement of local and regional self-governance, understood as a vital component of democratic advancement.

Formally established in May 1990 through a Partial Agreement of the Council of Europe, the Commission's founding was preceded by a conference in Venice on January 19–20, 1990. This event was attended by Council of Europe member states, with Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Yugoslavia, and the USSR participating as observers. From the outset, the Commission sought to assist „sister nations” which had formerly been under Soviet influence, recently freed from dictatorial regimes, in building the political and legal infrastructure necessary to realize pluralist democracy, human rights, and the rule of law (Venice Commission, 1991). A second core institutional aim, energized by the fall of the Iron Curtain, was to support the harmonization of legal and political relationships typical of liberal democracies —referred to as „geopolitical transformations” that reshaped global configurations through international agreements.

The Commission affirms pluralist parliamentary democracy as a fundamental and distinctive feature of Europe and North America—part of a shared democratic heritage, yet one that is not static. It is a cultural product in constant evolution and inherently imperfect (Venice Commission, 1991, p. 1). The Venice Commission therefore answers requests from the Parliamentary Assembly, the Committee of Ministers, or member states, to pronounce itself, though other actors may also require

its assistance, provided they comply with procedural requirements. In response, the Commission conducts legal analysis of the issue and acts as a forum for expert legal debate, primarily through examining legal guarantees and evaluating rules that govern political life in a democracy (Venice Commission, 1991, p. 2).

4. Opinions and recommendations of the Venice Commission

Research on party functions often follows three theoretical models. The first concerns internal party structure and the relationships between leaders and members, where one model sees parties as elite-driven teams, with decisions flowing top-down, making internal democracy irrelevant (Schattschneider, 1977), while the other expects parties to act as democratic associations of citizens, with bottom-up decision-making and leadership accountability. The second theoretical approach addresses the relationship between parties and the state: a liberal view, which treats parties as private associations with internal autonomy, it is an institutional view, which sees parties as semi-public entities, subject to state oversight due to their public role and access to public resources. And a third view, which concerns the state's role in inter-party competition, consisting of a libertarian model -calling for minimal state intervention- and an egalitarian model – that requires the state to ensure a level playing field.

The Venice Commission views political parties as vital to democracy, fulfilling three key functions: facilitating the exercise of citizens' rights (association and expression), promoting cooperation among governing bodies, as well as connecting citizens to representatives via political programs, elections, and collective governance. It supports party autonomy, warning against universal restrictions and its principles aim to protect association rights and party operations, particularly against oppressive state overreach.

Regarding specifically the organization and functioning rules of political parties, the views on political pluralism of the Venice Commission, as well as of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe / Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) are most clearly illustrated by the „Guidelines on Political Party Regulation – Second Edition” (Venice Commission & OSCE/ODIHR, 2020).

Based on eleven principles — including freedom of association, presumption of legality, duty to respect, freedom of expression, political pluralism, legality and proportionality of restrictions, effective remedies, equality of treatment (both among and within parties), internal democracy, good governance, and accountability — this framework, which addresses legislators, civic actors, and state institutions interested in enhancing democratic governance, offers detailed recommendations on the legal and constitutional framework applicable to political parties in democracies.

Other Commission documents also reinforce these views. For instance, the 1991 OSCE Expert Seminar Report on Democratic Institutions identified electoral

fairness and pluralism as core pillars of democracy. Orgun Özbudun's report, „Organizing Elections” (European Commission for Democracy Through Law [Venice Commission], 1991, pp. 11-13) stressed safeguards such as equal voting rights, protection from intimidation or fraud, and the need for independent judicial resolution of electoral disputes and Francisco Laporta's report, „Organizing Political Parties” emphasized that parties are „the point of intersection between real politics and social processes” (European Commission for Democracy Through Law [Venice Commission], 1991, pp. 13-14), calling them constitutional mechanisms for shaping political will. Laporta further warned that while parties enjoy freedom upon registration, they are later constrained—especially when in power—to adhere to democratic values and to prove institutional loyalty to the state by not engaging in any political activity that could jeopardize the very political freedoms that they enjoyed upon registration—specifically freedom of association and freedom of speech. He advocated for judicial remedies when party leadership violates internal rules, careful balance between legal regulation and political autonomy and recognizing parties as mediators between state and society.

The Commission has also issued other key documents, such as „Guidelines on Prohibition and Dissolution of Political Parties” (European Commission for Democracy Through Law [Venice Commission], 2000), „Guidelines on the Financing of Political Parties” (European Commission for Democracy Through Law [Venice Commission], 2000), „Recommendations on Party Law: Specific Issues” (European Commission for Democracy Through Law [Venice Commission], 2004).

The Venice Commission has consistently emphasized that regulations concerning political parties must be designed to uphold democratic freedoms without imposing unnecessary constraints. Specifically, the registration of political parties should not involve excessive bureaucratic burdens, such as stringent requirements for territorial representation or minimum membership thresholds. Public authorities are urged to exercise restraint in regulating internal party operations, including matters such as the frequency of congresses or the establishment of regional branches. Moreover, where applicable, the right to political participation of foreign citizens or stateless individuals should be recognized and safeguarded. The autonomy political parties, as well as internal judicial remedies that enable members to challenge decisions perceived as unjust are essential features of their democratic functioning, thus they must be preserved and safeguarded. State interference in party affairs should therefore be minimal and permissible only in exceptional cases involving incitement to violence or attempts to undermine constitutional order.

In a related development, the Venice Commission's Opinion No. 845/2016 – “Parameters on the Relationship between the Parliamentary Majority and the Opposition in a Democracy: a checklist” (European Commission for Democracy through Law [Venice Commission], 2019) introduced a detailed framework for evaluating the relationship between governing majorities and parliamentary opposition. This opinion reaffirmed the importance of maintaining internal party

discipline while respecting the principle of free mandates for elected representatives. It warned against the practice of revoking parliamentary mandates solely for voting against party lines, though it acknowledged that internal disciplinary measures—such as revoking leadership positions—may be appropriate. The Commission further endorsed the use of secret ballots as a means of protecting individual parliamentarians from coercion and preserving internal dissent.

The Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters (Venice Commission, 2002), also a cornerstone document in understanding the positions of the Venice Commission, identifies key electoral principles, essential to democratic governance. These include the universality of suffrage, equality in the weight of each vote, the freedom and secrecy of voting, the periodicity of elections, transparency throughout the electoral process, the impartiality of electoral authorities, and access to effective legal remedies in the event of electoral disputes. Although the code does not explicitly regulate the internal functioning of political parties, it implicitly calls upon them to reflect these democratic principles within their own organizational structures and practices, thereby reinforcing public trust and contributing to the integrity of democratic institutions.

5. An assessment of Romania's alignment to recommendations issued by the Venice Commission

Although Romania has made significant strides in harmonizing its legislation on political parties with international standards, critical shortcomings persist in the institutionalization of internal party democracy. The national legal framework references the eleven foundational principles of the „Guidelines on Political Party Regulation” (Venice Commission & OSCE/ODIHR, 2020), but these are only partially upheld in practice.

One of the key deficiencies rests with the procedural barriers to party registration. Recurrent delays in the registration process at the Bucharest Tribunal have forced some political groups to resort to legal shortcuts merely to gain formal recognition and the right to participate in elections. Equally concerning is the reluctance of party leaderships to allow the establishment of internal thematic organizations—such as those representing youth or women—which have the effect of curbing internal deliberation and discouraging diverse political expression.

The application of disciplinary sanctions, particularly expulsion, often lacks proportionality and procedural fairness, thereby infringing on the fundamental right to freedom of association and expression. Moreover, the formulation of political programs frequently occurs without meaningful consultation with party members, undermining both the freedom of expression and the legitimacy of internal political processes. Internal dialogue is not structurally guaranteed, and political platforms can serve as mechanisms for consolidating elite control rather than channels for articulating collective preferences.

Furthermore, the existing legal and institutional arrangements do not provide effective mechanisms for member oversight of upper-level leadership, nor do they offer credible avenues for the revocation of mandates or ensuring leadership accountability. Although secret voting is legally required for leadership selection, this safeguard is compromised by the pre-selection of candidates by party elites, limiting open competition and reducing opportunities for broader participation.

The Venice Commission recommends that national regulations strike a balance between transparency, participation, and party autonomy. Party statutes should thus be genuinely democratic, adopted in general members' assemblies, publicly accessible, and explicitly outline internal decision-making procedures. In Romania, however, guarantees of access to internal judicial remedies for members whose rights have been infringed end where leaders' discretionary powers begin. Moreover, party structures rarely institutionalize pluralism, internal debate or openness in policy development, which limits their legitimacy as democratic intermediaries between citizens and the state, given that there is no space for the articulation of political views.

In summary, while partial alignment with the Venice Commission's standards has been achieved, Romania's party system continues to fall short in three essential domains: internal democracy, the protection of member rights, and the institutionalization of transparent, participatory policymaking.

Conclusions

The analysis of the legal framework governing the organization and functioning of political parties in Romania reveals both significant progress in aligning with the international standards articulated by the Venice Commission as well as persistent structural and conceptual deficiencies. Romania has benefited from the Venice Commission's expertise since the drafting of its 1991 Constitution, and subsequent guidance in the form of recommendations, handbooks, and opinions has shaped the development of its electoral legislation and party regulation.

The study highlights the ambivalent nature of Romania's legal-political Europeanization process. While Romanian legislation formally adheres to core democratic principles—particularly in areas such as political pluralism, freedom of association, and internal party democracy—implementation remains largely symbolic and superficial.

This symbolic compliance may be interpreted through the lens of the theory of „external conditionality,” as outlined in the introductory section. According to this model, domestic actors adopt democratic norms primarily for strategic purposes, such as gaining legitimacy or securing external support, rather than out of genuine normative commitment. In line with the rationalist approach proposed by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), adherence to Venice Commission recommendations becomes a tool for maximizing external rewards—such as

improved international image—without internalizing the democratic values those norms promote.

The paper also draws attention to the limits of institutional resilience. The legacy of a centralized and authoritarian regime continues to undermine democratic functionality within political parties. From a historical institutionalist perspective, political institutions exhibit strong path dependency and resistance to change, even under external pressure. While the Venice Commission has established a valuable normative reference and exerted a form of moral pressure for reform, its influence is mediated by a domestic context characterized by democratic discontinuities, clientelist practices, and the absence of a deliberative political culture. Although the Commission's contributions have been instrumental in shaping the legal architecture of the party system, they have not ensured its functional democratization.

The Venice Commission consistently underscores the need to maintain a balance between party autonomy and democratic requirements, without resorting to excessive regulatory intervention by the state. Romania's experience illustrates oscillation between overly restrictive measures—such as high thresholds for founding membership—and sudden liberalization, as seen in the 2015 reform, without building a coherent framework conducive to internal democracy and political accountability.

The findings suggest that formal Europeanization alone is insufficient to consolidate democracy. Only through the genuine internalization of democratic principles and the creation of effective accountability mechanisms can Romania overcome the persistent gap between formal and practical law. Romanian law prescribes the existence of intra-party democratic mechanisms but fails to guarantee their meaningful implementation. Freedom of expression, the right to internal dissent, and effective participation in decision-making processes continue to be constrained by centralized leadership structures and a post-communist political culture.

At an organizational level, Romanian political parties formally subscribe to the principles of transparency and representativeness. In practice, however, their dominant practices reflect low levels of member participation and a stark imbalance between leadership elites and the party base. Leadership and candidate selection processes rarely follow competitive procedures, and debates around political platforms are typically absent or perfunctory. As a result, internal pluralism—an essential component of representative democracy—remains underdeveloped.

In essence, the current regulatory framework imposes limited horizontal accountability within political parties. The combination of institutionalized elections, political particularism as a dominant institutional logic, and the disjunction between formal rules and actual behaviour fosters a tendency toward delegative, rather than representative, models of authority. Once elected, party leaderships often behave in a plebiscitary and authoritarian manner, assuming they have a mandate to impose their will upon the organization.

To achieve full compliance with the standards of the Venice Commission and other relevant international bodies, Romania must take several critical steps. It should clarify and strengthen the rights of party members, including the establishment of internal appeals mechanisms and accountability over party leadership. It must improve transparency and public access to information on party activities, including financing and decision-making processes. Furthermore, it should promote meaningful member participation in shaping political will through regular consultations and direct voting on policy and candidate selection. The country must also redefine thresholds for registration and participation in a manner consistent with proportionality and non-discrimination and establish baseline standards for internal democracy—preferably through soft-law mechanisms adopted in party statutes, rather than rigid legal imposition.

In conclusion, while Romania has made notable strides in institutionalizing political pluralism and constructing a functioning representative democracy, political parties have yet to demonstrate a strong commitment to deepening internal democracy or implementing the more demanding aspects of Venice Commission recommendations, particularly those calling for greater transparency and members' accountability. This situation reflects the „formal structures as myth and ceremony” phenomenon described by Meyer and Rowan (1977) whereby legal frameworks are adopted primarily to signal conformity with the minimal standards of pluralist democracy, without seeking greater legitimacy or functional efficiency. Legitimacy is thus reduced to compliance with formal institutional norms, primarily to avoid deregistration, while any additional effort toward higher—albeit non-mandatory—standards appear unjustified in the absence of external pressures with tangible electoral consequences.

To this moment, the quality of internal party democracy remains a significant vulnerability that may hinder parties' ability to function as arenas of deliberation and as vital intermediaries between civil society and the state. Addressing this shortcoming will require both political will and a substantive commitment to fostering a culture grounded in democratic values. Compliance to democratic standards would be strengthened by the adoption of legal provisions making the public reporting on internal decision-making mandatory and introducing minimal statutory standards for debating the political programs as well as candidate and leadership selection.

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The synergy between institutionalism and digitalization in the EU27: the road to more effective national governments

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Abstract

Institutionalism ranges from theories in the social sciences to political theories that underscore the pivotal role of institutions in creating regulations, guiding behavior, stabilizing societies, and supporting social development. This research primarily examines the interplay between institutionalism and digitalization in EU member states, demonstrating their interaction. The findings support the research hypothesis, indicating that digitalization is increasing the effectiveness of government. Consequently, EU member states that have strengthened digital capabilities and implemented e-governance have seen notable progress in transparency, accessibility, and institutional effectiveness. Meanwhile, digitalization reshapes the institutional structure, streamlines administration, and supports the advancement of the public sector. These outcomes may inform digitalization-centered public policies. This paper contributes to the relevant literature by revealing the institutionalism-digitalization relationship and confirming a positive link between digitalization and the effectiveness of government.

Keywords: government effectiveness, e-gov, institutionalism, digitalization policy, digital technology

Introduction

The close relationship between digitalization and institutionalization is reshaping modern society. Digital tools not only transform the operations of institutions, organizations, and governments, but they also impact the development of rules and structures within these bodies. Here, digitalization refers to the increasing influence of digital tools in daily life and institutions. Institutionalism influences the behavior of actors within institutions. Digitalization is transforming

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the way institutions operate and interact with society. For instance, governments now utilize online services to enhance transparency, increase efficiency, and reduce corruption. Institutionalism examines the norms that help maintain societal stability. As technology advances quickly, organizations must adapt just as fast. Digitalization and institutions interact in an ongoing, dynamic relationship.

Digitalization shapes the digital economy in areas such as AI and cryptocurrency. At the same time, institutionalism determines how these impacts should be managed to ensure accountability and sustainability. Theories of institutionalism offer valuable insights into understanding and guiding digitalization. This encourages responsible and sustainable adoption. Digitalization also raises challenges. For instance, entrenched bureaucratic structures exist that would be difficult to displace. It could also contribute to some risks like centralization, digital divide, and overdependence on technology, which can cause mental illness, cyber-bullying, and social media misinformation. The publication of this article does not aim to address the same risks in detail; however, they need to be addressed as soon as possible. With the proliferation of digitalization, it is vital to embrace technology at a sustainable pace. Primarily, education is needed, along with clear (ethical) guidelines and substantial investments in infrastructure. Those actions help society realize the benefits of digitalization while reducing its risks.

This research paper aims to conceptualize and empirically examine the interaction between digitalization and institutionalism in the context of public governance within EU member states. Initially, specialized literature will be synthesized to examine diverse perspectives on how digital technologies advance institutionalism and to identify shared elements, such as governance and development, within an institutional framework. We will then test the hypothesis that digitalization enhances governance through empirical analysis. Our methodology progresses from a broad literature review to a systematic quantitative assessment, ultimately advancing understanding of how digitalization streamlines governance and institutions. This process establishes a robust theoretical and empirical foundation for future public policy and digital initiatives.

In the first part, we will review the literature on the subject under analysis. Thus, we will present notions about digitalization and institutionalism, explore the advantages of their duality, and discuss other related topics, such as the EU 2030 digitalization agenda and the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI). In the second part, we formulate the research hypothesis. Variables subject to empirical analysis will be described in Section 3 of the research methodology.

1. Theoretical foundations

To begin, we will define the terminology and concepts that we use. By definition, digitalization is a complex process that involves integrating digital technologies into various aspects of life and business, transforming the way

organizations operate and interact with their environment. This is not limited to the implementation of technologies, but also includes essential organizational and pedagogical changes. The stages preceding digitalization, which include technologies like computers and the internet, have contributed to the current trend, marking the emergence of a digital society.

This development necessitates that social institutions adapt to the complexity of the new digital reality. Digital platforms are becoming essential pillars, including within public administration, while the challenges generated by the virtual world call for a reevaluation of social structures and traditional governance models (Vasilenko et al., 2022). Digitalization facilitates the optimization of service quality and increases customer satisfaction. However, it is accompanied by significant risks, including cybersecurity vulnerabilities, potential job losses due to automation (Subach, 2024), and psychosocial risks (Moja, 2024). Digital inclusion and access to ICT have a significant impact on the quality of life at the global level (Alhassan and Adam, 2021). Access to ICT, as well as ICT usage by the government, has a significantly positive impact on public sector performance (Dogbe et al., 2024).

On the other hand, institutionalism is an influential theory in political science and organizational studies that examines the role of institutions in shaping social and political outcomes. Modern institutionalism is a complex and diverse field, encompassing multiple versions: sociological, historical, and rational choice institutionalism (Hall and Taylor, 1996). Therefore, modern institutionalism does not represent a unified body of thought, but rather a collection of distinct analytical approaches (Hall and Taylor, 1996; Immergut, 1998).

Sociological institutionalism explores how cultural norms and values shape behaviours and organizational structures, while historical institutionalism focuses on macro-political or macroeconomic determinants, emphasizing the importance of institutions and being valued for its ability to explain complex and path-dependent processes (Kelly, 2019; Hall and Taylor, 1996). Rational choice institutionalism is grounded in rational choice theory and the maximization of individual benefits. It is often used to explain political and economic behaviors through the lens of personal interests and institutional constraints (Hall and Taylor, 1996).

Without pretending to list all types of institutionalism, a few less discussed forms should be mentioned:

- *The new Economic Institutionalism* that focuses on the economic aspects of institutions, analysing the policies of redistribution, regulation, and modernization;
- *Regulatory institutionalism* that focuses on the norms and values that guide institutional behaviors;
- *Institutionalism „billiard ball”* that analyzes interactions between different institutions and their impact on public policies (Reich, 2000).

In the current technological era, we can go even further by defining digital institutionalism. This type of institutionalism refers to the processes by which norms

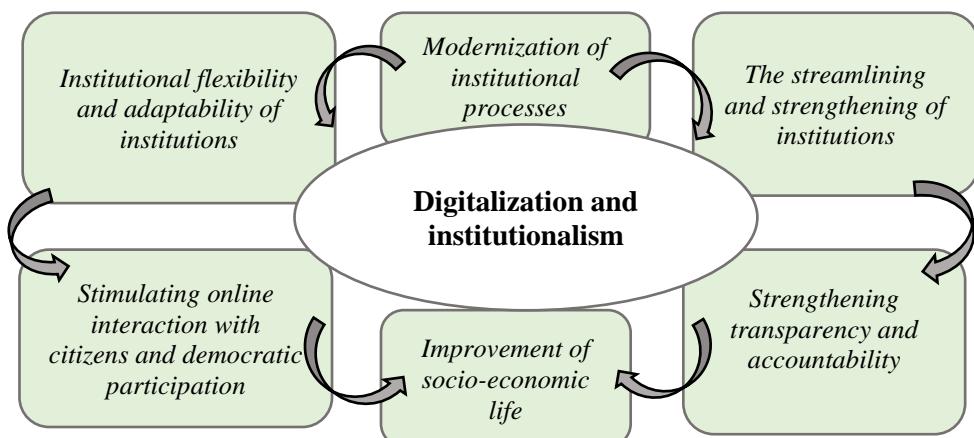
and rules are integrated into digital infrastructures, thereby changing social and organizational practices. The digitalization of institutional entities — such as those in the medical sector (for prescriptions), treasuries (for payments), or the insurance field — exemplifies the process of institutionalization in the digital environment (Eriksson and Ehlund, 2024).

The role of political entrepreneurs and key explanatory factors is essential in influencing the stability and change of digital policies (Torfs et al., 2022), while the success of digital inclusion projects depends on several stages — gaining recognition from the community, encouraging social activities within relevant groups, establishing connections to stable sources of income, and mobilizing institutional support from government authorities (Madon et al., 2009) — all of which contribute to the advancement of governmental digitalization, which in turn shows a significant positive correlation with the effectiveness of public administration, particularly in terms of governmental efficiency, combating corruption, and stimulating economic activity (Dobrolyubova et al., 2019).

1.1. Advantages of duality digitalization-institutionalism

Digitalization brings multiple benefits, optimizing processes and increasing efficiency for public institutions, as well as improving public services for citizens and companies. These advantages are summarized schematically in Figure 1, and we will elaborate on them further, providing references from the literature.

Figure 1. Advantages of binomial digitalization – institutionalism



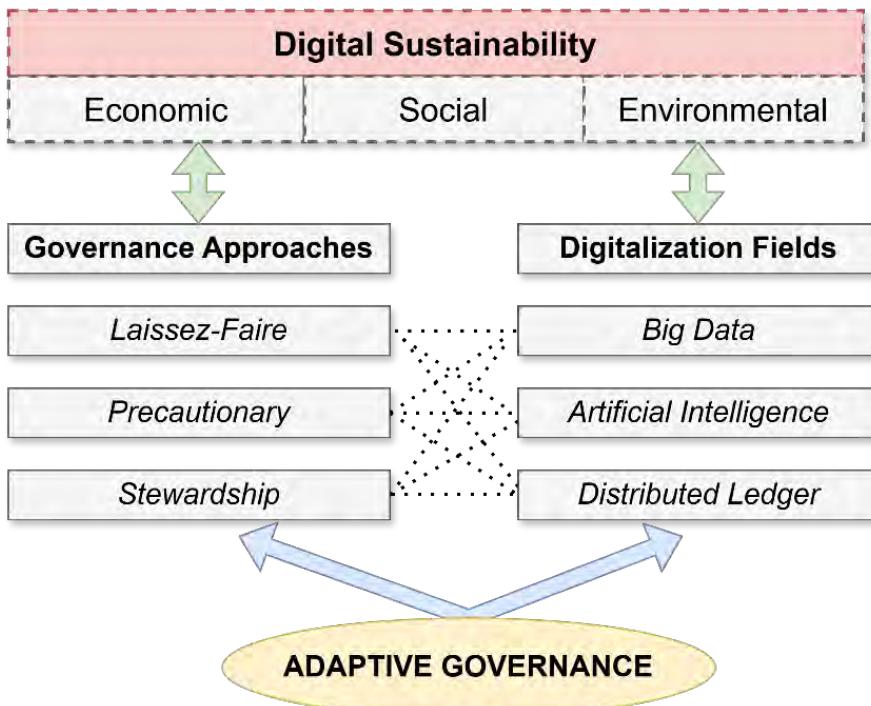
Source: authors' representation

Modernization of institutional processes

Digitalization facilitates the restructuring of traditional bureaucracy, as outlined in classical institutional theory, thereby reducing the influence of traditional institutional structures and allowing for a reevaluation of fundamental theoretical principles (Schildt, 2022). By implementing electronic processes (e-government), government institutions can reduce the time and resources required for administrative functions, including the digital filing of applications, automating public services, and creating an interconnected digital infrastructure among institutions, which simplifies bureaucracy and enhances the government's response to citizens' needs (Zubarev and Ivanov, 2021).

From the perspective of normative institutionalism, digitalization strengthens the principles of transparency and accountability, promoting open governance. On the other hand, while digitalization improves transparency, measures are needed to prevent cyber fraud and protect citizens' data (Mynenko and Lyulyov, 2022). Online platforms for publishing budget data and providing citizens with access to public interest information help build trust in institutions and reduce corruption (Thanh, 2022).

Figure 2. Digital Sustainability



Source: authors' adaptation after Linkov et al. (2018)

Accelerating the flexibility and adaptability of institutions

According to historical institutionalism, institutions evolve slowly, but digitalization is accelerating this process. The technology provides a flexible framework that enables rapid policy adaptation, the deployment of digital solutions in unforeseen crises (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic), and the development of analytical and predictive capabilities for informed decision-making through data analysis using modern technologies. Thus, digitalization facilitates *adaptive governance*, enabling it to respond effectively to new challenges.

Adaptive governance *can be defined as adjusting regulatory rules and practices to incorporate new data and balance the risks and benefits of a given activity*. A flexible and adaptive government administration can be strengthened through legislative measures, voluntary partnerships among relevant actors, and collaboration between industry, academia, and civil society. The objectives are to monitor digital services, mitigate risks, and develop effective governance strategies. Figure 2 is relevant (after Linkov et al., 2018).

Stimulating online interaction with citizens and democratic participation

Modern institutionalism emphasizes the importance of the interaction between institutions and citizens. Digitalization offers citizens new channels for active involvement in decision-making, such as public consultation platforms and e-voting, thereby contributing to more inclusive and democratic governance.

A sociological study conducted in Russia highlights that government initiatives to develop a digital environment for interacting with citizens can adequately meet societal demands. These measures would help to reduce bureaucracy and administrative formalism, while facilitating a more efficient and accessible process in the delivery of public services (Zubarev & Ivanov, 2021).

Improving socio-economic life

Digitalization presents unique opportunities for enhancing socioeconomic well-being. On the other hand, also through the prism of modern institutionalism, the process of digitalization is guided, regulated, and adapted through state institutions to meet social and economic needs. In this context, digitalization forms the foundation of the modern economy, driving technological innovation and enhancing various aspects of social life, including the labour market, education, and health (Bessonova & Battalov, 2020). The institutionalization of the digital economy, as an emerging economic model, is driven by the interaction of technological, organizational, and humanities innovations (Vasilenko et al., 2020). Evidence from Europe between 2011 and 2019 shows that digital business transformation via e-commerce contributed to economic complexity, which in turn accelerated

digitalization, indicating a bidirectional relationship (Ha, 2022). Key indicators of digital transformation include broadband coverage, software skills, and the share of businesses using big data and online commerce (Olczyk & Kuc-Czarnecka, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated digitalization, fostering significant economic growth, with advanced countries reaping greater benefits than those in earlier stages of the process (Parubets, 2022). In Ukraine, digitalization has facilitated virtual socialization and institutionalization, supporting socio-economic development through inclusive institutions and the promotion of political and economic pluralism (Ivashyna et al., 2023).

Enhancing institutions

From the perspective of *rationalist institutionalism*, we will retain only the proper meaning of our construct: digitalization can optimize the costs and resources of government institutions, thereby increasing their ability to implement effective public policies.

1.2. Digital innovation and institutionalism

Digital innovation and institutionalism are two key concepts for understanding how emerging technologies are transforming society and the economy. Digital innovation (artificial intelligence, blockchain, big data) provides significant opportunities for the modernization of institutions. In turn, institutionalism provides the necessary framework for the responsible adoption of digital innovations.

On the other hand, the institutional perspective is a crucial framework for analysing digital innovation and transformation. Digital innovation refers to the development of new products and services, while digital transformation reflects the effects of these innovations. It reconfigures actors, structures, practices, and values, and changes the rules in organizations and various fields. This approach examines how new arrangements gain social legitimacy and interact with existing institutional structures (Hinings et al., 2018). Eriksson and Ohlund (2024) emphasize that digital infrastructures and their design play a crucial role in institutionalization processes. The authors also highlight the need to rethink the processes of institutionalization in the era of digitalization.

In conclusion, from the perspective of institutionalism, digitalization transforms governmental institutions through efficiency, transparency, and adaptability. It not only improves the act of government but also strengthens legitimacy and trust in public institutions, facilitating modern and inclusive governance. Digitalization thus becomes an essential tool in modernizing the state and strengthening institutions in the current context. As a preamble to the practical part of the paper, it is appropriate to discuss the EU's digitalization agenda, specifically the primary measure of a country's degree of digitalization (DESI).

1.3. The EU digitalization agenda

The EU's digitalization agenda reflects various strategic goals and orientations for implementation, aligning with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It explains that a mutually supportive process is designed to realize all 17 SDGs. Digitalization is seen as a horizontal enabler and accelerator of development in many fields, including poverty eradication, e-government, innovation, and sustainability. Digitalization presents risks and challenges in achieving its goals, including digital divides between developed and developing countries, privacy concerns, cybersecurity threats, uneven access to digital infrastructure in the periphery, and the need for a certain level of digital literacy to prevent technological exclusion (Tan & Taeihagh, 2020). Jovanović et al. (2018) emphasize the key role of digitalization in sustainable development, highlighting a strong positive correlation between economic and social levels. Advanced digitalization also facilitates competitiveness, innovation, and entrepreneurial activities, thus promoting economic growth.

Cultural patterns also play a significant role in the digitalization process (Rubino et al., 2020). Antikainen et al. (2018) propose that digitalization can support the shift to a more sustainable circular economy. However, in the European Union, digitalization was associated with positive changes in labor market indicators in 2018, increasing employment levels and income (Basol & Yalcin 2021).

According to Xu et al. (2022), digitalization is fundamental for the sustainable development of a country or region, allowing the realization of purposes in sustainable development objectives such as the elimination of poverty and hunger, better health and education services access, an increase in industrial innovation, and the enhancement of infrastructure, reinforcement of governance structures, or managing environmental hazards.

1.4. About DESI

According to the European Commission, the DESI (Digital Economy and Society Index) is used to assess the progress of European Union member states in digitalizing their economies and societies. The digital performance of countries is measured based on indicators such as connectivity, digital skills, Internet use, the integration of digital technologies in business, and digital public services.

Despite progress, digital skills and technology integration are lagging (see the work - *Digital Economy and Society Index 2022: global progress but digital skills, SMEs and 5G networks leave behind*, 2022).

DESI score for a country „C” is calculated by the formula:

$$\text{DESI}(C) = \text{Human capital (C)} * 0.25 + \text{Connectivity (C)} * 0.25 + \text{Integration of Digital Technologies (C)} * 0.25 + \text{Digital public services (C)} * 0.25 \quad (1)$$

Following Russo (2020), the European Union monitors the degree of digitalization through the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), developed by the European Commission to assess technological progress and maintain competitiveness compared to the US, Japan, and South Korea. DESI is positively correlated with GDP per capita, depending on the extent to which citizens utilize online services and companies adopt digital technologies (Parra et al., 2021). Additionally, DESI enhances occupancy rates and personal earnings (Başol & Yalçın, 2020). In 2021, DESI sub-indicators were adapted to align with the goals of the Digital Agenda 2030, which comprises four fundamental dimensions: human capital, connectivity, digital technology integration, and digital public services.

According to Kovacs et al. (2022), the analysis of digital skills among member states did not reveal significant convergence, emphasizing the need to develop digital skills to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda. Socioeconomic factors, including GDP, education, and research and development spending, positively impact the DESI score, whereas the number of hours worked has an adverse effect (Masoura and Malefaki, 2023).

Almeida de Figueiredo (2024) highlights, through a panel analysis, the positive influence of digitalization factors on economic development, demonstrating a significant impact on GDP growth. Moreover, Asoy (2024) states that a 1% increase in the Digital Economic and Societal Index (I-DESI) generates a 1% increase in GDP. Török (2024) builds on the same idea that I-DESI generally has a positive influence on GDP/capita, but registers a slight slowdown in the 2015-2020 EU period.

2. Methodology

The research methods used: systematization of the relevant literature (described in the second section) and a quantitative method based on data, strategies, and statistical techniques, to test the hypothesis of dependence H1: „Digitalization improves the act of government”. Null hypothesis: H0: „Digitalization does NOT improve the act of government”.

The appreciation of government actions can be expressed through the quality of government. This reflects the efficiency and performance of the governance act. How digitalization can be effectively operated through the variable Governmental Effectiveness, which we propose as the dependent variable (Y): „Government Effectiveness Index - Percentile Rank” (source: World Bank).

By definition, Government effectiveness *captures perceptions of the quality of public services, the degree of independence of public services from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of government commitment to such policies*. The percentage level indicates the country's rank among all countries covered by the aggregated indicator, with 0

corresponding to the lowest rank and 100 corresponding to the highest rank (Spătaru and Popescu, 2025).

As independent variables (Xi), we propose a set of indicators that directly or indirectly relate to the process of digitalization, as follows:

(X1): „E-government activities of individuals via websites” (source: EUROSTAT) - Internet usage: obtaining information from websites of public authorities (last 12 months), % of individuals, out of total individuals;

(X2): „Transparency”, all life events, score: 0 to 100 (source: e-Gov. Benchmark, European Commission);

In short, this indicator assesses the extent to which governments are transparent about:

- the process of providing public services,
- responsibilities and own performance,
- personal data involved in the provision of services and citizens' access to them.

In a more detailed explanation, „Transparency” is a composite indicator representing the average of three sub-dimensions: *the transparency of online public services* (availability and clarity of information about digital public services), *the transparency of administrative processes* (the extent to which users can track and understand the stages of online administrative procedures), and *the accessibility of personal data* (the users' ability to access and manage their data stored by public authorities). Essentially, this indicator reflects the accessibility, clarity, security, and comprehensibility of information and processes for citizens. *Life events* are defined as sets of government services designed for citizens and/or entrepreneurs.

(X3): „Individuals using the Internet”, % of the population, (source: EUROSTAT) - The percentage of the population with internet access is an indicator that measures the percentage of the total population using the internet. Internet users are individuals who have accessed the Internet (from any location) within the last three months. Internet access can be obtained through various devices, including computers, mobile phones, personal digital assistants, game consoles, digital televisions, and others;

(X4): „Employ ICT specialists” - total, % of total employment (source: EUROSTAT);

(X5): „Secure Internet servers per 1 million people” (source: WB) - Refers to the number of distinct, publicly trusted TLS/SSL certificates found in the Netcraft Secure Server survey;

(X6): „Fixed broadband subscriptions (per 100 people)”, (source: WB) - Fixed broadband internet subscriptions for individuals and organizations refer to fixed subscriptions for fast access to the public internet (a TCP/IP connection) with download speeds equal to or greater than 256 kbit/s.

The descriptions of the predictors (X) are derived from the statistical metadata of the indicators. *The basic model proposed in this study can be expressed through the following multiple regression equation:*

$$Y = \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \beta_5 X_5 + \beta_6 X_6 + \varepsilon \quad (2)$$

We validate the research hypothesis by analyzing the collected data for the relevant variables. This analysis spans 10 years from 2013 to 2022, encompassing all 27 EU member states and the EU average, resulting in 28 observations per year.

To complete the missing data in the data series, where appropriate, we used the average value (compared to the values in the immediate vicinity) and/or employed the linear regression technique for prediction. More specifically, linear regression was used to estimate the missing values of the following indicators: E-government activities of individuals via websites for 2013 and 2022, Transparency for 2016, and Employed ICT specialists for 2013. EU values were calculated as weighted averages using the total population as a weighting factor.

The study encompasses a range of specific analyses, including correlation and regression analyses, analysis of variance (ANOVA), factor analysis (utilizing the KMO test), and cluster analysis. Additionally, scatterplots are an integral part of the analysis.

As for the regression and correlation coefficients, the theoretical rules are as follows:

- In the range (0 – 0.20), there is no connection between the variables;
- In the range (0.20 – 0.50), there is a weak link between the variables;
- In the range (0.50 – 0.75), there is a medium intensity link between the variables;
- In the range (0.75 – 0.95), there is a strong connection between the variables;
- In the range (0.95 – 1), there is a deterministic link between the variables (the independent variable determines almost entirely the dependent one).

We have used the Pearson correlation coefficient in this analysis. They illustrate the intensity of the relationships between the variables, examined in pairs (this is a bi-variable analysis). Correlation coefficients take values between 0 and 1. The closer it is to 1 (100%), the stronger the link between the variables. The most important results of the regression analysis are the coefficients R and R², as well as the level of significance (p-value, or Sig.). The coefficient „R-square” (R²) indicates the percentage of variation in the dependent variable explained by the independent variables. In theory, the level of statistical significance Sig. has an ideal value of < 0.05 (i.e., statistical significance > 95%). It is accepted in current practice and Sig. < 0.1 (statistical significance > 90%).

To assess the degree of internal coherence among the chosen and analyzed factors (variables), we conduct a factorial analysis using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) statistical test. In theory, the KMO should be in the range (0.5 - 1); if the KMO < 0.5, the values are unacceptable.

Scatterplots provide a visual representation of how the EU member states are grouped relative to the linear regression trend line (R²), which is marked on the graph with a red dashed line. Countries positioned in the upper part of the diagram tend to

occupy better rankings. For the first and last year of the analysis (2013 and 2022), we also present a *dendrogram*, a type of cluster analysis that shows how the member states (MS) are grouped based on the dependent variable, Government Effectiveness (*Gov_Ef*).

3. Results and discussion

In Tables 1–4, we present the results of the quantitative analysis for 2013, 2017, 2020, and 2022, including correlation and regression analyses, variance analysis (ANOVA), and factorial analysis (KMO). For comparison, we also included parts of the crisis years in the analysis: 2020 (pandemic crisis) and 2022 (energy crisis). The corresponding *dispersion diagrams* (*Scatterplots*) are found in Figures 3–6.

Table 1. Methods/statistical techniques applied in variable analysis, year 2013

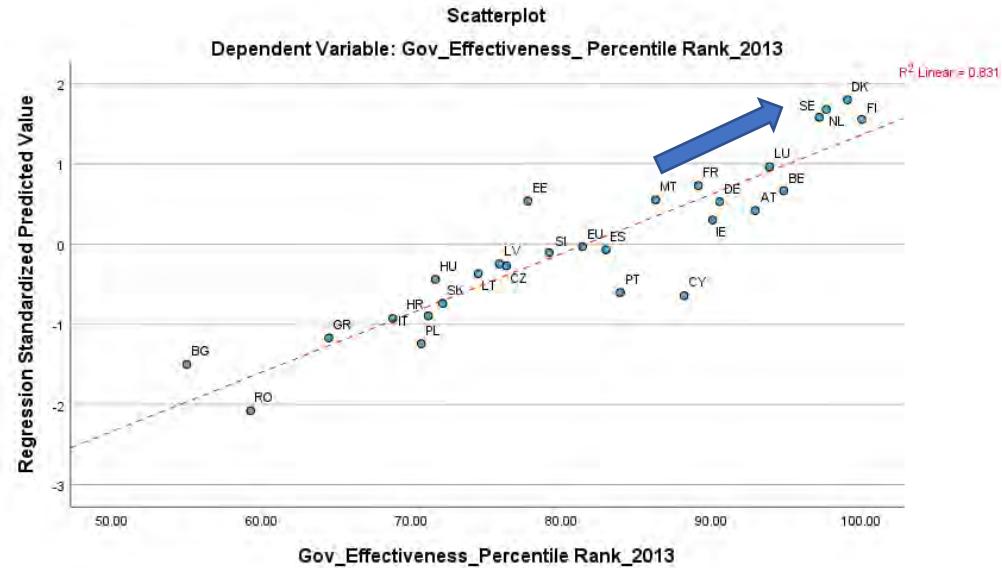
Correlations 2013		Gov_Ef_2013	E_gov_web_2013	Transp_2013	us_int_2013	ICT_spec_2013	secure_servers_2013	Fixed_broadband_subscriptions_2013			
Gov_Ef_2013	Pearson Correlation	1	,744**	,452*	,856**	,775**	,754**	,791**			
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<,001	,016	<,001	<,001	<,001	<,001			
	N	28	28	28	28	28	28	28			
Model Summary (Dependent Variable)		R	R Square	Adjusted R Square		Std. Error of the Estimate					
1		,912 ^{predictors}	,831	,783		5,73990					
ANOVA ^a Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.					
1	Regression	3406,294	6	567,716	17,231	<,001 ^b					
	Residual	691,875	21	32,946							
	Total	4098,169	27								
a. Dependent Variable: Gov_Effectiveness_Percentile_Rank_2013											
b. Predictors: (Constant), Fixed_broadband_subscriptions_per_100_people_2013, Transparency_score_2013, ICT_specialists_%_2013, E_gov_web_access_%_2013, secure_servers_per_1_mill_people_2013, using_internet_%_2013											
KMO and Bartlett's Test											
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.				,870							
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity		Approx. Chi-Square	df	151,721	21						
						<,001					

Source: authors' representation

According to the results presented in Table 1, the year 2013 is characterized by moderate to strong and statistically significant correlations among the examined pairs of variables, ranging from 45.2% to 85.6%. Regarding the regression results, we note that $R^2 = 0.831$, which means that the model explains 83.1% of the variation in the *Gov_Ef* dependent variable.

Multifactorial ANOVA certifies the statistical significance of the model, $\text{Sig.} < 0.001$. The KMO test value of 87% indicates that the sampling adequacy is very good, suggesting that the obtained solution is appropriate for factor analysis.

Figure 3. Diagram of dispersion. Government effectiveness vs. Predictors_2013



Source: authors' representation

Figure 3 illustrates the 2013 scatterplot, highlighting a top cluster of countries – Nordic states, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg – with outstanding performance on the analysed dimension. In contrast, at the bottom of the ranking are Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece.

According to the results presented in Table 2, the year 2017 is characterized by moderate to strong and statistically significant correlations among the examined pairs of variables, ranging from 44.8% to 85.8%. Regarding the regression results, we note that $R^2 = 0.812$, which means that the model explains 81.2% of the variation in the *Gov_Ef* dependent variable.

Multifactorial ANOVA certifies the statistical significance of the model, $\text{Sig.} < 0.001$. The KMO test value of 89.3% indicates that the sampling adequacy is excellent, suggesting that the obtained solution is appropriate for factor analysis.

Table 2. Methods /statistical techniques applied in variable analysis, year 2017

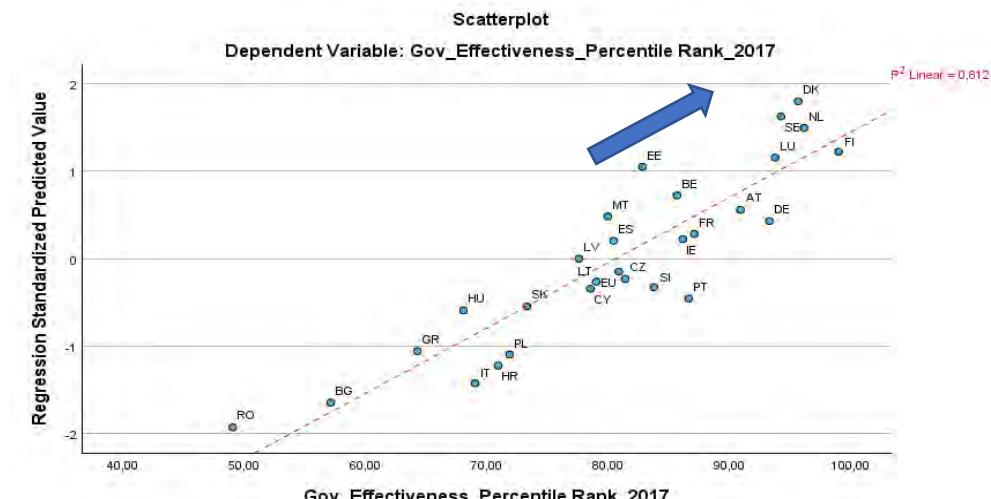
Correlations 2017		Gov_Ef_2017	E_gov_web_2017	Transp_2017	us_int_2017	ICT_spec_2017	secure_servers_2017	Fixed_broadband_subscriptions_2017
Gov_Ef_2017	Pearson Correlation	1	,800**	,501**	,858**	,752**	,448*	,630**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<,001	,007	<,001	<,001	,017	<,001
	N	28	28	28	28	28	28	28
Model Summary		R	R Square		Adjusted R Square		Std. Error of the Estimate	
(Dependent variable)								
1		,901 ^a predictors	,812		,759		5,93121	
ANOVA ^a Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F		Sig.	
1	Regression	3196,135	6	532,689	15,142		<,001 ^b	
	Residual	738,763	21	35,179				
	Total	3934,898	27					

a. Dependent Variable: Gov_Effectiveness_Percentile_Rank_2017
b. Predictors: (Constant), Fixed_broadband_subscriptions_per_100_people_2017, Transparency_score_2017, secure_servers_per_1_mill_people_2017, ICT_specialists_%_2017, E_gov_web_access_%_2017, using_internet_%_2017

KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.	,893
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square 112,261
	df 21
	Sig. <,001

Source: authors' representation

Figure 4. Diagram of dispersion. Government effectiveness vs. Predictors_2017

Source: authors' representation

Figure 4 illustrates the 2017 scatterplot, highlighting a top cluster of countries - Nordic states, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and Germany – with outstanding performance on the analyzed dimension. In contrast, at the bottom of the ranking are Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece.

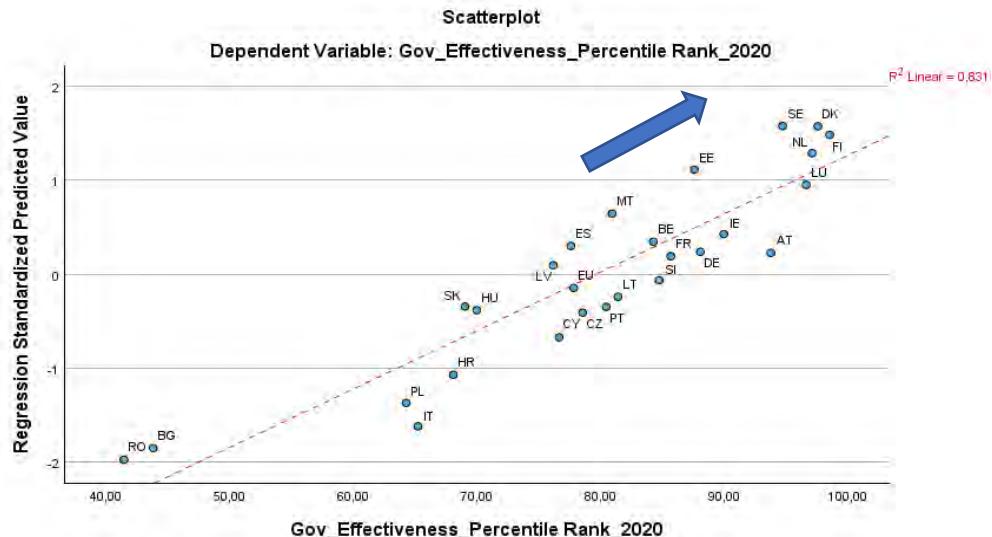
Table 3. Methods /statistical techniques applied in variable analysis, year 2020

Correlations 2020		Gov_Ef_2020	E_gov_web_2020	Transp_2020	us_int_2020	ICT_spec_2020	secure_servers_2020	Fixed_broadband_subscriptions_2020		
Gov_Ef_2020	Pearson Correlation	1	,734**	,638**	,764**	,775**	,476*	,476*		
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<,001	<,001	<,001	<,001	,010	,011		
	N	28	28	28	28	27	28	28		
Model Summary (Dependent variable)		R	R Square	Adjusted R Square		Std. Error of the Estimate				
1		,912 ^{predictors}	,831		,781			6,87087		
ANOVA ^a Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F		Sig.			
1	Regression	4650,229	6	775,038	16,417		<,001 ^b			
	Residual	944,178	20	47,209						
	Total	5594,407	26							
a. Dependent Variable: Gov_Effectiveness_Percentile_Rank_2020										
b. Predictors: (Constant), Fixed_broadband_subscriptions_per_100_people_2020, Transparency_score_2020, secure_servers_per_1_mill_people_2020, using_internet_%_2020, ICT_specialists_%_2020, E_gov_web_access_%_2020										
KMO and Bartlett's Test										
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy				,847						
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	89,100								
	df	21								
	Sig.	<,001								

Source: authors' representation

According to the results presented in Table 3, the year 2020 is characterized by moderate to strong and statistically significant correlations among the examined pairs of variables, ranging from 47.6% to 77.5%. Regarding the regression results, we note that $R^2 = 0.831$, which means that the model explains 83.1% of the variation in the *Gov_Ef* dependent variable.

Multifactorial ANOVA certifies the statistical significance of the model, *Sig. < 0.001*. With a KMO test value of 84.7%, the sampling adequacy can be considered good, confirming the suitability of the data for the proposed solution.

Figure 5. Diagram of dispersion. Government effectiveness vs. Predictors_2020

Source: authors' representation

Table 4. Methods /statistical techniques applied in variable analysis, year 2022

Correlations 2022		Gov_Ef_2022	E_gov_web_2022	Trans_2022	us_int_2022	ICT_spec_2022	secure_servers_2022	Fixed_broadband_subscriptions_2022
Gov_Ef_2022	Pearson Correlation	1	,772**	,601**	,780**	,798**	,573**	,349
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<,001	<,001	<,001	<,001	,001	,069
	N	28	28	28	28	28	28	28
Model Summary		R	R Square	Adjusted R Square		Std. Error of the Estimate		
(Dependent variable)								
1		,899 ^{predictors}	,809	,754		6,87165		
ANOVA ^a Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.		
1		Regression	6	699,471	14,813	<,001 ^b		
		Residual	21	47,220				
		Total	27					

a. Dependent Variable: Gov_Effectiveness_Percentile_Rank_2022

b. Predictors: (Constant), Fixed_broadband_subscriptions_per_100_people_2022, using_internet_%_2022, secure_servers_per_1_mill_people_2022, Transparency_score_2022, E_gov_web_access_%_2022, ICT_specialists_%_2022

KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.	,886
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square
	df
	Sig.

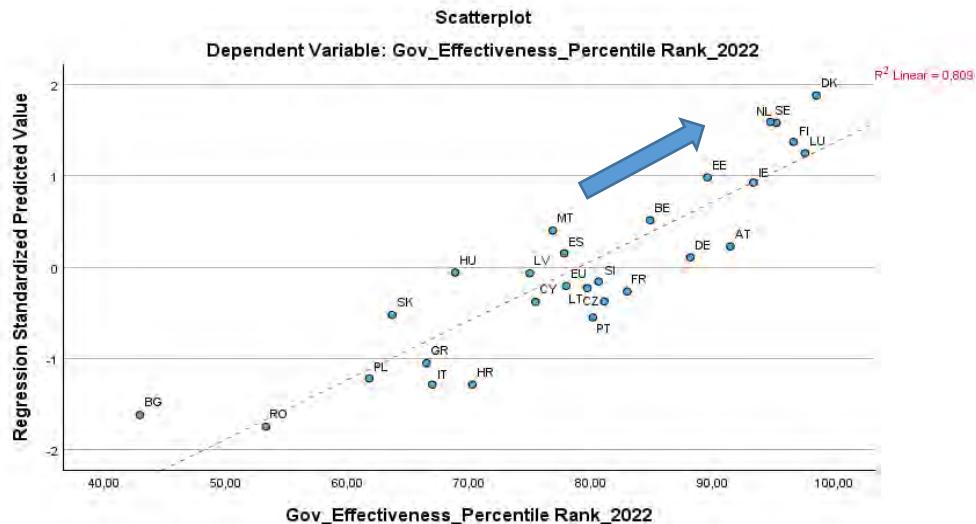
Source: authors' representation

As illustrated in Figure 5, the 2020 scatterplot reveals a distinct upper cluster composed of the Nordic states, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Austria, and Ireland, characterized by superior performance on the examined dimension. In contrast, Romania and Bulgaria occupy the lowest positions in the ranking.

According to the results presented in Table 4, the year 2022 is characterized by moderate to strong and statistically significant correlations among the examined pairs of variables, ranging from 34.9% to 79.8%. Regarding the regression results, we note that $R^2 = 0.809$, which means that the model explains 80.9% of the variation in the Gov_Ef dependent variable.

Multifactorial ANOVA certifies the statistical significance of the model, $Sig. < 0.001$. With a KMO test value of 88.6%, the sampling adequacy can be considered very good, confirming the suitability of the data for the proposed solution.

Figure 6. Diagram of dispersion. Government effectiveness vs. Predictors_2022



Source: authors' representation

In 2022, the countries with the best performance and those at the bottom of the ranking remain the same as in previous years (Fig. 6). From the consideration of data of 2013, 2017, 2020, and 2022 (Tables 1–4, Figures 3–6, A1, A2), we conclude:

Correlation analysis results

The statistically significant correlation results, established through $Sig. < 0.01^{**}$ or $< 0.05^*$), and suggest moderate to strong relationships among the chosen pairs of variables. More precisely, in 2013, they varied from a minimum of 45.2% to a maximum of 85.6%. In 2017, the correlation ranges between 44.8% and 85.8%,

and so on in the subsequent samples (see Tables 1–4). The bivariate associations between the dependent variable (Government Effectiveness) and the explanatory variables of interest show a mix of disparate degrees of association. However, in all cases, they are statistically significant, demonstrating the validity of the observed relationships.

Regression and factor analysis results

Regression results for all four observed years show that the dependent variable (Government Effectiveness) has a significant relationship with digitalization-related independent variables. Namely, the R value runs from 89.9 to 91.2%. The R² figures show that the model explains more than 80% of the variance of government effectiveness: 83.1% in 2013, 81.2% in 2017, 83.1% in 2020, and 80.9% in 2022 (Model Summary, Tables 1–4). The linear regression models are confirmed as significant by the ANOVA, with large F values (Sig. < 0.01) for the years examined, indicating that the obtained relationships had a high degree of reliability (ANOVA Model Tables 1–4). The value of the KMO test coefficient: 87% (2013), 89,3% (2017), 84,7% (2020), and 88,6% (2022), which indicate an excellent level of sampling suitability for analysis tools, testify to a reasonable degree of stability of the factorial structure adopted in measurement instruments used during research (Tables 1–4).

Visualization and country-level insights

Scatterplots depict country positions in relation to the linear regression trend line (R²). High-scoring countries are mostly Nordic and are located in the top portion of the figure. Estonia recorded the most significant improvement in governance effectiveness between 2013 and 2022, narrowing the gap with top performers. Conversely, Bulgaria and Romania consistently rank at their lowest, highlighting long-standing differences within the EU, both in terms of digitalization and institutional development (Figures 3–6). This finding is reinforced by the European Commission's report (2022) on the DESI index, which places Romania and Bulgaria at the bottom of the ranking on digitalization.

The cluster analysis, illustrated through dendrogram charts, presents the grouping of countries based on similarity criteria for the years 2013 and 2022, as shown in APPENDIX (A1, A2).

Conclusions

This research examines the interconnection between digitalization and institutionalism, two complementary notions that relate to rethinking governance through mutual reflections. In addition, the paper highlights that digitalization is

crucial for improving processes of public administrations and institutions, providing not only a sound theoretical background but also relevant practical evidence.

Consequently, the literature review emphasized that digitalization has much to offer in terms of institutionalism, highlighting synergies between digital transformation and governance efficiency and effectiveness. On the other hand, it also emphasized that institutions play a crucial role in advancing digitalization.

The empirical analysis conducted supports the research hypothesis that digitalization significantly contributes to improving government operations. Firstly, the correlation analysis revealed moderate to strong and statistically significant bivariate relationships between government effectiveness and each predictor, which reflects the level of digitalization. The results demonstrate that higher levels of digitalization are systematically associated with increased government effectiveness. Secondly, the regression and factor analyses further validate this relationship. The regression models exhibit high explanatory power, with R^2 values exceeding 80% across all analysed years. This indicates that digitalization-related factors explain a substantial proportion of the variance in government effectiveness. ANOVA tests confirm the robustness and statistical significance of the models as a whole. Additionally, the KMO coefficients reflect an excellent level of sampling adequacy and prove the stability of the factor structure employed in the analysis. Thirdly, the graphical representations (scatterplots) provide a clear view of countries' positions relative to the overall regression trend. The Nordic countries, along with the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Belgium, Austria, and Germany, consistently occupy the upper part of the distribution, reflecting both a high degree of digitalization and strong institutional effectiveness. Estonia stands out for its significant progress between 2013 and 2022, narrowing the gap with top-performing countries and potentially serving as a model of good practice for other Central and Eastern European countries that joined the EU more recently. Conversely, Romania and Bulgaria consistently rank at the lower end, highlighting persistent disparities within the European Union in terms of both digitalization and institutional development.

In conclusion, digitalization exerts a positive and substantial influence on government effectiveness, contributing to improved institutional performance, enhanced administrative capacity, and overall better governance quality in EU member states. Therefore, the promotion of rapid adoption and deployment of digital technologies in public administration is well justified. Digitalization enables facilities to become more flexible and sustainable as they navigate current challenges. This approach also aligns with the EU's 2030 Digital Compass. The Compass sets ambitious goals for digitalizing public administration in member states.

This research helps us better understand how digitalization affects administration and governance. It also highlights the importance of involving decision-makers in promoting digital public services. The study's findings could serve as a reference point for developing public policies based on the EU Digital

Agenda and launching effective digitalization strategies that support the sustainable development and modernization of public management.

About the study's limitations, it would be interesting for future research to address one or more of them—for example, by analyzing a larger number of indicators and, in particular, countries, exploring the risks associated with the digitalization process and how they have been managed, as well as formulating new questions or hypotheses, such as those concerning the quality of government effectiveness or the impact of digitalization on economic development, etc.

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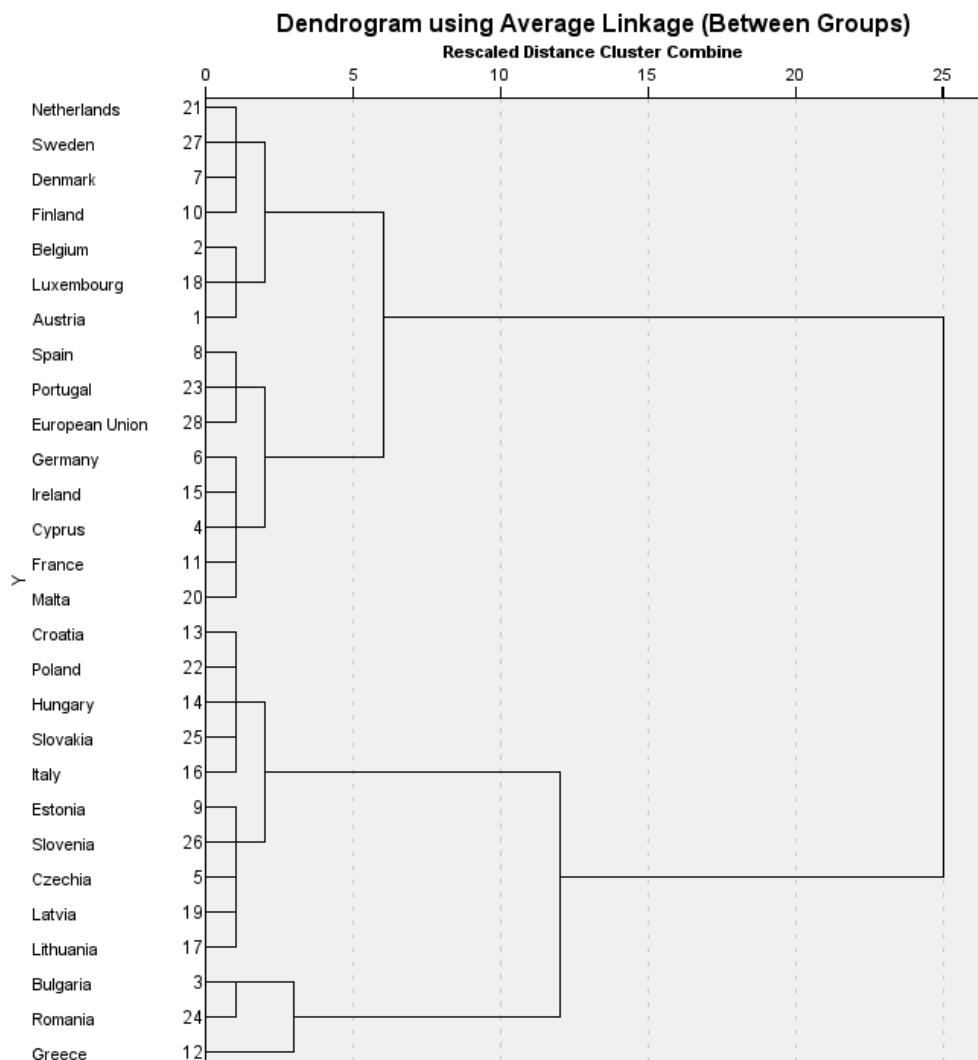
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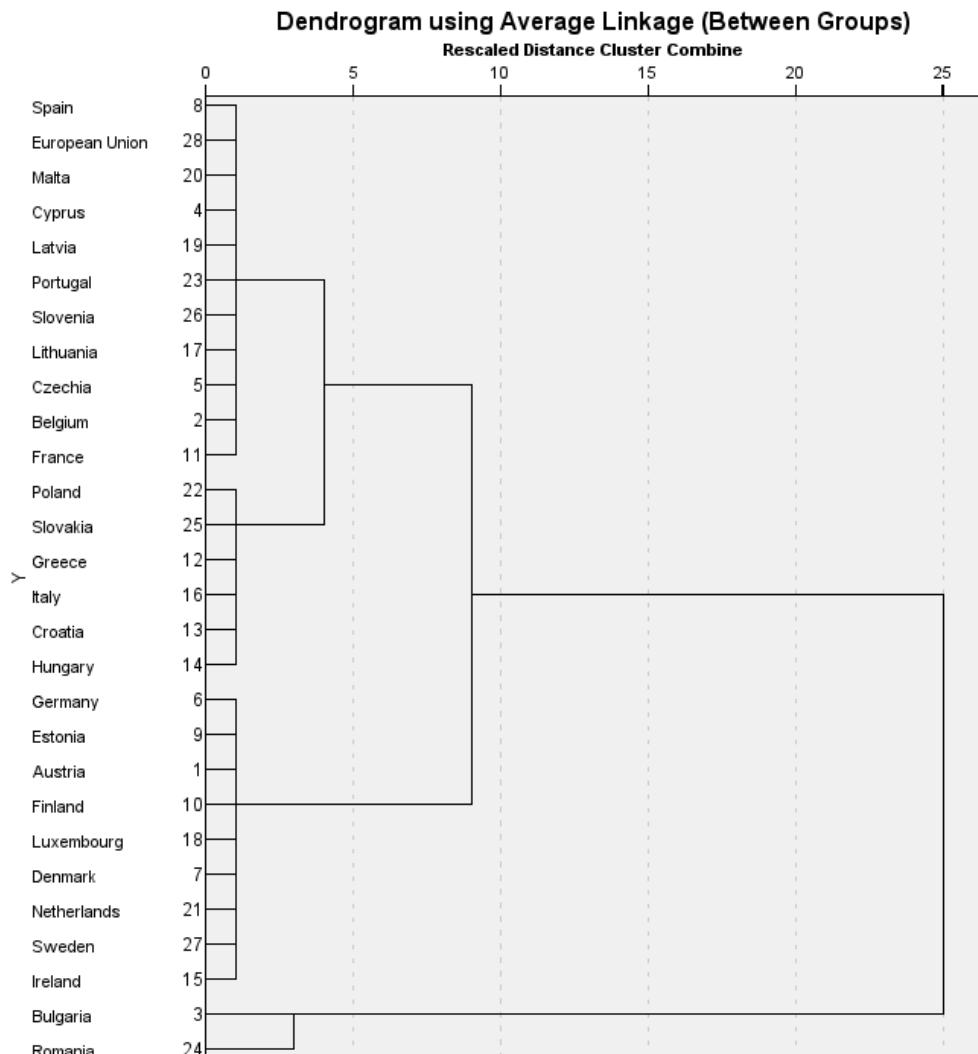
APPENDIX

A1. Dendogram_Government Effectiveness_2013



Source: authors' representation

A2. Dendogram_Government Effectiveness_2022



Source: authors' representation

Integration of Rwandan crafts students in Germany: a case study

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Abstract: Attracting African youths to vocational training in Europe can help address skills shortages, while African countries benefit from remittances and returning skilled workers. However, integration challenges can hinder this approach. This study uses case study methodology to explore such challenges. It begins with a literature review on the theoretical framework of educational migration and previous research on integration of African education migrants in Germany. The focus then narrows to Rwandans who migrated to Germany for apprenticeships in the crafts sector. Semi-structured interviews with five migrants examined their integration experiences, highlighting both, challenges and mitigation strategies. Participants stressed the importance of thorough preparation before and upon arrival, particularly in learning the German language and understanding local customs, including dialects. These findings offer practical insights for policymakers and training providers to improve integration support, contributing to a more stable skilled labour supply in Europe.

Keywords: apprenticeship, integration experiences, migration, Germany, Rwanda

Introduction

The transition of Germany to a climate-neutral economy requires new competencies and more workforce in the sectors construction, energy, manufacturing and transport (Mengis et al., 2022). The role of regular labour migrants from non-European countries, particularly African youths who migrate to Germany to do an apprenticeship, may become a key success factor in this transition, due to the lack of own youths interested in vocational professions in Germany and due to the strong motivation of unemployed youths from Africa (Beicht & Walden, 2019). The African home countries will in return benefit from diaspora remittances and brain gain – since the youths typically leave only with basic qualifications and some of them might remigrate fully qualified or do skills transfer remotely. But this

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approach can only lead to sustainable outcomes, if the migrated African youths successfully integrate in the society and decide to stay in Germany long-term.

Germany's transition to a climate-neutral economy is highly dependent on a sufficient number of skilled workers in vocational professions, particularly in the crafts sector, which plays a central role in construction, energy systems and manufacturing (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie, 2021; Mengis et al., 2022). At the same time, Germany faces a persistent lack of domestic youth interested in vocational careers (Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, 2023). Previous studies have highlighted both the opportunities and challenges of integrating young migrants into the dual training system (Beicht & Walden, 2019). However, little research has so far examined how regular labour migrants from African countries, such as Rwanda, experience integration during apprenticeships in Germany's crafts sector. By addressing this gap, the paper contributes to the literature on labour migration, vocational training and integration by providing empirical insights into the challenges and coping strategies of Rwandan apprentices.

The manuscript uses case study as strategy of inquiry. To this end, the paper, firstly, reviews the existing literature, while including theories in the context of integrating education migrants, as well as previous research on integration challenges of migrated African apprentices in Germany, and proven mitigation strategies for these challenges. The aim is to identify strategies to ensure the successful integration of migrant apprentices and to prevent remigration, which would undermine the investments made in their training.

After this review, secondly, the paper narrows the case down to Rwandans, who migrated for apprenticeship in the crafts sector to Germany. Semi-structured interviews with five Rwandans were conducted, focusing on their integration experiences in Germany – again focusing on integration challenges and strategies to overcome these. Thematic analysis is used to identify codes, categories and themes in the transcripts.

This manuscript focuses on two research questions (RQ):

- RQ1: What integration challenges do Rwandan crafts apprentices have in Germany?
- RQ2: What mitigation strategies do Rwandan crafts apprentices apply and what mitigation strategies might help in future, overcoming these integration challenges?

This paper first outlines the research methodology, including case and participant selection, data collection and analysis. The results section presents the coding, key themes and demographic background, illustrated with quotes and quantitative data. The discussion relates the findings to the literature. The conclusion summarizes insights, notes limitations, suggests future research and highlights implications for stakeholders.

1. Literature review

The literature review was conducted in three steps. First, relevant theories were identified as the foundation of the study. Second, previous research related to the research questions was reviewed. Finally, research gaps were identified.

1.1. Theoretical framework

This study is guided by a set of migration, human capital and educational theories that together provide a comprehensive lens on the integration of African apprentices in Germany. Migration theories offer structural and agency-based perspectives: neoclassical approaches frame migration as a rational response to economic disparities, while world systems and migration networks theories highlight how global inequalities, historical ties and social networks shape opportunities and barriers to integration (Triandafyllidou, 2023). Assimilation, multiculturalism and segmented assimilation explain the different pathways through which migrants adapt to host societies, whereas the mobilities perspective emphasizes circular and transnational movements, pointing to the fluidity of migrant trajectories (Triandafyllidou, 2023). To complement these, human and social capital theories underline how education, skills and networks constitute resources that can either facilitate or constrain integration processes (Russ, 2014).

In the educational context, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory shows how integration outcomes depend on interactions across multiple environments – from family and peers to institutions and policy frameworks (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Tinto's student integration model further emphasizes the importance of academic and social belonging for persistence and success, highlighting institutional responsibility in fostering inclusive environments for education migrants (Tinto, 1993).

Together, these theories inform the analytical framework of this paper by explaining why African apprentices migrate, how they build and use resources, and which multi-level factors influence their integration experiences in Germany's vocational training system.

1.2. Previous research on vocational migration

A literature review of scientific articles, books, policy and scientific reports was conducted, using online research databases, to obtain relevant data on the integration of African Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) migrants in Germany. Of twenty identified sources, ten were assessed of appropriate quality to contribute to the findings. These included studies based on quantitative and mixed-methods designs. The other ten sources were excluded as they did not meet the quality assessment criteria, for example due to methodological shortcomings, linguistic deficiencies or potential bias compromising scientific rigor.

Because of time constraints, certain biases were tolerated. First, the only person involved in the literature selection and data extraction was the author. This might have affected transparency and reproducibility and might have increased risk of errors. Second, this research just focused on sources published since 2018 in English or German. This might have excluded significant information.

The selected studies show that the research questions were not yet researched in detail. This paper groups the findings by integration challenges and mitigation strategies, starting with the integration challenges. For instance, the low level of skills and education – being technical, but more important language – was identified in the literature review as a key factor for integration failure of African TVET migrants in Germany (Adedeji & Bullinger, 2019; Backhaus, 2020; Becker, 2024). Thus, migrants would have challenges to cope with the speed of education (Studthoff et al., 2024).

In addition to education, the German (work) culture is perceived as non-welcoming and some migrants experienced insult or physical harm (Froehlich & Schulte, 2019; Idemudia & Boehnke, 2020).

Other major integration issues are caused by the administration processes in regards to visa, family reunification and recognition of prior qualification: some offices are difficult to access, e. g. due to short opening times; the attitude is perceived as non-welcoming, not offering services in English; there are some unclear or overlapping mandates, so that migrants have to deal with several offices instead of one (Becker et al., 2023; European Commission, 2022; 2024; Studthoff et al., 2024).

General errands related to integration (e. g. bank account opening, apartment search or registering with health insurance) may also cause difficulties (Studthoff et al., 2024). For instance, limited income and career opportunities, poor medical treatment and living conditions, limited social relations, concerns in regard to safety and finances seem to cause Africans to remigrate to their home countries after finishing apprenticeship (Adedeji & Bullinger, 2019; Backhaus, 2020).

At last, another integration challenge was identified in the difficult German climate, compared to tropical and subtropical African climate (Idemudia & Boehnke, 2020).

Literature have also emphasized some possible strategies in order to mitigate integration obstacles. According to the literature review, the low level of skills can be overcome by contextualizing and building a partnership, in which the quality of education in Africa is improved before migration to Germany (Backhaus, 2020; Becker, 2024; Clemens et al., 2019). This should include qualified language courses, conversational and technical, in the home countries before migration and in the host countries after migration (Becker, 2024; Becker et al., 2023; Clemens et al., 2019; Studthoff et al., 2024). Short preparational trainings in the home countries, prior to departure, on the (work) culture and expectation management, would also facilitate integration (Clemens et al., 2019; Studthoff et al., 2024).

Administration processes should be improved by making them leaner, faster and more welcoming, particularly with regard to accelerated procedures for visas, recognition of prior qualifications and family reunification (Becker, 2024; Becker et al., 2023; European Commission, 2022; 2024). In addition, the efficient use of existing networks of integration support offers – such as voluntary training initiatives or the sharing of experiences by successfully integrated migrants – could further enhance communication with authorities (Clemens et al., 2019; Studthoff et al., 2024).

Beyond administrative improvements, fostering mutual understanding between migrants and host communities is essential. Prejudices can be reduced through face-to-face interaction between both groups, which helps build trust and dismantle stereotypes (Froehlich & Schulte, 2019).

Building on this, integration can also be facilitated through individual onboarding and tailored integration services, jointly provided by companies, training institutions and local governments. Such cooperation not only strengthens institutional support but also demonstrates a caring mentality toward migrants – for example, by covering certain expenses related to visa procedures or assisting with everyday administrative tasks (Becker, 2023; 2024Studthoff et al., 2024).

Finally, social integration requires efforts beyond the institutional sphere. Joint activities with host communities – such as religious gatherings – or within migrant groups themselves – such as communal dinners – can provide important opportunities for African TVET migrants to build social ties and strengthen their sense of belonging (Idemudia & Boehnke, 2020).

Despite the growing body of literature on migration and integration, several gaps remain relevant for this study. Research on the integration of regular African migrants in Germany is scarce, as most existing studies primarily focus on irregular migration, neglecting the dynamics of skills- and education-related migration. Moreover, there is a lack of integrated research on African education migrants who specifically enter Germany for TVET programmes. Empirical studies are needed to assess whether this pathway can contribute sustainably to addressing Germany's skills shortage, taking into account both structural aspects (e. g. labour market demands, training company practices) and soft factors of integration (e. g. daily life challenges). Finally, much of the existing research treats Africa as a homogeneous region, whereas country-specific analyses are necessary to capture the diverse contexts of African migrants. Addressing these gaps would provide a stronger empirical basis for developing strategies to facilitate the integration of African TVET migrants in Germany.

2. Methods

Basing on the general findings in the literature review, qualitative research was applied for this research, to further study the integration experiences of African apprentices in Germany. To get more specific insights, the research narrowed the

case down. The Rwandan diaspora was chosen because of its long-standing cooperation in education with Germany. The focus is on the crafts sector, because this is one of the sectors with the highest skills shortage in Germany. The case to be analysed is defined as follows: perspective of five Rwandan crafts journeymen (graduated apprentices), focusing on their experiences in the context of integration in Germany during the apprenticeship.

The approach applied in this study is a case study as strategy of inquiry. Creswell (2009) recommends case study as inquiry strategy to examine a specific phenomenon in detail in a bound system. Here, the phenomenon is „integration experiences” and the bound system is „Rwandan apprentices in the German crafts sector”. The research aimed to answer two questions:

- RQ1: What integration challenges do Rwandan crafts apprentices have in Germany?
- RQ2: What mitigation strategies do Rwandan crafts apprentices apply and what mitigation strategies might help in future, overcoming these integration challenges?

A case study design was therefore chosen to gain detailed insights into the contextualized experiences of the trainees. In particular, the analysis considered how different factors (preparation, education, finances, society, culture, administration and work or school environment, family and friends) influence integration.

When it comes to the selection of participants, purposive and opportunity sampling were combined. The focus was on Rwandan citizens who had migrated to Germany directly after graduating from high school in Rwanda, without any additional formal education, and who had successfully completed an apprenticeship in Germany at least two years earlier. This profile ensured that participants were able to retrospectively evaluate their integration challenges and the strategies they had used to overcome them. The sample was recruited through opportunities within the researcher’s professional network, developed over more than ten years of work in East Africa with a focus on technical training.

Regarding data collection, the author was the interviewer and conducted five semi-structured interviews, either in person or online if a physical meeting was not possible. Most meetings took place in a restaurant setting, to create a relaxed atmosphere. Each interview was structured in two parts: a fully structured section for collecting general and quantitative information, and a semi-structured section for qualitative insights into individual experiences. The question catalogue can be derived online (Tomingas, 2025). An interview and observation protocol was implemented in an application (Google Forms), which was used both for reading instructions and questions and for recording answers and observations. In addition, audio taping was used. The typed answers and observations were consolidated with the transcriptions from the audio recordings within a week from each interview.

For data analysis and interpretation, the software ATLAS.ti (version 25) was applied. Thematic analysis guided the process. First, the researcher familiarized

himself with the data and noted impressions regarding tone, credibility and general ideas. Then open coding was conducted, limiting each code to a maximum of five words. From there, broader themes were identified, revised to avoid redundancies, and refined to ensure concise and descriptive names. The findings are summarized in the description of the case, supported by quotes and quantitative data. Finally, the results were interpreted in relation to the research objectives and existing literature.

In terms of reliability, all captured information was read, reviewed and corrected, and steps and procedures were documented in memos to avoid a shift in the meaning of codes, as recommended by Creswell (2009). Validity was enhanced by presenting also discrepant or negative information, by providing detailed descriptions, and by reflecting on the researcher's own bias as an experienced development worker who normally promotes employment opportunities within Africa rather than migration to Europe. Generalizability was not the aim; instead, the intention was to specify, verify or contradict findings from the literature and add new knowledge for this defined case.

Finally, ethical considerations followed the European Charter for Researchers (European Commission, 2005). At the beginning of each interview, the purpose and societal benefits of the research were explained to the participants. Informed consent forms were shared and signed by both parties, with one copy each retained. This protected participants' rights and guaranteed the possibility to withdraw at any time. Audio files, physical consent forms and notes were destroyed within one week, while anonymized and password-protected digital versions were safely stored. Participation was voluntary, non-discriminatory and designed to ensure participants' comfort, including the provision of food and water during the interviews.

Basing on the general findings in the literature review, qualitative research was applied for this research, to further study the integration experiences of African apprentices in Germany. To get more specific insights, the research narrowed the case down. The Rwandan diaspora was chosen because of its long-standing cooperation in education with Germany. The focus is on the crafts sector, because this is one of the sectors with the highest skills shortage in Germany.

The case to be analysed is defined as follows: perspective of five Rwandan crafts journeymen (graduated apprentices), focusing on their experiences in the context of integration in Germany during the apprenticeship.

3. Results

In this section, the document summarizes the findings for the case. The study identified 137 codes in open coding as part of the thematic analysis process. Within repetitive revision cycles, it consolidated ten key themes, emerging from the codes.

In the next sub-section, the study first shares demographic information of the research participants. Then, it explains the different themes in detail, starting with

the most emerging themes (most mentions consolidated). The theme explanations are supported by evidence from data, as direct quotes and quantitative information.

3.1. Demographic information on participants

All five research participants had Rwandan citizenship and were male. Four of them were Christians and one was Moslem.

Table 1. Demographics of participants

Basic Demographics (current)	<p>Gender:</p> <p>5 male / 0 female</p> <p>Religion:</p> <p>4 Christian / 1 Moslem</p> <p>Mean age:</p> <p>37 years (29 – 42 years)</p> <p>Family situation:</p> <p>4 married with children / 1 single</p>
Migration Background	<p>Migration history:</p> <p>3 in 2005 to Germany (returned to Rwanda)</p> <p>2 in 2019 to Germany (still work in Germany)</p> <p>Family:</p> <p>3 migrated without family / 2 migrated with 1 relative</p>
Education	<p>Education before migration:</p> <p>5 secondary school graduates</p> <p>Education in Germany:</p> <p>3 masons / 1 cook / 1 caretaker</p> <p>Education after migration:</p> <p>3 TVET graduates / 1 bachelor's degree / 1 master's degree holder</p> <p>German language skills before migration:</p> <p>3 without language skills / 2 with basic language skills</p> <p>German language skills now:</p> <p>4 with advanced language skills / 1 with native language skills</p>
Employment	<p>Mean salary:</p> <p>Mean before migration = 315 USD (0 – 1,000 USD)</p> <p>Mean now = 1,800 USD (1,000 – 2,000 USD)</p> <p>Employment now:</p> <p>4 in formal employment / 1 student</p>

Source: author's representation

Three migrated to Germany 20 years ago, while two migrated six years ago. The motivation for all of them to migrate was „exposure to something new” and

„learning something new”. Three of them already returned to Rwanda, while two now work as skilled workforce in Germany.

At the time of migration, all research participants were fresh graduates of 12-years basic education in Rwanda. Three had no income, while two had little income (mean income of the five participants = 315 USD). They had no (three participants) or basic (two) German language skills. Three migrated without any family or friends, while one migrated with a sibling. One already had extended family in Germany.

Three of the five interviewees did a journeyman certificate as masons in Germany, while one became a cook and one a caretaker. They all successfully graduated after four years of training, of which the first year was focusing on German language competence. The other three years focused on the practical and theoretical technical competences.

At the time of the interviews, they were between 29 and 42 years of age (mean age = 37). Four were married and had children, one was single. All of them either gained advanced or native German language skills. Two joined university after graduating in TVET and were bachelor's or master's degree holders now.

At the time of research, two participants worked in formal employment according to the learnt profession. Two were formally employed in a different sector and one was student. They earned 1,800 USD on average now (mean). That is six times more than before migration. All of them were in a range between 1,000 and 2,000 USD.

3.2. Personal support as pre-dominant factor for a successful integration

Personal support was the pre-dominant factor for a successful integration in Germany (most mentions consolidated). It is therefore considered to be the most important integration strategy.

Three interviewees migrated without family members to Germany. Thus, one of their major challenges in integration was the lack of personal support, particularly friends and family. All participants confirmed that they missed the life with their friends and families in the home country. However, two interviewees already had (extended) family in Germany and confirmed that this was a big support.

According to all five interviewees, German friends and spouses were important for the social integration, particularly learning the language. German friends and spouses helped also with understanding the culture and with understanding the German law system.

Ideally, this gap of not having family and friends in Germany was filled by other personal supporters. Integration was most successful, if these stepped in from the very beginning. All participants got to know about the possibility to migrate to Germany and to do an apprenticeship through personal contacts. For all, personal contacts supported them in the preparation of the migration to Germany, by giving

informal advice on what to expect (e. g. racism, weather, non-welcoming society or work life) and how to behave (e. g. punctuality or legal regulations).

The same personal contacts introduced them to their employers for apprenticeship. Some even paid the flight tickets and rented a home for the first year of the Rwandan migrants in Germany. In all cases, they did not yet receive in that year an apprenticeship allowance, since they only studied German language. The allowance was later (for the other three years of their education) paid by the employer. This made them financially independent.

The extended contacts of the initial supporters were also supportive in several administrative challenges, e. g. when there were delays in the visa procedures or with the recognition of prior qualification. According to all interviewees, the stakeholders involved in the training wanted to support the aim of the initial supporters to train African youths in Germany. Thus, they supported the Rwandan apprentices. The employers and company trainers helped the Rwandans in learning, how to do errands, e. g. supermarket shopping, or gave behavioural advice, e. g., how to dress. Even a mayor supported some of the interviewees in creating shorter procedures for administrative issues.

The following is a quote from one interviewee on the personal support mentioned:

He helped us so much. Whenever there was a challenge, he found a solution through his network. When we went to the visa office and the officer was denying work visas, he called the Rwandan Honorary Council and within one day the problem was solved. He even asked work colleagues to look for winter clothes for us. I would not have managed to integrate in German society without his personal support.

3.3. Organized preparation and language skills as essential foundations for a successful integration

The Rwandan migrants emphasised that their integration was easier compared to other groups of vocational migrants they met, particularly due to the personal support they received. However, they also criticised that this support was not organized. Therefore, they had to remain flexible, put in a lot of effort and improvise to successfully integrate. They faced challenges with errands (e. g. shopping due to the new currency or the new products), with the expectations of employers and society (e. g. punctuality or how to dress) as well as with the traffic system.

For a better integration, all interviewees recommended organized preparation courses. This aspect was the second most frequently mentioned factor for a successful integration, though all of them confirmed that their preparation had been more informal than organized. Thus, this constitutes a recommendation for a future integration strategy. Such organized preparation courses should be divided into two

parts: a pre-migration stage in Rwanda and the arrival in Germany. According to two interviewees, the part in Rwanda could be offered by an agency, financed by future employers. The courses should contain language (conversational and technical), occupational aspects (theoretical and practical), expectations, administration (e. g. visa procedures or recognition of prior qualifications), errands and regional aspects. Following the recommendation of two interviewees, employers could play the main role in the preparation courses in Germany upon arrival. They should explain their expectations to new apprentices, but also what apprentices can expect, e. g. regarding infrastructure, organization or weather. These preparation courses should also include cultural norms, such as how to behave or dress.

Closely connected to preparation are language skills, which all five interviewees highlighted as an additional and indispensable condition for successful integration. None of them had more than basic German skills prior to migration. They stated that they failed to integrate smoothly in the first year of technical training in the company and in vocational school, because they could not communicate properly with their bosses, colleagues, customers and trainers. Consequently, they perceived the training speed as too fast, which also explains why some partly failed their first examinations. The main problem was that the available language courses focused on conversational German, whereas they needed technical vocabulary both at the workplace and in school. At the same time, they also lacked conversational language for daily life.

Language skills were therefore the third most frequently mentioned factor for successful integration and are considered a key integration strategy. The interviewees applied different mitigation strategies. They attended evening classes in technical language, but also admitted that language was best learned through personal interactions, particularly with Germans. To achieve this, they avoided remaining only among the Rwandan diaspora and actively sought to integrate with Germans. Some had already started learning German prior to migration. Nevertheless, the research participants strongly recommended easier access to German language courses (e. g. in the form of evening classes), ideally as part of the formal preparation outlined above.

3.4. Strong personality and regional preparation as complementary conditions for effective integration

A strong personality was the fourth often mentioned integration strategy. All interviewees confirmed that the migration to Germany was a chance for self-development and to learn something new. They were prepared by personal contacts, who emphasised commitment, punctuality and discipline as prerequisites to succeed in German work culture. Also, as already mentioned above, they had to remain flexible and empathic, to be motivated and durant to successfully integrate.

The interviewees stated that they needed to learn new skills, particularly soft skills, and to adapt to new contexts very fast. To succeed, it was not enough just to work and study during worktime. It was a complex task, which included evening classes, both, technical and language, as well as volunteering and integrational hobbies in the free time. Continuous adjustment was necessary. The research participants had to work hard. This included additional work.

The following is a quote from one interviewee regarding the personality:

My friend always told me, Germans live for work. It requires strong personal commitment and extra hours to succeed and integrate. Somebody, who believes, he arrives and people will just donate money, will not succeed.

Regional preparation was the fifth often mentioned integration strategy. The research participants emphasised that all German regions they visited were different, with different integration challenges. They lacked the specific behavioural information for their training regions, e. g. how to dress or how to greet.

According to their perception, society and employers were not patient with the migrants. They wished that the local community would also be better prepared for hosting foreigners, e. g. in being patient with migrants.

According to the interviewees, particularly learning the local dialect was important for their integration at the workplace and in private life: standard German was not understood by the local population. The interviewees also failed to understand the locals. Therefore, the research participants recommended the inclusion of local dialects in preparation courses, besides the local customs. These courses could be conducted by the employer.

3.5. Integration without major obstacles in certain areas

Four of five interviewees emphasised that the recognition of their Rwandan high school certificates, as part of the official apprenticeship registration, was easy. Neither the accreditation process with German government nor with the public school took long. Most interviewees perceived the entry requirements and formal procedures as easy, because they were used to similar administration in Rwanda. Two research participants emphasised that the visa procedures were ok. One mentioned that the labour office informed him well, prior to apprenticeship.

The German TVET system was judged as accommodative: all research participants confirmed that it is well explained, structured and organized. Standard operating procedures would exist. The training would contain many learning materials and practical exercises. All interviewees confirmed that apprenticeship was easy for them.

Two research participants still lived in Germany. They emphasised that there was no difference in payment between them and Germans with similar

qualifications. They believed that they had equal job opportunities in Germany as Germans.

Even without having savings before migrating to Germany, all apprentices succeeded and graduated as journeymen. They did not lack anything, neither healthcare, nor housing, nor food. The overall integration experience was considered as good by all interviewees.

3.6. Role of group activities in strengthening social integration

All interviewees participated in sports activities, e. g. basketball or football, to make new friends and to learn German language. New friendships not only helped with language, but also led to other social activities: all interviewees regularly went out with the sports friends. One interviewee started to work in the garage of a sports friend.

Besides, the interviewees participated in different self-aid groups, in which they shared their daily challenges. They supported each other, based on their experiences. Three interviewees organized themselves in study groups with either their sports friends or other apprentices of their companies. All groups were mixed (Germans and foreigners). This was helpful, because it forced foreigners to speak German and to socially integrate.

The interviewees also participated in religious gatherings, in which they made new friends. There, they applied the German language, though they complained that, due to secularization, it was difficult to find a community with people in their age group. Other gatherings were organized by the African diaspora, in which African migrants could share experiences and support each other.

One interviewee shared his experience and his views on the role of the African diaspora:

We met twice a month in the Africa house. I noticed that not all influence from fellow expats is good, particularly the generalization. People said that our home countries have challenges. But I am Rwandan, and I want to speak for my country and not for a continent. My country is good and the development is incredible, thanks to the good leadership and governance. Back to the diaspora: we met for church, we met for dinner, we listened to music, danced and laughed a lot. That was good. One friend shared that he cannot read coins and therefore always pays with bills at the supermarket. We helped each other.

3.7. Negative reception and irreplaceable exposure as contrasting experiences of integration

All research participants emphasised that the German work culture and social culture were perceived as rather non-welcoming. One example mentioned was the

ignorance towards neighbours; at the beginning, migrants thought this was personal, but later they noticed similar behaviour even among German neighbours. All interviewees also experienced racism, which included random searches or passport controls by police, people moving away from them in public transport, insults and bullying by colleagues or strangers. One interviewee explained that his colleagues were jealous, because he worked hard and was therefore more successful. As a mitigation strategy, one participant suggested that racism should be punished more strictly, criticising that the German government was not doing enough against it.

At the same time, the participants underlined that exposure in Germany was irreplaceable for internalising the cultural and social environment. However well they were prepared for migration, they still experienced cultural shocks, such as the coldness of winters or the advanced infrastructure. Everyday encounters, like driving on a German highway, using trains or reading traffic signs, were described as both, surprising and formative. Soft skills such as reliability, punctuality and commitment were perceived as best internalised through direct experience in the German training and work environment.

To cope with these challenges and shocks, interviewees mentioned several strategies. They actively avoided remaining within the Rwandan diaspora in order to learn German language and culture more quickly, and some organised preparatory visits. A few even spent one-month trial stays in Germany before starting their apprenticeships, which they described as particularly helpful for easing their later integration.

3.8. Reducing bureaucracy as relevant condition for smoother integration

The interviewees emphasised that administration in Germany was challenging and that they needed guidance. Though the recognition of prior skills was easy for four research participants, one had strong challenges with it. It even failed. All participants did not consider family reunification, due to the complexity of the process. Also, the visa process was stressful and complex. It required personal intervention (compare above).

Therefore, the interviewees recommended the German government to ease administration procedures, particularly visa, recognition of prior qualification and family reunification. They also advised the government to establish one-stop-centres, where migrants could receive services in all migration related matters, e. g. administration.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study illustrate the complex integration experiences of Rwandan apprentices in Germany and show how they both confirm and nuance existing theories and previous research. Economic motivations were central for all

participants, confirming Neoclassical Economic Theory (Triandafyllidou, 2023). The challenges they encountered after arrival reveal the limitations of this perspective. As noted in earlier work (Triandafyllidou, 2023), economic disparities alone cannot explain integration trajectories; rather, they must be complemented by sociocultural and institutional perspectives.

Language barriers emerged as one of the most persistent challenges, in line with earlier studies highlighting limited technical language skills among African TVET migrants as a key obstacle (Adedeji & Bullinger, 2019; Backhaus, 2020; Becker, 2024; Studthoff et al., 2024). While participants had attended conversational courses, these did not prepare them for the technical vocabulary required at the workplace or in vocational schools. This supports Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Model, which emphasises the importance of academic integration for persistence, and resonates with Chiswick and Miller's (2007) findings that language proficiency is decisive for labour market integration. Participants mitigated this by attending evening classes and engaging with German peers, which underlines the relevance of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, since integration outcomes were shaped by both institutional and peer environments.

Migration Systems and Networks Theory is also confirmed, as participants relied heavily on mentors, family and diaspora connections to navigate challenges. These networks provided critical information and emotional support, echoing Social Capital Theory and previous findings on the significance of bonding and bridging capital (Russ, 2014). Participants with stronger networks experienced smoother transitions, supporting earlier research on the role of informal support (Froehlich & Schulte, 2019; Idemudia & Boehnke, 2020). At the same time, overreliance on diaspora networks was sometimes avoided, as participants realised that socialising exclusively within African circles slowed their language acquisition – confirming the mixed role of networks already highlighted in Beicht and Walden (2019).

Administrative hurdles were another recurring theme. Participants described visa processes and family reunification as stressful, a finding consistent with studies documenting bureaucracy as a barrier for African migrants (Becker et al., 2023; European Commission, 2022; European Commission, 2024; Studthoff et al., 2024). While recognition of prior schooling was experienced more positively in this study, the general perception of German administration as complex aligns with earlier literature (Bommes & Kolb, 2004). The participants' recommendation of one-stop offices corresponds to OECD (2020) policy advice on simplifying administrative procedures for migrants.

Discrimination was reported by all participants, ranging from everyday microaggressions to workplace jealousy. This confirms earlier findings on prejudice towards African migrants (Froehlich & Schulte, 2019; Idemudia & Boehnke, 2020) and supports World Systems Theory, which highlights structural inequalities persisting even when migrants are formally included in the labour market (Triandafyllidou, 2023). Participants' call for stricter punishment of racism resonates

with findings by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2022), which underline that, despite existing legal frameworks, anti-discrimination laws in Germany are often insufficiently enforced in practice.

At the same time, the study reveals positive experiences. Several participants described integration as relatively smooth, reporting equal pay, good training structures and access to healthcare. This diverges from previous findings of poor living conditions and limited opportunities (Adedeji & Bullinger, 2019; Backhaus, 2020), suggesting heterogeneity in integration outcomes depending on support, preparation and individual resilience. The role of strong personality traits such as perseverance and openness, highlighted by participants, further expands Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993), showing that personal attributes are as relevant as formal skills for integration.

Finally, the study underscores the irreplaceable value of exposure. Despite preparatory courses, cultural shocks (e. g. climate, infrastructure) could not be avoided. Instead, participants emphasised that direct experience in the German context was crucial for learning norms of reliability and punctuality. This aligns with Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning, emphasizing that direct immersion and practical engagement are essential components of successful integration. Preparatory visits to Germany before migration were perceived as particularly beneficial – a strategy rarely highlighted in earlier literature.

In summary, this study confirms key findings of earlier research, particularly regarding language, administration and discrimination, but it also nuances the picture by emphasising the centrality of personal support, the heterogeneity of experiences, and the irreplaceable role of exposure. The results suggest that integration is best understood through a multi-theoretical lens: while economic motivations explain the decision to migrate, social capital, institutional environments and experiential learning shape how integration unfolds in practice.

Conclusions

TVET migration from Africa, particularly from Rwanda to Germany, can be more successful than migration of fully qualified workforce. Its benefit is that the German companies can design the training of the migrated apprentice according to their needs, instead of working with someone, who already studied his profession in another context and might not be ready to learn again.

In the following, the manuscript summarizes its key findings. First, the most important factor for successful integration is good preparation, most importantly focusing on language skills, particularly local dialects.

Second, soft skills as the individual character, motivation and will are other key factors, which lead to successful or unsuccessful integration. These can be partly trained, but also depend on the background of a person.

Third, integration becomes easier, the more welcome and confident the migrant feels. Previous migration experiences and socio-cultural, language or technical knowledge additionally build his or her confidence. Strong personal support and networks are more success factors. Non-welcoming factors as prejudices and discrimination are counterproductive and lead to lack of confidence of the migrant.

Fourth, mingling in non-homogeneous groups of friends, consisting of foreigners and locals, helps to learn the best of each culture and therefore is an important tool for integration in any country. This way, migrants can select to learn the processes and customs of a country from its nationals and the mitigation strategies to overcome challenges from the expat community.

The study is also marred by limitations. It is limited by the low number of research participants and therefore not generalizable. However, this was not the research aim, but to add knowledge in the context of the selected case. There are two reasons for the low number of research participants. First, up to now, only a few thousand Rwandan nationals graduated apprenticeship in the crafts sector in Germany. Second, due to data protection law, it is very difficult to identify them.

Future research should apply the same methodology, but focus on a bigger sample, to be more representative and generalizable. The sample size could be increased by focusing on different East African countries, e. g. Uganda and Rwanda. Another aspect for future research would be the reintegration experiences of East African crafts graduates after returning from Germany, particularly focusing on the benefits of this model for the home countries.

This research may guide the relevant stakeholders to understand integration challenges of African TVET migrants in Germany and how to mitigate them. Relevant stakeholders were identified in the African home countries as well as in Germany, being policymakers, embassies, public authorities, private sector representations, employers, training providers and civil society.

This research might consecutively contribute to sustainable reduction of skills shortage in Germany and economic development and youth employment in partaking African countries.

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