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I. EUROPEAN STUDIES AND PUBLIC POLICIES

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COMMUNITY INTEGRATING HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES A SUSTAINABILITY ANALYSIS APPROACH OF A HEALTHCARE PROJECT IN ROMANIA, FUNDED BY THE SWISS-ROMANIAN COOPERATION PROGRAM

BERGMANN Christian*

Abstract. *This article displays a sustainability analysis conducted in 2023. It exemplifies how this type of analysis can be performed at the project level, reproducing the procedure on as many projects as predetermined and drawing conclusions about the entire program. The need to evaluate government-funded interventions and implemented social programs has become more urgent. Stakeholders must have assurance that the projects they funded are performing as intended. To help ensure the proper functioning and overview of a project, more evaluations must be conducted. Due to the nature of the program phase, a full-scale evaluation was not possible; however, it was more than suitable to conduct the sustainability analysis. The program ended in 2019, and the analysis was conducted in 2023. To assess the program, several methods were applied. The program documents underwent a content analysis before the sustainability analysis. Sustainability was observed with the help of survey questionnaires, document review, telephone conversations, and on-site object observations. The results of the overall analysis, conducted in 2023, were not as expected, nor were those of the analyzed project presented in this article. The content analysis showed positive results, and the sustainability analysis revealed the overall project`s success. Nevertheless, we have recommendations based on the project analysis. Those will be discussed in the article`s summary.*

Keywords: *Switzerland, Romania, cooperation, cohesion contribution, health issues, sustainability analysis, content analysis.*

The following article presents an excerpt of the sustainability analysis of the Swiss-Romanian Cooperation Program (SRCP) conducted in 2023 and 2024. The focus was on a specific project within the program. Therefore, it presents the overall content analysis performed on the project environment and the sustainability analysis of that specific project. The sustainability analysis was a PhD work and lasted between 2020 and 2024. The goal was to conduct a sustainability analysis of the Swiss-Romanian Cooperation Program 2009-2019. To set up a goal, we asked some research guiding questions, always keeping the sustainability aspect focused. We discarded several questions during our feasibility tests. Time and financial restrictions did not allow for choosing freely from the preconceived questions. We were left with four to conduct the

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analysis. *Did the intervention work?* This question regarded the whole program, based on the analysis of its single elements. We wanted to find out a very basic feature, the functioning of the SRCP. The question relied on the aggregation of all project analysis results. *Did the implemented measures achieve the intended goals?* In this case, the analysis went below the level of our first question. This time, we went for each subcategory within the program.

Some subcategories could be analyzed entirely, while others relied on a sample. With this question, we had the greatest issues. It was impossible to provide evidence, with statistical relevance, on how the SRCP influenced any issues it set out to combat. If we took the Romanian socio-economic markers and compared the growth with the program implementation, we could notice improvement. But while the SRCP ran, other external funding schemes were active as well. It was not possible to measure only the SRCP`s contribution to the overall improvement in Romania.

What type of implemented projects are still operational? Our guiding question for the sustainability analysis. For this question, we had to look at each project separately. This meant a sustainability analysis on each project. It was the main task of the PhD project. The last question: *Did the SRCP improve the bilateral relations between Switzerland and Romania?* was trying to find evidence for any improvement between Switzerland and Romania on the institutional level.

Sustainability analysis is part of a larger evaluation scheme. It is the part that is applied once the program has ended. In this case, the program ended almost four years ago. Enough time to check for sustainability. Among the concept sustainability, we went out to check for more during the project. Merit, worth, effectiveness, and efficiency were the others. Each concept required a different set of data, while merit, worth, effectiveness, and efficiency relied on document analysis and survey questionnaires, sustainability also needed on-site visits for observations.

The content analysis was desk work that compared the documents issued by stakeholders and official parties. This measure was taken to check for basic comprehension, which meant verifying whether the information provided was clear about the issues, intentions, and solutions to implement. Consistency was verified by checking for identical descriptions and information on the issued documents. Adequacy, although the last part will be judged from a basic, non-professional point of view. As we will see, the program consists of specific fields, such as healthcare, with identified needs. To check for adequacy means that we expect projects to address health issues and the particular needs of the given situation, rather than being primarily focused on supporting research for alternatives to nuclear energy. An additional effect was to present raw data in a more structured manner. This provided a clear display of the nominal data *project title* and its *field of operation*, which consisted of three subcategories. And the numeric data *project costs* and *duration.*

The sustainability analysis involved fieldwork, including observation, surveys, and documentation of the project's current situation in the field in 2023. This was done by visiting seven objects in Romania. On-site questionnaire surveys and photographs helped gather data and provide a more authentic view of the object, even though it was only temporary. The program was closed in 2019, which means the seven project sites had four years to stand on their own, without Swiss funding. From a sustainability analysis perspective, this was a very insightful timeframe. While the content analysis yielded more interpretive results, the sustainability analysis was factual, grounded in observable realities. The analysis checked for merit, worth, efficiency, effectiveness, and

sustainability. It is worth noting that the efficiency aspect in this analysis has an interpretive component. It is not based on observations over the project's lifespan. The particular analysis presented was one small part that helped to answer the research guiding questions initially posed. The formulated hypotheses used are mentioned in the summary and conclusion of this article, exemplifying a sustainability analysis variant of the SRCP`s specific project.

1. The Swiss-Romanian Cooperation Program

The need to evaluate government-sponsored economic interventions and recently implemented social programs has become significantly stronger. Switzerland is no exception to that rule; its obligation to evaluate government-funded programs is codified in several sources. One is Article 170 of the 1999 Federal Constitution.[1] Another source is the Federal Act on the Federal Assembly (Parliament Act, ParlA) of December 2002 (issued in January 2024). Switzerland ran a contribution program in Romania between 2009 and 2019. It was the SRCP.

It all started on February 27, 2006, when the Swiss Federal Council and the Council of the European Union (EU) signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)[2] regarding the Swiss financial support for the ten member states that acceded to the EU on May 1, 2004.

This MOU was approved by the Swiss population in a popular vote on November 26, 2006.[3] Switzerland contributed 1.302 billion Swiss Francs (Sfr.) to support projects in the new EU-10 member states.[4] The Romanian Government approved the framework agreement with Decision No. 1065/2010.[5] Romania received 180 million Sfr. The main Leitmotif of the Swiss-Romanian Cooperation Program was:

To reduce the economic and social disparities within the enlarged European Union and between different regions of development of the beneficiary country of Romania. And to contribute within Romania to the reduction of economic and social disparities between the dynamic urban centers and the structurally weak peripheral regions.[6]

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[1] *Bundesverfassung der Schweizerischen Eidgenossenschaft*, 1999, (issued January 2008), Artikel 170 Überprüfung der Wirksamkeit, p. 50. Available in English: www.fedlex.admin.ch. Accessed August 2025.

[2] Official website of the Swiss Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research. *Swiss contribution to the enlarged EU: Signing of a memorandum of understanding.* www.admin.ch/gov/en/start/documentation/media-releases.html Accessed August 2025.

[3] Official website of the Swiss Federal Chancelry (Bundeskanzlei). *Volksabstimmung vom 26. November 2006*. Site is not available in English www.bk.admin.ch/bk/de/home/dokumentation/volksabstimmungen/volksabstimmung.html Accessed August 2025.

[4] Swiss Contribution to selected EU member states. The document is available for download as follows: *Der Schweizer Erweiterungsbeitrag. Bilanz zum Abschluss der Länderprogramme in den EU-12 Staaten* (published May, 2020), p. 4. www.eda.admin.ch/schweizerbeitrag.html In this document, Romania has not finished the necessary time frame of 10 years, which means there is only an incomplete display of results. Accessed August 2025.

[5] Portal Legislativ. *HOTĂRÂRE nr. 1.065 din 20 octombrie 2010*. www.legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/123330. Accessed August 2025.

[6] *Annex 1: Conceptual Framework of the Swiss-Romanian Cooperation Programme,* Document available on the website of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. p. 1-2

The SRCP was terminated on December 7, 2019. The 10-year time frame was divided into two phases: one commitment phase from 2009 to 2014 and one implementation phase from 2014 to 2019. Project selection occurred within the first five years, and all projects were required to be completed by the end of the implementation period.[7] The SRCP was divided into eight thematic funds[8]:

- Health Issues.
- The Sustainable Energy Action Fund (SEAF)
- Inclusion of Roma and Other Vulnerable Groups
- Security
- Research Fund and Project in Education
- Scholarship (SCIEX)
- Partnership and Expert Fund
- Civil Society Participation Fund

Six Thematic Funds were managed by a Swiss Intermediate Body (SIB) in Switzerland, which provided expertise and assistance, as well as a partner organization in Romania. Tow were directly managed in Romania. With a few exceptions, an Executing Agency (EA) in Romania implemented each activity.[9] Each of the eight SIBs was supervised by three institutions: the Ministry of Finance in Romania, serving as the National Coordination Unit (NCU); the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) in Bern; and the Swiss Contribution Office (SCO) at the Swiss Embassy in Bucharest. The SRCP came into existence due to the EU`s demand for Switzerland to pay its fair share for the benefit of access to the open market. Switzerland is not an EU member state, but thanks to its bilateral relations framework, it benefits from the common EU market, without restrictions. This is where the SRCP was created. The idea behind this program is for Switzerland to pay an entry fee to the marketplace. Switzerland accepted the deal, since the EU is its largest and most important trading partner. The program was not only a mere transfer of funds to Romania, but also funding and assisting projects in Romania. Of the 180 million Sfr. roughly 10% remained in Switzerland and went to non-governmental actors. The rest was spent in Romania on almost 300 projects distributed among the eight thematic funds. The benefit of this method was knowledge transfer. The transfer was only possible if the experts from Switzerland worked in Romania with the beneficiaries and target groups. That was fulfilled with intensive cooperation between the actors, which otherwise would not have occurred on such a large scale. This method not only ensured an efficient allocation of funding in Romania but also less fund loss through corruption and bad management. By strengthening local actors and service providers, the SRCP also aimed at creating a sustainable environment for

https://www.eda.admin.ch/schweizerbeitrag/Annex1-Rumaenien_en.pdf Accessed August 2025

[7] Under the section *Documents*, title: *Der Schweizer Erweiterungsbeitrag. Bilanz zum Abschluss der Länderprogramme in den EU-12 Staaten,* p. 5. www.eda.admin.ch/schweizerbeitrag/rumaenien.html Accessed August 2025.

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 8-25.

[9] *Annex 4: Rules and Procedures for Thematic Funds*, p. 1. Document available on the website of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. Accessed August 2025. www.eda.admin.ch/schweizerbeitrag/Annex4-Rumaenien_en.pdf

future projects, without foreign help. The program acted as a force multiplier by investing at the right spots, money and expertise, but without the bulk of an EU program. From those initiatives, more must arise by Romania`s own initiative.

The PhD. project assessed all eight thematic funds. Each one had a content analysis, as presented here, and a sustainability analysis, described on the following pages. The specific project presented in this article was chosen from the Health Issues Fund. The content analysis examined the entire fund, encompassing both the fund and project-related data issued by the involved parties. While the sustainability analysis is of only one project out of the fund, *Community Integrating Health and Social Services*.

2. Content Analysis Health Issues Fund

Before presenting the results, we would like to explain why this method was chosen to analyze the thematic fund. The content analysis was selected to help illustrate the relationship between the funds' intent and the projects' content. Drisko et al. referred to this as a frequency count because it does not require us to make extensive interpretive judgments in coding and data analysis (Drisko, 2016:24).

The task of our content analysis was to compare the goals with the implemented projects and assess whether the projects were suitable or adequate in a nominal sense to achieve those stated goals. Weber mentions some issues with content analysis, namely the reduction of data, whereby entire text paragraphs are classified into much fewer content categories. However, in our case, we do not have to worry about this issue. We are not aggregating large text segments into categories represented by keywords; this is not a typical analysis of media content or political speech. Our procedure will be inductively driven, which means we will let the categories emerge from the data (Schreier, 2012:25); in other words, we decided on our key codes and concepts after reviewing the project's descriptions. The analysis determined whether the projects aligned with the fund's objectives. We did not develop preliminary codes, a guiding question, or a hypothesis that needed to be tested. The task was purely explorative and descriptive, keeping with Drisko et al.'s statement about fundamental content analysis (Drisko, 2016:26). Our analysis was a plausibility estimation. We sought to determine whether the given means were adequate to obtain the desired results. We did not face abstract notions, constructed to make them measurable. Schreier explains it very accurately; she talks about manifest and latent content (Schreier, 2012:177).

We considered this to be important for our analysis; the source for our content analysis was Annex 4: Rules and Procedures for Thematic Funds, as well as the official project's website, which is hosted by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. Annex 4 contains the thematic fund`s goals, and the website includes the projects that have been implemented. The content of these sources is manifest, not latent, which means it is standardized and does not require interpretation by the coder. We analyzed the data and developed a minimalist categorization. A category, for example, is the type of investment, with the question: *What was the money spent on?* Was it a material investment, such as renovating a building? Or an intangible investment, such as training or research?

We used three questions to form our *dimensions of analysis*:

- What was the budget spent on?
- Who or what was the target or target group?
- Where were the projects implemented?

The first question gave us an idea about the nature of the project in general; we wanted to see if the project focused on teaching, construction, job training, or academic research, rather than health issues. The second question told us something about the target group, specifically the target, which means who or what the project was aimed at. Was it aimed at a specific group of people, what kind of people, and how many? Or was it aimed at a particular improvement, like reducing a specific issue inside a community? The third question shows us the project's geographic location. Not all of Romania is equally advantaged; some regions are poorer than others.

This is an essential factor, as several of the thematic funds of the SRCP aim to improve specific disadvantaged regions, particularly rural areas, compared to urban settlements.

Once we have illustrated the content of each thematic fund using the dimensions of analysis, we were able to compare it with the objective of each thematic fund. We start by displaying the basic fund information. The thematic fund health was divided into three subcategories:[10]

- Widening access to health and social services
- Improving the quality of health services
- Emergency medical services and air rescue

Each project had a public call for proposals for the technical installation on the official Romanian public tender offer website "licitatie-publica.ro".[11] All seven projects are listed on this website, including their value, location, requirements, and the expiration date of the proposals. The source for the data was official, publicly accessible documents issued by the involved parties. The Swiss Intermediate Body (SIB) for the Health Issues fund was the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute. The primary project partner on the Romanian side was the CRED, a Romanian foundation working in public health. With help from the Center for Health Policies and Services in Bucharest and the Romanian Ministry of Health.

The parties planning the thematic fund, Health Issues, provided the public with an explicit definition of the fund and its purpose, as posted in Annex 4: Rules and Procedures for Thematic Funds.[12] Annexes 1 to 5 are part of the Bilateral Framework Agreement between Switzerland and Romania, which organizes the SRCP. There is also a definition on the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs website. We will put the two next to each other and see how they compare. The meaning and purpose of this fund are:

The fund shall pursue the objectives of widening the access to health and social services as well as to improving the quality of health services. Priority shall be given to activities in primary health care, in emergency medicine, and in perinatology[13] (a

[10] *Annex 4: Rules and Procedures for Thematic Funds, op. cit.*, p. 13-14.

[11] Official website for public tender offers. Each project name can be introduced in the search field and the site will provide all the necessary information about the tender for the project. www.licitatie-publica.ro Accessed October 2024.

[12] *Annex 4: Rules and Procedures for Thematic Funds,* Document available on the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. Accessed August 2025. www.eda.admin.ch/schweizerbeitrag/Annex4-Rumaenien_en.pdf

[13] *Ibidem*, p. 13.

subspeciality of obstetrics concerned with the care of the fetus and complicated, high-risk pregnancies[14]).

In addition to the information in Annex 4, we compared it to the information provided on the project website. The page mentions:

Thematic Fund Health Reforms in Romania has the purpose to deepen and widen previous support by Switzerland to reforms in the area of medical emergency and pediatry and will in addition to that support the development of community-integrated health and social services in rural areas.[15]

The wording differs only between the two definitions. Annex 4 mentions perinatology, but the website refers to it as pediatry.

Other than that, there was no meaningful difference, which gave us a good understanding of the goals. The Romanian Ministry of Health`s homepage also has a dedicated website. It does not provide a specific fund definition but only a list of projects. The contents are identical, translated from the English version of the Swiss website.[16]

Another difference between the sources is the fund`s title and the allocated budget; the document lists 8.5 million SFr. as the project budget and 1.5 million as fund management expenses, while the website lists only the 8.5 million project budget without mentioning the fund management expenses.

The title shows only a different arrangement of the words; the meaning remains the same. Although both sources provide a precise definition, they employ different wording. These are essential aspects of content analysis: consistency and comprehension. Since we have only two sources for thematic fund definitions, both should be identical.

The next step was to dismantle each of the five projects and distribute their variables according to the dimensions created after viewing the projects. The result was a 5X5 table comprising all the variables and their observable characteristics. We will display the content analysis results for the entire fund in Table 1 below. The first column represents the project titles within the sampling unit, and the first row represents our three sampling dimensions. The last two metrical values are not considered in the content analysis. Our dimensions are: What was the budget spent on? We checked the project descriptions for specific funding on tangible or non-tangible goods.

An example is medical equipment in hospitals or training courses for personnel, such as nurses or caregivers. The next dimension was: Who was the target group?

This helped to highlight the individuals directly benefiting from the intervention. The third dimension was: Where were the projects implemented? This mapped out the distribution of the projects in Romania.

Since this analysis was part of a larger study, the three dimensions of analysis were standardized across all eight thematic funds. It will be evident that, in the example of the healthcare fund, the geographical distribution is not very local, but rather regional. Other thematic funds have projects with more specific locations where they operate. However, the healthcare fund has one project that targets seven communities in rural

[14] A website about perinatology, dictionary. www.perinatology.com/dictionary/Perinatologydef.htm Accessed October 2024.

[15] Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Contribution to selected EU member states, this is the project webpage, *Thematic Fund Health Romania*. www.eda.admin.ch/schweizerbeitrag/Health. Accessed August 2025.

[16] Romanian Ministry of Health, Swiss-Romanian Cooperation Program, www.oldsite.ms.ro/programe/programul-de-cooperare-elvetiano-roman/. Accessed August 2025.

Romania: Community Integrating Health and Social Services. This project was especially suitable for on-site observation visits.

Table 1. Health Issues Fund content analysis results[17]

	What was the budget spent on?	Who was the target group?	Where were the projects implemented?	Budget in SFr.	Duration in Months
Improving Quality of Prehospital and Hospital Emergency Services	Training, training equipment, clinical guidelines developed and updated, training curricula developed, trainer and trainee kit developed, translation of foreign manuals.	Emergency teams and managers and professionals from associations. A total of 437 people participated.	117 unspecified locations in Romania.	1.197.748	20
Quality Improvement for Pediatric Intensive Care	Training, equipping regional training centers, and guidelines were updated.	Romanian pediatric and intensive care health professionals, 76 in total.	7 nominated training centers in undisclosed locations.	488.651	24
A national Training System for Simulation in Anesthesia & Intensive Care and Other Specialties	Medical training activities, medical training equipment, technical manuals, training site rehabilitation, program assessments.	40 intensive care specialists, anesthesia specialists, physicians and nurses were trained	Five simulation centers were opened in unspecified locations	2.769.258	40
Community Integrating Health and Social Services	Restoring buildings, medical equipment, and training for nurses and social workers.	More than 700 people from different vulnerable groups: children, elderly, pregnant minors, people with social assistance, chronically ill, families with special needs.	Seven communities, two in Sălaj County, two in Botoșani County, and three in Tulcea County.	1.500.250	45
REGA Trains Pilots in the Romanian Air Rescue Service	Helicopter pilots training in Switzerland	Helicopter pilots of the SMURD and their crew	Training happened in Switzerland; the crews are deployed in different regions in Romania afterwards.	1.500.800	52

Source: Own display with data from the Swiss SDC website

Table 1 shows us the results of the content analysis.

The Health Issues Fund had five projects. Our first dimension of analysis is the question: *What was the budget spent on*? The main activity was training, the second was developing manuals and guidelines, the third was renovating and restoring buildings for the new socio-medical centers in seven communities, and the last was acquiring medical equipment. A mix of tangible and non-tangible objects.

The second dimension of analysis is the question: *Who was the target group*? This means, who was the project aiming to help? The main target, with more than 700

[17] Information about each project can be found on the website of the Swiss Federal Council, section Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, title Swiss contribution to select EU member states. Projects website www.eda.admin.ch/content/schweizerbeitrag Accessed August 2025.

people, was the group of vulnerable people; this included children whose parents are abroad for work, the elderly without any family, young mothers from disadvantaged ethnicities, poor people living on social assistance, the chronically ill, and families with special needs. The second target, with more than 400 people, comprised emergency team members, special managers of emergency facilities, and professionals from health associations. The third target was made up of 76 Romanian pediatrics and intensive care specialists, the fourth target was made up of 40 intensive care and anesthesia specialists, and the last target was made up of helicopter pilots from the SMURD. We believe this to be a well-thought-out group of people, respecting the needs for the specific projects.

The last dimension of analysis is the question: *Where were the projects implemented*? One project, the helicopter pilots' training, had a national character; this is obvious because good pilots are needed everywhere, not just in economically disadvantaged regions of Romania. The project Community Health and Social Services was distributed among less prosperous counties in Romania, namely Sălaj, Botoșani, and Tulcea. However, the other projects have no specifications for locations. It is unclear where the training centers are located or where the newly trained professionals are being deployed after training; we do not have any town name, county name, or even a broader region. Geographical distribution is very broad in this fund, except for one project, with pinpoint implementation.

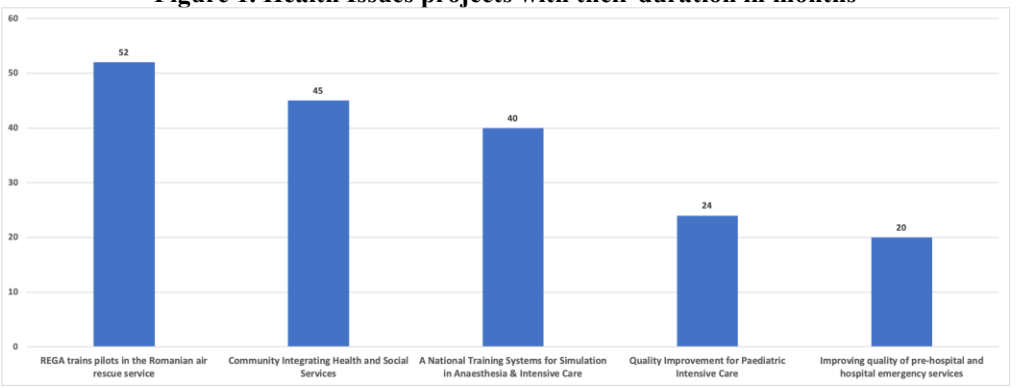
We compared the projects' activities with the stated goals of the thematic fund for health issues and discussed the connection. The first goal was to widen access to social and health services. The Community Integrating Health and Social Services project helps fulfill this goal. This project took place in seven communities in rural regions in disadvantaged counties. We believe the idea to be very adequate; our only concern was the low intensity. Only seven communities profited from the project. It is stated that the project is a pilot, yet we would have expected significantly more of this activity.

The second and third goals are improving the quality of health services, emergency medical services, and air rescue. The emphasis lies on primary health care, emergency services, and perinatology. Four projects were implemented to achieve those goals. The activities include professional training and modernization of manuals, training equipment, and new training centers. We believed this to be adequate to obtain the desired results. Our only concern was the missing designation of the various locations of the new training centers. Are they all located in big cities with high attractions that lead to the rural depopulation of professionals? Or are some new training centers also located in smaller towns to improve the disadvantaged situation of those regions? This issue should be taken into consideration and adequately addressed.

The content analysis did not concern the project duration or its budget. The duration follows the requirements of medical professionals in the specific fields, and the program organizers specify the budget according to the requirements.

The implementation duration means the time it took to train the pilots, install the medical equipment inside the simulation center, or renovate the designated building for the socio-medical centers in the chosen communities. For us, the time factor did not determine the quality of a project. The budget is another variable we neglected in this analysis. We believe the invested budget was reasonable for each project. However, to have a better efficiency analysis of the funds, we would need the expertise of medical professionals from each specific field. The two variables are displayed in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1. Health Issues projects with their duration in months



Source: own calculations with data from the Swiss State Department

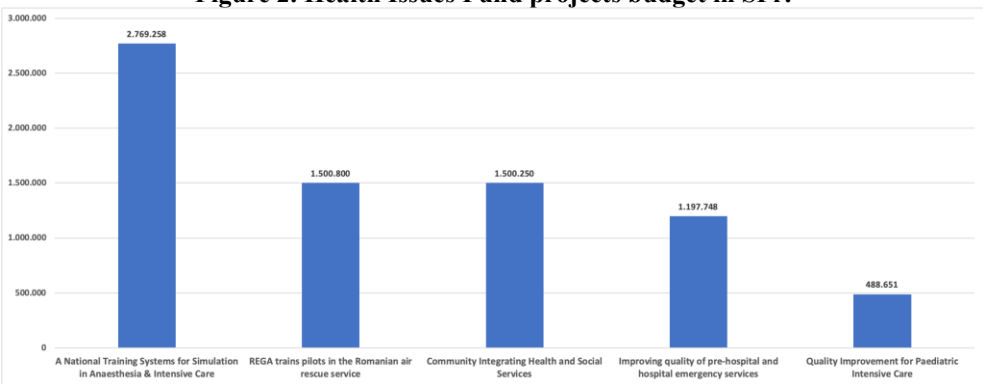
Figure 1 shows the projects within the Health Issues Fund, ordered by duration in months. The longest duration was when REGA (Swiss Search and Rescue) trained pilots of the Romanian air rescue service[18]; it took 52 months. This activity aimed to assist in setting up a reliable, safe, and professional air rescue service system for the Romanian people and visiting tourists. SMURD flight instructors had been trained by simulator training and training on the job in Romania, as well as organizational competence, medical competence, maintenance competence, and development for a mission partners training program for SMURD. We can see why this took 52 months; the activity is very intensive and requires thorough instructions and training. There is nothing one can accomplish in a year or two, so it took more than five years of work. The project with the shortest duration was Improving the quality of pre-hospital and hospital emergency services,[19] which took only 20 months.

The project was about education in emergency care at all levels, with the help of training equipment like mannequins, printing of training materials, and making it available to the relevant personnel (nurses and physicians of medical education). The project included a vital communication component for the participants and the development of a national campaign to increase people`s awareness about using emergency services. This is not a training-intensive project that would require years of training and instructions; compared to training an air rescue pilot, it took less than two years.

[18] Swiss contribution to selected EU member states, Projects in Romania: *REGA trains pilots in the Romanian air rescue service* www.eda.admin.ch Accessed August 2025.

[19] Swiss contribution to selected EU member states, Projects in Romania, *Improving the quality of pre-hospital and hospital emergency services* www.eda.admin.ch Accessed August 2025.

Figure 2. Health Issues Fund projects budget in SFr.



Source: own calculations with data from the Swiss State Department

In **Figure 2**, we can see the budget for each project in the Health Issues Fund. If we compare it to **Figure 1**, we see that the project with the most extended duration is not the most expensive one. A National Training System for Simulation in Anesthesia & Intensive Care[20] is the costliest project; this project is the most expensive one because the project responsible had to procure equipment worth 1.8 million SFr. to set up a training facility in the specific field. The lowest budget was for the Quality Improvement for Pediatric Intensive Care project. This project was about training pediatrics according to Romanian regulations and implementing Clinical Practice Guidelines corresponding to international standards. No expensive medical equipment was acquired for this project, so the budget was kept low. And since the medics already had basic training, the intensity of the additional training was lower.

Duration in months and budget are the only two metric variables in this content analysis; therefore, it was suitable to present them properly in Figures 1-2. Within those ranges, we took out the two ends of the scales and presented the projects. There is not much room for conclusions when examining those variables. If a project took longer than the other, it is a mere observation, not a judgment.

3. Sustainability Analysis Community Integrating Health and Social Services[21]

The reason we did a sustainability analysis was very straightforward; nothing else was possible, four years after the program`s termination. Before we present the results of this analysis, we have to explain the concept of sustainability. According to Dale, "*The maintenance or augmentation of positive achievements induced by the evaluated programme or project after the scheme has been terminated.*" (Dale, 2004:80-81) Sustainability may be assessed during the program implementation or at its completion. (Dale, 2004:81) We used sustainability as the key criterion for judging the project. (Stufflebeam, 2014:40) We take a look at some examples to better understand what sustainability means in this context: (Dale, 2004:81)

[20] Swiss contribution to selected EU member states, Projects in Romania, *A National Training System for Simulation in Anaesthesia & Intensive Care and other Specialities.* www.eda.admin.ch Accessed August 2025.

[21] Homepage of the Swiss Federal Council, Swiss contribution to select EU member states, projects in Romania. www.eda.admin.ch. Accessed August 2025.

- *Maintenance* of material constructions, such as roads, buildings, electric power installations, water purification installations, waste recycling centers, etc.
- *Continued use* of the mentioned constructions after the intervention has terminated, not only material constructions but also intangible qualities such as knowledge.
- *Continued production* of the same outputs, for example, teachers from a teacher training college.
- *Multiplication* of effects and impact of the same or related kinds through inducements from facilities or qualities created by the program or project.

How do we observe sustainability? Methods may include mail or telephone surveys, site visits, case studies, and archival data reviews. Notably, most sustainability analyses are undertaken about two years after the funding stops. (Mertens, 2019:274)

This sustainability analysis was conducted almost four years after funding had stopped. Mertens et al. consider sustainability to be of significant importance when discussing outcomes. If a program is funded during a specific period, the beneficiary is expected to continue the program after funding has stopped. Projects need to be able to find continuous alternative long-term financing. (Mertens, 2019:273) To what extent was the project institutionalized after the donor's funding was finished?

These questions can be answered only years after the project ends. Sustainability can and should be encouraged; Jennie Flemming and Thilo Beck wrote in an article (Flemming *et. al*., 2005:234) about community health work and how this can be done:

- Offer training to local people, community members, and workers about the subject (whether it`s education, security, health care, or environmental service);
- Employ local people or community members as workers;
- Adopt a flexible and responsive management style;
- Provide long-term funding for community initiatives (whether it`s in the field of education, security, health care, or environmental services);
- Work with funders to help them see the relevance of qualitative information and analysis of processes and quantitative data.

When discussing sustainability, we often refer to performance; inevitably, we must also discuss goals, objectives, standards, and targets. In this case, the official 2010 Framework Agreement document sets the targets. That document will also display the objectives and goals set for the thematic fund. However, we need a quantitative definition of the parties' agreed-upon goals and targets. All we have is the intention to implement and successfully finalize the program and each thematic fund with its projects. The thematic funds define the overall target, and each project contributes in its own way. Since we do not have specific coordinates given by the program description, we will focus on observable results achieved by the implemented projects and judge the projects by those goals.

Community Integrating Health and Social Services aimed at developing a functional model of integrated and locally managed health and social services in rural communities with low development indicators. Particular attention was paid to ensuring equitable access for the community and the cost-effectiveness of service provision.[22] To this end, the project intended to establish medico-social community centers in the selected communities. The project partners were the Swiss Tropical and Public Health

[22] *Annex 4: Rules and Procedures for Thematic Funds, op. cit.*, p. 14.

Institute, the Romanian NGO Fundatia CRED, and the town halls of each community. By combining the knowledge and experience of the institution, we assumed that the merit of this project was high. Worth and need were also methodologically determined by the same institution and, additionally, by the Romanian Ministry of Health.

However, the Swiss side had no say in the method or in choosing the locations for implementation. Before the implementation of the project, the target population did not have access to such comprehensive local assistance. This made the need particularly relevant to this project. The target group had to endure hard times in terms of medical care and assistance. According to the authorities, more than 20.000 people in the seven selected communities benefited from the new services thanks to the project.[23]

We visited each of the seven project sites: in Sălaj County, it was the Plopiș community and the Meseșenii de Jos community; in Botoșani County, it was the Sulina community and the Dângeni community; and in Tulcea County, it was the Beștepe community, the Maliuc community, and the Luncavița community. The projects received media coverage from local news outlets. The effectiveness of the project was very high! Before the project implementation, people had problems with health care, and needed help; after project implementation, people in each community benefited massively. The old and chronically ill people, pregnant youth from the Roma community, people without health insurance, children whose parents work abroad and are unable to look after their families, people on social assistance, and families with special needs.

They all benefited from the newly provided services in the seven communities. And the centers were successful and needed, as the numbers in Table 2 show:

Table 2. Community Center output in relation to the target population

Community center in	Patients per month	Target population
Beștepe	528	undisclosed
Luncavița	300	>1000
Maliuc	280	undisclosed
Sulița	92	>600
Plopiș	40	>300
Meseșenii de Jos	30	undisclosed
Dângeni	20	>600

Source: Own survey with data from each community

When talking about efficiency, we can approximate the degree by comparing the resources used for the project with the outcomes obtained, which are the patients per month mentioned in Table 2. What we did not know was the mortality rate of the target population. This would have shown us a graphical evolution of the number of direct beneficiaries. Over the years, this should decrease and change the requirements of each community center. So far, the numbers presented were those up to August 2023. Nobody had specific data about how many patients they had each month since the program's conclusion in 2019. What we can say, judging by the numbers, is that the centers were effective in their designated tasks. Almost all communities knew about their target population numbers and about those treated each month.

[23] Website of Medichub, an online platform for medics, students, and pharmacists with news, information, and sources for documentation, publication, and networking for professionals in the field of medicine. www.medichub.ro/stiri/sapte-centre-comunitare-pilot-infiintate-prin-programul-de-cooperare-elvetiano-roman Accessed August 2025.

The output of this project was the rehabilitation of a building in each of the seven mentioned communities and its transformation into a socio-medical center. Additionally, each medical center received medical equipment for primary health care and several vehicles. The vehicles were necessary for home-care services, which were also set up by the project. Home care was required because many elderly people could not come to the medical center without a vehicle or somebody to drive them there. For that reason, the project included vehicles: cars, minivans, ATVs, bicycles, and, in two cases, Maliuc and Beștepe in Tulcea County, motor boats. These expenditures are mentioned in Table 3:

Table 3. Community Center Budget and Implementation Duration

Community center in	Budget in CHF	Project duration in months
Meseșenii de Jos	399.452,00	21 months
Maliuc	389.511,45	33 months
Dângeni	384.083,30	37 months
Luncavița	356.292,26	33 months
Sulița	354.685,19	33 months
Plopiș	271.801,03	33 months
Beștepe	217.273,44	33 months

Source: Own survey with data from each community

As we can see in Table 3, Community Center Budget and Implementation Duration, the highest budget was in Mesșsenii de Jos, but also the shortest project duration.

Nobody among the responsible could explain to us why this was the case. Another curiosity is that the building in Beștepe did not require any rehabilitation; they only had to move the medical equipment and start the work. This brings us to the conclusion that Beștepe had the highest efficiency among the seven centers.

If we compare the data, they had the lowest budget of all seven communities, the longest project duration compared to the others, and the highest output of patients per month, 528. Meseșenii de Jos had almost twice the budget, one year less in project duration, and a meager number of monthly patients. This leads us to believe that its efficiency could be higher compared to Beștepe. The other communities, Plopiș and Dângeni also have a low efficiency, if we compare the data. Maliuc, Luncavița, and Sulița are ranked somewhere in the middle, which is not very good but not bad either.

Unfortunately, nobody could provide pictures of the buildings before rehabilitation to give us an idea of how they looked before the intervention. But every one of the buildings, except the one in Dângeni, looks very good, is in perfect shape, and is fully functional.

The building in Dângeni is different from the other six buildings we visited. It is not clear why the project-executing agency and the local authorities chose that building for the medical center. No one could give us more detailed information because no one was around when the projects were implemented. Everyone we talked to had recently been hired and had no detailed knowledge of the project. However, for the duration of the project, the medical centers in each community were able to provide the services described to the target population. This meant that each center had doctors, social workers, and medical assistants. We talked to every community mayor and some social assistants, and even though not all were around during the project phase, they praised the project entirely.

They saw how well the target group received the medical center and could not imagine what it would be like without it. That means it is a massive benefit for the community, which every efficiency analysis must consider. Sometimes, the human aspect of a project is also essential and cannot be measured in numbers but in happy and appreciative community members. This is precisely what the project achieved in every community. Looking at the data, we conclude that the overall project was efficient, especially considering the nontangible outcomes.

Among all the appraisals for the project, there was also a downside. It came as the problem of sustainability. After funding through the program stopped, four of the seven communities experienced problems with continuous financing. Only three could finance the required activity out of the local budget; the other four communities had to scale down the services, which was a drawback for the community. We talked to the Ministry of Labor, which would have been responsible for the wages of the hired assistants and doctors in each community center. Unsurprisingly, no continuity plan or strategy was developed after Swiss funding stopped.

This was also confirmed by the Swiss Intermediate Body manager, who told us that nobody was seriously contemplating a follow-up plan for sustainability. There were two reasons for this: the upcoming second Swiss-Romanian Cooperation Program and the hope for further financing through Switzerland. The other was the interest of the EU Commission in community care.

However, as we can see, neither has contributed to the funding of the projects so far. At the moment of analysis, nothing had been decided, and nobody knew how to proceed with the medical centers in the four communities.

We concluded the thematic fund Health Issues with an assessment of the transfer of expertise at the fund level. Four out of five projects directly benefited from Swiss expertise in the field. One project that did not involve Swiss expertise was Community Integrating Health Services. The next step was to find out how the Swiss Intermediate Bodies operated. Therefore, we surveyed the SIB in Switzerland, the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institution in Basel. We learned that it was not an objective to transfer any know-how or expertise on the fund level.

The SIB was an advisor to the host institution, not a teacher or a trainer. Capacity building was not an objective. However, the SIB is still in contact with Romania, and it is monitoring other projects. The SIB representative told us that cooperation between Swiss and Romanian institutions was not an objective of the thematic fund and that they were not aware of any further cooperation between them.

Overall, the SIB representative is satisfied with the performance of the fund and the project results. However, some projects revealed systemic deficiencies that could not be remedied. Nevertheless, the SIB would like to continue project implementation in Romania within the framework of a second Swiss contribution.

4. Summary and Conclusion

Relying on the two presented analyses, our summary was positive for this thematic fund. and the single project. Judging by the content analysis, the fund tackled its identified problems with solutions tailored to the specific needs. The needs assessment was methodically conducted, and the current situation was evaluated before the right project was chosen to temper the hot spots within the Romanian health system. We had nothing to add to the project`s choice.

The Community Integrating Health and Social Services was an overall successful project, judging by the sustainability analysis. We could visit the socio-medical centers, take pictures, talk with the local administration, and see for ourselves how well the seven centers were received by the pilot communities. Nevertheless, not all communities could sustain the center fully functional equally with their own funding. A lack of catch-up financing for the time after the conclusion of the SRCP was visible in a few communities. This was the project`s biggest issue: a solid finance plan for the time after the SRCP.

This type of analysis was conducted on all eight thematic funds within the SRCP during its sustainability assessment. Each fund had a content analysis followed by a sustainability analysis. In two cases, the sustainability was analyzed by a project sample; it would not have been feasible otherwise. The described analysis helped answer some wider questions before exploring the Swiss-Romanian Cooperation Program (2009-2019). The research guiding questions, as mentioned in the introduction, evolved around the idea of finding out what was left of the 180 million Swiss Francs that Switzerland contributed to Romania. By doing so, it was possible to check how many projects are still operational and to what degree, after the program`s conclusion.

Out of the research guiding questions, we formulated four hypotheses:

H_1. *The Swiss-Romanian Cooperation Program did work at an operational level.*

H_2. *The set goals of the Swiss-Romanian-Cooperation Program were achieved at a high degree (>66% success rate).*

H_3. *The majority of the implemented projects lacked sustainability. Less than 50% are still operational, and only the ones managed by government institutions are still active.*

H_4 *The SRCP contributed to improving the bilateral relations between Switzerland and Romania.*

We tested all four hypotheses and found results contrary to our initial beliefs about the program. Our first hypothesis refers to the fundamental functioning of the SRCP. We chose this hypothesis following one of the great evaluators of the 20th century, Peter H. Rossi, and his remark about a program: *"The most policy-relevant question about a program is: Does it work?"* (Rossi, et. al., 2019:291) It also touches loosely on the evaluation concept of merit.

Given that it is essential and reasonably easy to answer, we used this as a starting point. The only information we got is whether the whole program worked.

The second hypothesis is already more detailed and on a macro level. It concerns the eight thematic funds and another evaluation concept: effectiveness. We checked each thematic fund with a content analysis and measured the sustainability of most projects directly. This aggregated data, but with individual information from the surveyed projects, helped to measure the overall effectiveness of the program.

The third hypothesis investigates the concept of sustainability of the implemented projects. It is based on the SRCP`s micro-level, the projects within each thematic fund. This was measured by individual project surveys around the country. The method of choice was either observation on-site or standardized survey interviews and data analysis.

The last hypothesis treats the SRCP's influence on the involved Romanian institutions, namely the ministries and subordinate institutions, on a local or regional level. We believed the SRCP improved relations between the Swiss and Romanian Ministries. This was verified by adding specific questions to each survey questionnaire sent out. A convenient side effect of this hypothesis was that it disclosed the knowledge

and expertise transfer. If cooperation took place, the respondent went on to explain to what degree and for what purpose. The questionnaire and the interviews revealed a substantial knowledge and expertise transfer between the involved parties. Although not to the extent we expected. Nevertheless, the goal of cooperation was achieved, and from this point of view, the program was very effective in doing so.

Testing the hypotheses was only one part of the results; since we observed the object over a period of four years, we gained a lot of insight and knowledge. Combined with the recommendations obtained through the countless interviews and survey questionnaires, we decided to come up with recommendations for improvement. The recommendations were aimed at the program as a whole, but also at the eight thematic funds. Each fund received recommendations, but for this article, we present only the ones formulated for the Community Integrated Health and Social Services project, based on observations conducted during the site visits.

This project should be repeated in the next Swiss Contribution Program. However, there is room for improvement:

Volume. The project consisted of seven implementations in three different counties. However, having seven implementations in seven different counties would have been better. The number of community centers can be more than just seven. There could be as many as 14 or even 21 in various counties. The need is undoubtedly there; the people need these centers, especially in rural, isolated communities with many vulnerable people. After talking to the people responsible at the centers and town halls, we are convinced that these projects will have a massively positive impact on the target population. Inclusion. The project was implemented based on a call for proposals from the local authorities. There is a problem here: some communities have competent personnel in the town hall, while others still need to do so. There is a positive causality between the qualifications of the staff of an administration and its financial success. The problem is that if the implementation is based on a competition for project proposals among the communities, but some employees do not have the qualifications to set up a project of this magnitude, they will not submit project proposals, although they would need such implementations. Project commissioning should be centralized and based on needs identified in a special assessment. For example, the central organization, in this case, the Ministry of Health, determines Romania's 10 or 15 most disadvantaged counties based on economic performance. It uses that as a starting point. From there, the financially most precarious community is selected based on statistical data, on-site visits, and observations. Once the 10 or 15 most vulnerable communities are defined, the projects will be tailored to their needs and demands. This will circumvent the issue of low-qualified community administration employees who need to learn how to draft a project and request funding. This brings us to the following recommendation.

Specialization. Community administrations need a specialized unit qualified to set up project proposals. The unit should consist of 1-2 employees qualified in community project management. The town mayor must do something other than this type of work, and also not their underqualified secretary. This could lead to objections because many communities are too small and need to be wealthier to support such a unit. As our observations have shown, this is indeed the case; community administration must be perceived as a complex task, and like with other occupations, it needs qualified personnel. Therefore, a better community financial plan must be elaborated; small and impoverished communities need better support from the national budget.

Territorial Integration. There is a town hall and a mayor for every community. Several communities within a short distance of each other should merge their administration into one unit, leaving the small communities with just a simple administration for the daily needs of the inhabitants. This means that there should be a territorial reform plan for the future of Romania. It would lower the spending and increase the efficiency. Some of the communities we visited had neighboring hamlets and smaller villages. Unfortunately, the inhabitants of these settlements could not benefit from the community services implemented in their vicinity. This is unfair to those people; instead of building several socio-medical community centers servicing each community within a short periphery, having one more extensive center would be more efficient, providing a more comprehensive range of services and accepting inhabitants of neighboring settlements within a certain radius.

Concluding the article, we want to take a look back and discuss how the Health Issues Fund and the specific project presented in this article actually performed. but also, the overall evaluation analysis of the Swiss-Romanian Cooperation Program (2009-2019). The fund fulfilled its intended purpose; on paper, it did what it was designated to do, and we were not able to find any evidence to doubt that. The project can be regarded as overall sustainable. Of the seven visited and observed objects, some did not perform convincingly. The lack of funding was evident. But the majority of the projects went well, leading us to a positive assessment. This fund contributed to the overall assessment of the SRCP sustainability analysis 2023-2024. We could answer all our research guiding questions and test the hypotheses. However, certain projects deserved a more in-depth analysis to have a more precise picture. On the scale of the SRCP, the volume was not favorable. Certain funds were judged with the help of aggregated data. Nevertheless, the SRCP got a second round, which started in 2024.[24] More projects, more funding, and hopefully more lessons learned from the first round.

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Annex 1: Conceptual Framework of the Swiss-Romanian Cooperation Programme, Document available on the website of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. https://www.eda.admin.ch/schweizerbeitrag/Annex1-Rumaenien_en.pdf

Annex 4: Rules and Procedures for Thematic Funds, p. 1. Document available on the website of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. www.eda.admin.ch/schweizerbeitrag/Annex4-Rumaenien_en.pdf

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OVER-REGULATION AND CHANGES TO LEGISLATIVE INSTRUMENTS RELATED TO RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY AT EU LEVEL. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF REGULATORY INSTRUMENTS BETWEEN TWO MULTIANNUAL PROGRAMMING PERIODS

Claudiu Gabriel BONACIU*

Abstract. *Development instruments are framework tools through which European development policies become operational at the level of each Member State or acceding state. European regulatory instruments are self-contained in the sense that they cannot be modified by Member States or in the process of accession. Each Member State adapts its European regulatory instruments based on national legislation so that they can be operational/used in the development process. They were created with the aim of providing legislative, financial and technical support to European rural development policy.*

Keywords: *Over-regulation, European Rural Development Policy, regulatory instruments, legislative changes.*

Methodology

The objective of this research is to carry out a comparative analysis between the multiannual programming periods, 2007-2013 and 2014-2020, respectively, in order to capture the influence of the changes and modifications made on the regulatory instruments in the field of rural development at EU and Romanian level, respectively.

Based on the research question: *Was the framework of regulatory instruments at European and national level in line with the rural development needs and expectations of beneficiaries?* and depending on the hypothesis *Over-regulation of regulatory instruments at EU and national level determines the effectiveness of the rural development process*, this article aims to demonstrate that the European rural development process and especially the rural development process in Romania need a simplified and stable legal framework. In this hypothesis, we have as an independent variable the over-regulation of the instruments, i.e. the large number of legislative acts registered at European and national level through which the rural development instruments and mechanisms are put into practice, and the effectiveness of the rural development process is the dependent variable under these conditions. The hypothesis represents a cause-effect relationship between the two variables and suggests that the over-regulation of instruments and mechanisms affects the rural development process,

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and the results planned through the Rural Development Programmes (hereinafter referred to as RDPs) by each Member State are achieved differently from one programming period to another. In order to reach the expected results, this causal relationship was analyzed comparatively and quantitatively using as units of analysis the types of European and national legislative acts issued in the two programming periods, and the absorption rate of European funds from the EAFRD was analyzed as quantifiable indicators.

Analysis of the literature

Regulatory instruments play a decisive role in the European rural development process. Due to the quite different legal systems and concepts in the Member States, the differences in the hierarchy of legislation regarding the existing legal rules at the level of the Member States compared to those existing at the EU level and, last but not least, due to the massive production of EU regulatory instruments, in terms of legislation, there have been complex approaches in the literature.

What are regulatory tools? It is necessary to define, on several occasions, based on the specialized literature, the concept of *regulation*. Baldwin and collaborators propose in the publication *Understanding Regulation* that the term be approached in the sense of: "a specific set of commands, in which regulation implies the promulgation of a mandatory set of rules to be applied by a body dedicated to this purpose; *as a deliberate influence of the state* with the aim of influencing business and social behavior; *as all forms of social or economic influence* in which all mechanisms that affect behavior are considered regulatory" (Baldwin, 2012: 3). By extrapolating the above set of definitions to the concept of rural development, we understand regulatory instruments as a form of institutional control through which, based on legislation, the rural development process at EU level is aimed at being standardized, based on common rules. If we refer to Baldwin's definitions, we can accept that regulatory instruments are tools or means by which European institutions, national governments, local authorities *impose* a concrete framework for law enforcement in various fields.

The concept of regulatory instrument is found in the literature under several names, namely: legal instruments, legislative instruments, or legislative instruments, with the meaning of legal acts[1]. The difference between them is only linguistic. For example, in European law they are found under the name of legal instruments. They make up the EU's body of law and are used to create and coordinate policies, adopt measures and build development programmes and implement them unitarily at Member State level. Walter Hallstein said in 1973 that the European Community is a "legal phenomenon in three respects: it is a creation of law, it is a source of law and it is a legal order" (Hallstein, 1973:30). In the context of rural development, the 'legal order' referred to by Hallstein[2] is materialised at EU level through the regulatory instruments related to the rural development process.

German Professor Rudolf Geiger and collaborators approach the issue of European regulatory instruments on agricultural and rural development in the light of the notions of agriculture and rural development in the Treaty on the Functioning of the

[1] In our contribution we will use the phrases *regulatory instruments* and *legislative instruments* almost without discrimination, for the purpose of readability.

[2] Walter Hallstein strongly supported in his mandate, as president, the consolidation of European law, which was to have a major impact on European legislative instruments.

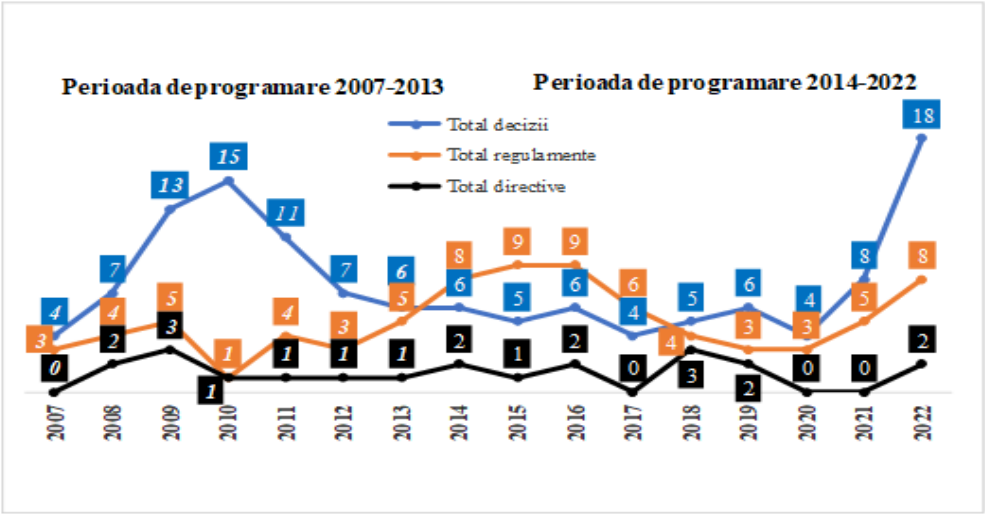
European Union. Geiger says that "the definitions relating to agriculture or agricultural products in the (TFEU) when specified are inaccurate and have no legal significance, and when they do not provide clear definitions, they provide the possibility for Member States under special secondary legislation to interpret the concepts differently and not in harmony with European law" (Geiger, Khan, Kotzur 2015: 306). They are partly right, but in our opinion the treaties, through their construction, have the power to substantiate an institutional framework and basic principles for European legislation, and the construction of European legislation is carried out, mainly by legal acts, regulatory instruments, adopted by the EU institutions.

According to Onuf, one of the theoreticians of social constructivism, "meaning in human social relations depends on the existence of rules" (Onuf, 2013, 36). Consequently, his constructivism supports the fundamental meaning of rules in relation to social reality. Rules regulate aspects of the world, but, from a constructivist point of view, they always constitute situations in the first place. Therefore, any analysis of social life must start with rules, and a rule, according to UNUF "is a statement that tells people what they should do" (UNUF, 2013, 51). The rules provide guidelines for human behavior and thus make common meaning possible. People, as well as social constructs such as states, become agents in society only through rules. At the same time, rules give agents choices, the most fundamental choice to follow or break them (Bonaciu, 2025: 62).

Benchmarking of regulatory instruments at EU level

In two programming periods in the 2007-2020 time series, the EU institutions, namely the EC, the EP and the EUC, issued **226 binding legislative instruments** such as Decisions, Regulations and Directives with a direct impact on the European rural development process. The distribution of the types of legislative instruments issued during the 16 years is graphically represented by Figure 1.

Figure 1. Frequency of adoption of legislative instruments, depending on the type of legal act, between 2007 and 2022, at EU level



Source: Author's processing.

Following the comparative analysis, depending on the type of legal acts issued by the European institutions and referring to the total number of acts issued, we find that in the 2007-2013 programming period the three types of regulatory instruments had an upward evolution, followed by a downward evolution (Bonaciu, 2025: 191-192).

From the middle to the end of the programming period, the evolution of legislative acts was downward at the level of decisions, slightly upward at the level of regulations and linear at the level of directives. Most of the regulatory instruments, 58 in number, were issued by the middle of the programming period, and in the last three years the other 39. A total of 97 regulatory instruments were adopted during this programming period.

As regards the 2014-2022 programming period, we note that the evolution of the three types of regulatory instruments is different from the previous period. The European institutions legislated through the three types of legislation at a relatively linear pace from the beginning of the programming period to the middle of the 2017 period. Between 2014 and 2017, 32 regulations were issued, more than in the same period[3] of the previous period. The same upward trend is recorded with regard to directives, their number increases to eight directives compared to six issued in the previous period.

As for the number of decisions, it decreases in these intervals, to 21 decisions, compared to 39 issued between 2007 and 2010. After the middle and until the end of the programming period, the evolution of legislative acts is again different from the same interval of the previous programming period. Between 2018 and 2022, there is an upward evolution, in a curve at the level of the three types of legislative instruments. The number of regulations issued indicates a downward trend between 2019 and 2020. However, in 2022 the number of regulations increases again from 3 regulations issued in 2019 to eight in 2022. The same positive development is recorded in the case of decisions and directives. In the current period, compared to the previous period, from a quantitative point of view, the regulatory instruments were issued differently, compared to the middle of their programming periods. Thus, in the period 2014-2022, by the middle of the programming period, i.e. 2017, 58 legislative acts were issued, and the remaining 71 in the second part of the programming period. A total of 129 regulatory instruments were adopted during this programming period, 32 more than in the previous period.

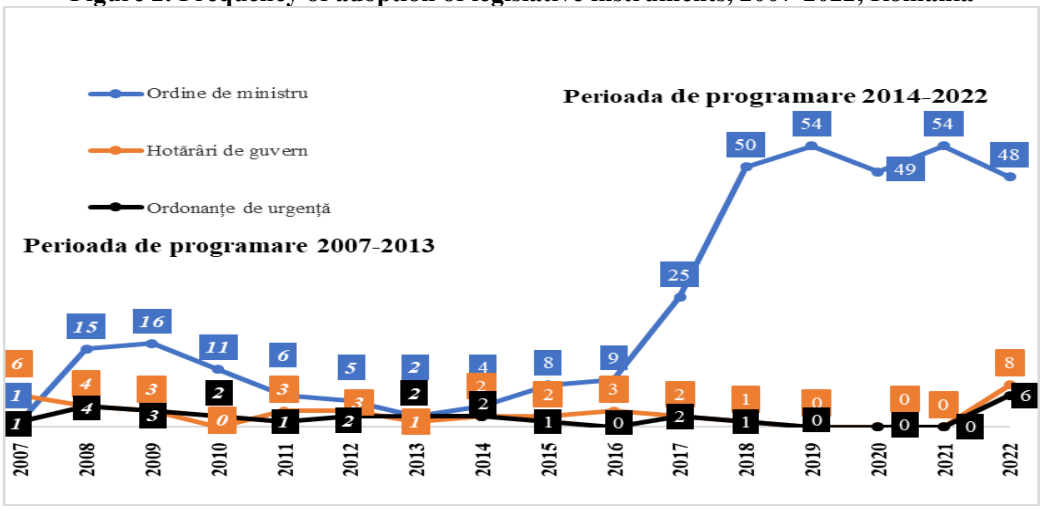
Comparative analysis of regulatory instruments at the level of Romania

In the two programming periods included in the 2007-2020 time series, Romanian institutions **issued 422 legislative instruments** such as Ministerial Orders, Government Decisions and Emergency Ordinances with a direct impact on the Romanian rural development process. The distribution of the types of law-making instruments issued over the 16 years is graphically represented by Figure 2. Following the comparative analysis, depending on the type of legal acts issued by the institutions in Romania and referring to the total number of acts issued, we find that in the 2007-2013

[3] The interval to which we refer is 2007, the year of the start of the programming period, and 2010, the middle of the programming period.

programming period[4] the three types of regulatory instruments [5]had an upward evolution, fractured in the middle of the programming period, which generated a downward evolution maintained until the end of the programming period (Bonaciu: 193-194).

Figure 2. Frequency of adoption of legislative instruments, 2007-2022, Romania



Source: Own processing according to official MADR information (MADR 2021)

Between 2007 and 2010, 43 ministerial orders, 13 government decisions and 10 government ordinances were issued. After the middle and until the end of the programming period, the evolution of legislative acts was downward at the level of ministerial orders and government decisions and slightly upward at the level of emergency ordinances, but low in terms of quantity. Most of the regulatory instruments, 66 in number, were issued by the middle of the programming period, and in the last three years the other 25. A total of 91 regulatory instruments were adopted during this programming period.

As regards the 2014-2022 programming period, we note that the evolution of the three types of regulatory instruments is different from the previous period. A total of 331 regulatory instruments were issued during this programming period, **3.5 times more than in the previous period.**

The Romanian institutions legislated through the three types of legislative acts, in a relatively linear rhythm from the beginning of the programming period until the middle of the period, 2017. In the top of legislative acts were also ministerial orders, ***with 301 more than in the previous period***, in second place were government decisions in number of 18, two less than in the previous period, followed by government ordinances in number of 12, with three less than in the previous period.

[4] As in the previous analysis, the two analyzed programming periods are divided into two equal time intervals. For the period 2007-2013, the year 2010 is the half of the programming period, and for the period 2014-2022, the mid-term is considered to be 2017. According to European regulations, RDP evaluations are carried out in the middle of the programming period so that the EU and Member States can intervene if the rural development policy implementation process stalls.

[5] In Figure 2, the frequency of adoption of ministerial orders is highlighted in blue, government decisions in orange, and emergency ordinances are highlighted in black.

Between 2014 and 2017, 46 ministerial orders were issued, three more than in the same period[6] of the previous period. The upward pace is maintained between 2017 and 2022. As can be seen by following the blue line in graph 5.6, the number of ministerial orders doubles in 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022 compared to 2017. Their number is almost 20 times higher than in the same period of the previous period[7]. This upward evolution is the result of the amendments brought to the European regulations in the middle of the programming period, which forced Romania to align its legal framework with the new community requirements through the Ministry of Agriculture.

As far as government decisions are concerned, we notice with the help of orange lines that by the middle of the analyzed programming period, their number is relatively stable, with nine such legislative instruments being issued, but lower for the same interval of the previous period. In the second part of the programming period, their evolution indicates a decreasing trend starting with 2018, maintained until 2022, when nine such regulatory instruments are issued by the Romanian Government, two more than in the same period of the previous period.

Regarding the number of emergency ordinances, we can see with the help of the black line in Figure 2, that by the middle of the programming period their evolution indicates a decreasing trend until 2016, and in 2017 the number of these instruments will increase again, but maintaining 2 legislative instruments such as government ordinances. In the second part of the programming period, their evolution indicates a decreasing trend starting with 2018, as in the case of government decisions, maintained until 2022, when six such regulatory instruments are issued by the Romanian Government.

Compared to the middle of the programming period, in the current period, compared to the previous period, from a quantitative point of view, regulatory instruments were issued differently. Thus, in the period 2014-2022, until the middle of the programming period, i.e. 2017, 60 legislative acts were issued, 18.13%, and the remaining 271, i.e. 81.87% in the second part of the programming period, compared to the period 2007-2013 when, out of the total of 91 regulatory instruments, 77.25% were issued until 2010, and the difference of 22.75% after the middle of the programming period, that is, between 2011 and 2013. In other words, in the 2007-2013 programming period, more legislation was passed until the middle of the period and less in recent years. On the other hand, in the second programming period, the law-making process was the opposite, less was legislated until the middle of the programming period, but more compared to the same interval of the previous period, and more in the second part of the programming period.

By comparing the quantitative data of the type of regulatory instruments comparing the two multiannual financial periods, two phenomena are observed at the level of Romania: the high tendency of constant modification of some rules adopted by the same ministry, and the over-regulation of the PNDR implementation process in the second programming period.

[6] The interval to which we refer is 2007-2010, with 2007 being the year of the start of the programming period and 2010, the middle of the programming period.

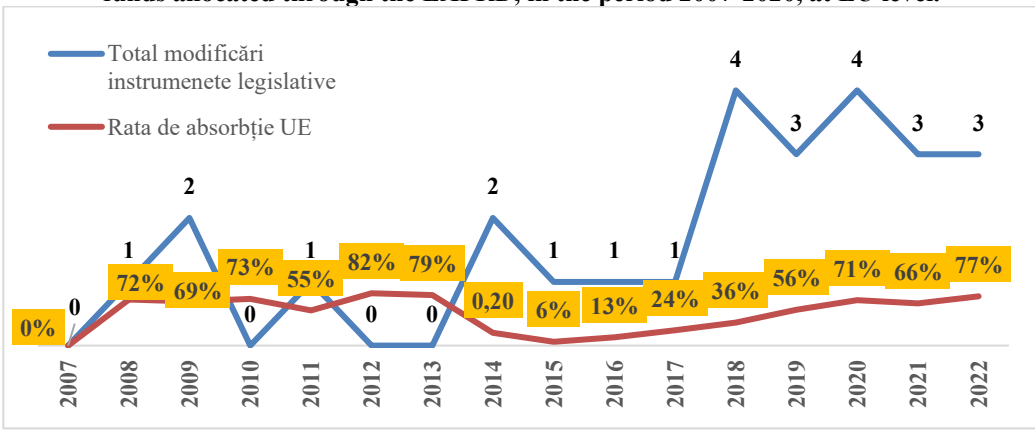
[7] If the programming period had ended in 2020, the ratio between the number of ministerial orders, issued after the middle of the programming period of the two periods, would still have been different, almost 12 times higher than in the previous period.

Analysis of the effects of legislative changes on financial implementation at EU level, 2007-2020

In the 2007-2013 programming period, the rural development process at European level was implemented on the basis of Regulation 1698/2005, and the second period included in this analysis on the basis of Regulation 1305/2013. During the two periods, the two European legislative instruments were amended almost annually, which affected the average absorption rate at European level of funds allocated to rural development through the EAFRD. Regulation 1698/2005 was amended four times during the multiannual period, and in the following period the number of amendments to the second regulation increased by 5.5 times. After each change, Member States had to adapt their legal framework, revise their RDPs, and make changes to the funding guidelines, so that the funds allocated through the EAFRD could be used by the beneficiaries of the programme. The influence of the amendments to this Regulation on the absorption rate in the period 2007-2020 is graphically represented by Figure 3.

Figure 3 shows, for the period 2007-2013[8], a variation in the average absorption rate of expenditure at EU level, which is explained by the fact that the reporting made by the Member States includes only the expenditure planned and contracted annually, expenditure that is also influenced by the degree of completion of the projects by the beneficiaries. In 2007, according to the first report of the commission on the administration of the EAFRD, no expenditure was made from the budget allocated to the programming period because there is no approved RDP (ECA, 2008:4). As for the change compared to 2007, Figure 3 shows a significant increase in the average absorption rate. This increase is explained by the fact that *the repayments made by the Commission to the Member States doubled in 2008*, while the amount of advances decreased slightly.

Fig.3 Influence of changes Reg.nr. 1698/2005 and 1305/2013 on the absorption rate of funds allocated through the EAFRD, in the period 2007-2020, at EU level.



Source: Own elaboration based on EAFRD reports in the period 2007-2022.

The strong increase in the average absorption rate also shows the progressive implementation of RD programmes in the Member States (ECA, 2009:14-15). The first amounts spent reported were in 2008, in the third and fourth quarters of the programming

[8] In Fig.3 the evolution of the changes to the regulatory instruments at EU level is highlighted by the blue line, and the evolution of the absorption rate at EU level is highlighted by the orange line.

period, with a promising average absorption rate at European level of 72%. In the following year, some of the amendments made to the regulation in 2008 as well as the amendments adopted in 2009 enter into force. The changes made by the European institutions to the regulatory instrument during the implementation of the RDP by the Member States lead to a decrease in the average absorption rate to 69%.[9] In the following year, in 2010, in the middle of the programming period, the fact that there are no changes either in form or content to the regulatory instrument means that the average absorption rate at European level increases to 73%.

In 2011, the effects of the 2009 amendments are felt, with the lowest absorption rate of funds allocated through the EAFRD since the approval of the RDPs of only 55%. This low percentage was mainly due to the changes that Member States had to make to the RDP, but also to the effects of the economic crisis. In 2012 and 2013 there were no changes to the Regulation, which means that Member States have two years in which to continue the absorption of EAFRD funds without legislative impediments during this programming period. As can be seen, in 2012 the average absorption rate increased compared to the previous year by 27%, reaching 82%. This increase came as a result of the 2011 changes that reduced the co-financing rate of beneficiaries, which made RDPs much more attractive. In the last year of the programme period under review, although there have been no changes to the regulation, the average absorption rate at European level decreases by 3 percent, to 79 percent, compared to 2012. The rest of the money allocated to this programming period was spent in the first two years of the next programming period.

After long debates, Regulation 1035/2013 becomes operational, and Member States can start building their RDPs based on a much more complex legislative framework than in the previous period. However, interventions were also made on this regulation during the programming period, which modified the general framework of the regulation.

In total, 22 changes were made with different effects on the average absorption rate of the allocated budget. Regulation 1305/2013 entered into force on the first day of 2014 together with three amendments brought by Regulation 1310/2013. By the end of 2014, two other amendments were made, which entered into force in October and December, respectively.

On the basis of these amendments, seven RDPs were approved for the 2014-2020 programming period and expenditure in 2014 shows an extremely low average absorption rate[10] of only 0.2% (EC, 2016: 12-13). In 2015, the amount of amendments to the regulation decreases to value 1, all national and regional RDPs are approved, and the average absorption rate of the allocated amounts, although it has increased significantly compared to 2014, indicates that the money allocated through the EAFRD was starting to be spent as planned. In 2016, the changes are stable, as in 2015, and the absorption

[9] The decrease in the average absorption rate is influenced by the degree of completion of the projects contracted in 2008. Given that most of the financing projects were contracted in the 3rd and 4th quarters of 2008, and the implementation period varies between 1 and 3 years, with the possibility of extension, the Member States' reports mostly included payment requests for direct payments made on Axis 2 Environmental Measures and fewer reimbursements at project level.

[10] The average annual absorption rate is related to the total budget allocated to the EAFRD in the period 2014-2022. It is calculated on the basis of payments made by the EU to Member States, according to the annual plans and budget approved at EU level.

rate, although it maintains its upward trend, compared to 2015, remains low at EU level, registering an average of 13%.[11] In 2017 we recorded the same low level of changes and the same upward trend of the absorption rate, but low in terms of spending European money, registering at the end of the year an average of 24%. In the middle of the programming period, i.e. 2017, a quarter of the EAFRD budget allocated for the 2014-2022 programming period was spent[12]. These results were alarming for European decision-makers as well as for Member States that had to modify and postpone the implementation of RDP measures (MADR, 2017: 37-57).

The massive amendments of Regulation 1305/2013 which simplified the operationalization of the RDP and which entered into force in 2018 generated an increase in the average absorption rate to 36%, quite low considering that there were still two years until the end of the programming period. It was only in 2019, when three other amendments to the regulatory instrument came into force, that 56% of the funds allocated through the EAFRD were spent. The growth rate was encouraging, it increased in 2019 compared to 2018 by 20 percent (EC 2020: 13). Economic activities, and not only, were severely affected in 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic, but the pace of spending funds for DR maintained its upward trend, reaching 65%.[13] This increase is explained by the fact that in 2020 final or partial payments were made to the financing contracts concluded in previous years[14].

In 2020, in order to help the beneficiaries, the four emergency amendments to Regulation 1305/2013 were made in a very short time[15]. In 2021, the regulation was amended three times, in addition to the entry into force at the end of the previous year of the previous amendments, with a decrease in the average absorption rate by 9% compared to 2020. In 2022, three other amendments to the regulation are made, and the upward trend of the average absorption rate of funds indicates an 11% increase in the expenditure of the amounts allocated for this programming period compared to 2021. The 2014-2022 programming period ended in 2023 with a budget surplus of over €2 billion, recording an average absorption rate of 83%.

Analysis of the effects produced by legislative changes and changes on the absorption rate in Romania, 2007-2020

In the case of Romania, the amendments brought by the European institutions to Regulations 1698/2005 and 1305/2013, as well as to the other regulations related to rural development, have generated a series of interventions by the state, especially by MADR, in the legislative framework of the rural development process. These interventions consisted primarily in the issuance of legislative acts at national level without the predictability necessary to attract beneficiaries. These were followed by the need to

[11] As in 2015, the largest amounts were directed to EAFRD Measures 10 and 13.

[12] The largest amounts were directed to three EAFRD measures, namely Measure 4 Investments in physical assets, Measure 10 Eco-conditionality, and Measure 13 Payments for areas facing natural constraints.

[13] In 2020, the average absorption rate at EU level was only 5% higher than in 2019.

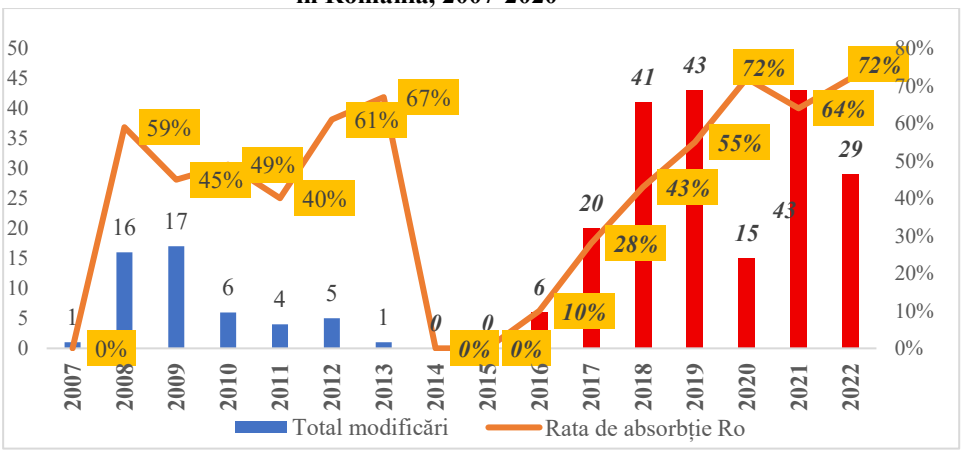
[14] Member States declare their expenditure on a quarterly basis. However, for year n, the T4 declarations are submitted in January of year n+1. Accordingly, the corresponding reimbursements granted by the Commission to Member States in year n shall be made from the fourth quarter (Q4) of year n-1 to the third quarter (Q3) of year n.

[15] It took the European institutions 3 months to adopt a regulation in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

harmonize the national legislation with the European legislation but also by the harmonization of the national legislation with the new changes made at EU level.

In addition to these changes at European level, there is also the lack of a predictable national legal framework, which led to the frequent change of the procedures and rules for the implementation of the measures in the NRDP for the period 2007-2013, causes that influenced the access to the measures by the beneficiaries, which was reflected in the average absorption rate of the funds allocated through the EAFRD[16]. During this programming period, Romania was below the European average of the average absorption rate of funds this year. Between 2007 and 2013, the legal framework for rural development through EAFRD funds consisted of 84 national regulatory instruments, of which 59% were amendments to the legal framework. Most changes or additions to the legislative framework were made between 2008 and 2010, and in the last three years the data indicate a relaxation of legislative changes. These values indicate a sustained concern on the part of the state regarding the harmonization of the national legal framework with the European regulatory instruments by the middle of the programming period. The effects of repeated changes in the legislative framework on the average absorption rate of funds from the EAFRD budget are graphically represented in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Effect of amendments to RDP legislation on the absorption rate of EAFRD funds in Romania, 2007-2020



Source: Own elaboration based on MADR annual progress reports

In 2007, out of the nine instruments issued, only one represented an amendment to an emergency ordinance on the management of non-reimbursable funds for the CAP, as well as a modification of the co-financing and pre-financing rate allocated from the state budget. This year, Romania still did not have the PNDR approved by the commission, which means that it had not absorbed any amount of the allocated funds, like the rest of the member countries. In 2008, compared to 2007, the number of legislative instruments issued at the same time as the number of amendments to the legislative framework increased. Also, positive values of 59% are recorded in terms of

[16] In Fig. 4 the evolution of the changes in the regulatory instruments in Romania in the period 2007-2013 is highlighted by the values in the columns marked in blue, and the average absorption rate of the funds allocated through the EAFRD with the orange line.

the average absorption rate of funds allocated at national level from the EAFRD, but below the European average (72%). In 2008, Romania contracted 1117 financing applications and over 1 million payment requests for Axis 2, which provided direct payments for Environmental Measures. Most of these payments were made during 2009 or in the following years depending on the payment requests submitted by the beneficiaries (MADR, 2009: 19-45).

It seemed that the PNDR was in an advantageous direction for the public and private ecosystem in the Romanian countryside. Based on the legal framework of 2008, MADR managed to launch 11 measures[17] within the NRDP for financing, but without notable success. For example, this year, after the financing guide for measures 312 and 313 was launched[18], the MA decided to modify two eligibility criteria (MADR, 2010:50). This change confused potential beneficiaries in the sense that they had to adapt their business plans and projects according to the new requirements.

Another example is the amendment of the manual of procedures for *the training, information and dissemination of knowledge measure*. These changes, instead of attracting vocational training providers in rural areas, made the measure unattractive (Bonaciu, 2025: 212). The evaluation commission had to analyze at national level seven projects, none of which met the criteria of the financing guide, which is why a new stage of project submission was organized (MADR, 2010:20).

In 2009 compared to 2008, the number of national legislative instruments decreased, but the number of amendments brought to the previously approved legislation increased. These changes lead to a decrease in the average absorption rate by 6 percent. This decrease to 49%, again below the EU average of (69%) was due, for example, to the fact that the measures that provided for the financing of the activities of informing the beneficiaries regarding the preparation of business plans could not be contracted, which led to the loss of funding (MADR, 2010: 35).

In 2010, the number of legislative instruments issued and the quantity of amendments decreased significantly in the middle of the programming period, again indicating a positive trend in the average absorption rate of funds. However, the average absorption rate in Romania (49%) was below the European average (73%).

In 2011, compared to 2010, the number of national legislative instruments increased, and the number of changes in the legislative framework due to changes at European level decreased. The average absorption rate of funds is also in a downward trend.

In 2012, the PNDR implementation process improves. Compared to 2011, both the number of legislative instruments and amendments decreases to 5 units, and the absorption rate increases significantly to 61%, but remains below the European average (82%).

In the last year of this programming period, namely 2013, the national legal framework is further harmonized with the European one, with 6 national legislative instruments being issued and only one amendment.

In the case of Romania, the amendments brought by the European institutions to Regulation 1305/2013 as well as to the other regulations related to rural development, have generated, as in the previous programming period, a series of interventions by the state, within the legislative framework of the rural development process. These interventions consisted primarily of issuing ministerial orders, which amended legislative

[17]These are measures 112, 121, 123, 141, 142, 211, 212, 214, 312, 313 and 322.

[18] Measure 312 had as its objective "*Support for the creation and development of micro-enterprises*, and Measure 313 *Encouragement of tourism activities".*

acts issued in the same period. These changes consisted of the frequent change of the procedures and rules for the implementation of the RDP measures for the period 2014-2020, which influenced the access to the measures by the beneficiaries, which was reflected in the average absorption rate of the funds allocated through the EAFRD. During this programming period, Romania was below the European average of the absorption rate of funds this year[19].

Between 2014 and 2015, there were no changes to the legal framework, and the NRDP was not yet approved by the Commission, which means that Romania had not managed to spend a single euro of the allocated European money. Only in 2016, following six changes to the legal framework, 10% of the allocated budget is spent. From the perspective of the Romanian state, these changes (MADR, 2016) were in favor of the beneficiaries, in the sense that the largest number of sub-measures were publicly launched for financing[20], the number of necessary documents was reduced, as well as the deadlines for submitting technical projects in the case of construction financing.

However, the launch in a single year of a large number of calls for applications for funding with short deadlines was to the disadvantage of the beneficiaries because they did not have enough time to analyse all the applicant's guides of the 24 sub-measures in order to decide which eligibility criteria they meet and definitively, to choose the right sub-measure.

In addition, the most important problem that affected the submission of projects and implicitly the absorption of European funds in 2016 by the public sector "was the delay in harmonizing the legislation with European directives regarding the conduct of public procurement" (Law 98: 2016); [21] and for the private sector, the lack of a legal framework regarding the reimbursable financial instrument. This instrument was to help beneficiaries, who were applying for funding of up to €2 million, to co-finance their co-financing rate required by the funding guide.

Another cause was "the delay in the elaboration of the normative framework of the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 49/2015" for establishing the financial flows in the implementation of projects financed from the EAFRD; legislative process that was completed in April 2016. The absorption of funds allocated to private beneficiaries with lower co-financing rates was also not without problems caused by the legislative vacuum and the over-regulation of financing guidelines, problems solved by the Romanian state only two years later through a series of amendments (Bonaciu, 2025: 231).

All these legislative problems were remedied by the legislative acts issued in 2016, but nevertheless the absorption rate was reduced by only 10%, standing three percent below the European average of 13%. Basically, the operationalization of the PNDR for this programming period was slowly unwinding, with a delay of two years. A year later, the effects of the 2016 changes are felt in terms of the evolution of the absorption rate. Thus, in 2017, compared to 2016, it increased by 18 percent, reaching 28

[19] Figure 4 The evolution of changes to regulatory instruments in Romania for the period 2014-2020 is highlighted by the values in the columns marked in red.

[20] In 2016, 24 sub-measures/schemes were launched starting with April within the implementation measures of the PNDR 2014-2020

[21] This legislative act entered into force in May, and the implementing rules in June. This law amended "*G.D. no. 226/2014 on establishing the general framework for the implementation of the measures of the national rural development program co-financed from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and from the state budget".*

percent. Of the 20 amendments made to the legislative framework, two contributed massively to the increase in the absorption rate. The first is the amendment of the national legislation regarding the "Portfolio Risk Sharing Loan Financial Instrument",[22] financed by the EAFRD[23], and the second amendment regulated the information and publicity strategy of the programme in order to make it more attractive. However, in the middle of the programming period, i.e. 2017, timid progress was made, with the entrepreneurial and public ecosystems in the Romanian countryside managing to spend only 28%, just over a quarter of the money allocated through the EAFRD (MADR, 2018: 24-26).

As in 2016, the changes made in 2017 had positive effects in 2018. Thus, the upward trend of the average absorption rate is maintained in 2018, as well as that of the legislative changes. This year, 41 changes were made to the manuals, guides and procedures for the implementation of projects financed from the EAFRD budget. The most important changes made in the legislative framework were mainly aimed at reducing over-regulation, simplifying funding applications and the necessary documents so as to reduce the administrative burden. Also during this year, the procedures, funding guides and evaluation manuals related to the poorly accessed measures between 2015-2018 were simplified. The average absorption rate of funds allocated through EAFRD by Romania was 43% in 2018, seven percent above the European average (36%).

In 2019, following only 43 legislative changes to the content of manuals, regulations and project selection procedures, the average absorption rate of funds allocated through the EAFRD reaches 55 percent, 12 percent more than the previous year, but below the European average by only one percent (56 percent). The increase in the average absorption rate was due in the first phase to the effects of the changes made in 2018, but also to the simplifications made by the 2019 changes. For example, this year, measures that provided for investments continued to be accessed by private beneficiaries with the help of reimbursable financial instruments. For the most part, these amendments concerned *OM 795 of 2016* on the approval of the procedure manuals developed at the beginning of the programming period by AFIR. In this regard, Order 795 was amended 24 times in 2019. The most important legislative instruments issued in favor of the beneficiaries consisted in the transition to a digitized system with fewer documents. Thus, individuals, legal entities as well as state institutions interested in obtaining financing through measures 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7, starting with 2019, can submit the application for financing online. And as for payment requests, starting with 2019, the requirement to apply the stamp on the documents submitted for reporting by the beneficiaries of PNDR funding was eliminated (MADR, 2019: 1-2).

In 2020, the number of legislative changes decreases significantly to 15, while the average absorption rate maintains its upward trend, reaching 72% of the total amount allocated through the EAFRD to our countries, with a percentage above the European average rate (71%). Normally, 2020 was supposed to be the end of this programming period, and the law-making instruments should support the process of closing the

[22] This reimbursable financial instrument was implemented in accordance with the provisions of "art. 38, paragraph 4, letter b) of Regulation no. 1303/2013". "The manager of the instrument was the European Investment Fund (EIF), based on the Financing Agreement" concluded on November 28, 2017.

[23] Between January 2016 and December 2017, *expenses amounting to EUR 247,212,831.95 were incurred for sub-measures 4.2 and 4.2a, of which EUR 8,414,738.00 related to the Portfolio Risk Sharing Loan Financial Instrument.*

contracted projects, as well as in support of a new programming period. However, due to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation has become more complicated on several levels. First of all, the field verifications could not be carried out by the MA, and the beneficiaries could not complete their economic indicators from the business plans related to the financing applications contracted before March 15, 2020. In this context, an order was issued in March to modify the implementation period, offering beneficiaries the possibility "to extend certain stages of the implementation schedule, to reschedule payment tranches or to request the extension of financing contracts" (MADR, 2020: 1).

Also, all evaluation, monitoring and verification activities planned by the MA were postponed (MADR, 2020:4). Through a new order issued in June, substantial derogations were made in favor of the beneficiaries but also of the managing authority in terms of the process of submitting, evaluating, monitoring and reporting payment requests. Thus, the authorization of payment requests regardless of the tranche, as well as those included in the "on-the-spot" sample for which verification by the MA at the place of investment was required, could be carried out on the basis of "the relevant documents submitted by the beneficiary regarding the implementation stage of the project, including photographs/videos with geographical labeling where possible, according to the provisions of art. 1 para. (2) of OM no. 125/2020" (MADR, 2020: 5). These derogations have only eased the implementation process. The beneficiaries were exempted from field visits, they were able to continue their activities within the state of emergency, and the verification officers had at their disposal a new, much more efficient digital verification model. However, these derogations were removed immediately after the end of the pandemic. The ministerial orders issued in the same year, on the basis of which the financing guidelines and implementation procedures were approved, amending previous ministerial orders, did not provide for derogations or advantages similar to those during the pandemic. The procedures for evaluating, monitoring and verifying the payment requests to be made in 2021 and 2022 returned to the classic form - *field visits*, photos taken by the managing authority's officers.

In 2021, in Romania, the trend of changes is again upward, similar to that of 2019, when no less than 43 changes are made to the manuals, regulations and project selection procedures, leading to a decrease, compared to 2020, of the average absorption rate to 64%, two percent below the European average rate (66%). This year, a package of measures was carried out that included revisions of the technical sheets and or reallocation of additional funds for 19 measures from the NRDP with effects on the average absorption rate in 2022. For example, in the case of Measure 4 and Sub-measure 4.1 on investments in physical assets, new categories of beneficiaries, new selection criteria and additional eligibility conditions have been added.

In 2022, the number of legislative changes decreases significantly compared to the previous year to 29 legislative acts, and the average absorption rate of funds allocated to Romania increases to 72%, but remains below the European average rate, which jumped compared to 2021 at 77%.

In the period 2014-2022, the legal framework for rural development through funds allocated through the EAFRD consisted of 310 national regulatory instruments, of which 65% were amendments to the legal framework. The fewest changes or additions to the legislative framework were made until 2017, the middle of the programming period, and most in the following period, which indicates a change in the perspective of the Romanian state, influenced both by the changes at European level, but also by the

way the financing guides were designed, as regards the regulation of rural development policy compared to the previous programming period under review, when the legal framework was harmonised by the middle of the programming period.

Conclusions

Following this comparative analysis, we notice two aspects. The 2007-2013 programming period had a much more stable legal framework compared to the 2014-2020 period. In the first period under review, the evolution of regulatory instruments was intense until the middle of the period, followed by a decrease, maintained until the end of the programming period. This evolution indicates a relative stability, which has provided beneficiaries of European funding through the EAFRD with a predictable legal framework, with regulations that have supported the spending of EAFRD money. The second aspect found is that in the second programming period the total number of regulatory instruments is higher and that the number of regulations has increased significantly. Their evolution indicates instability in the EU legislative framework, which has had an impact on the absorption rate of funds allocated to rural development through the EAFRD.

If we refer to the phenomenon of changes in the legislative framework, we find that the changes at European level in the 2007-2013 programming period indicate a relatively linear evolution of the average absorption rate at European level of the European funds allocated through the EAFRD. However, we can note that in 2009, when the number of changes increased, the average absorption rate decreased, and when no changes are made, the average absorption rate has an upward evolution. On the other hand, the effect of the changes brought to the legislative framework on the average absorption rate is much more pronounced in Romania. The lower or more constant the number of changes, the average absorption rate has a positive evolution.

Regarding the analysis of the data from the period 2014-2020, we note that the legislative changes at European level had a positive impact on the evolution of the average absorption rate of European funds allocated through the EAFRD, compared to the previous period. The average rate has increased annually, progressively with the exception of the post-pandemic year 2021. On the other hand, the effect of the changes brought to the legislative framework on the average absorption rate is much more pronounced in Romania compared to the previous period. At the same time as the number of legislative changes increases, the average absorption rate of European funds also increases. It has increased significantly since the middle of the programming period, indicating annual increases of an average of 56 percent, 10 percent more than the previous period. These results demonstrate that in the second programming period the legislative changes positively influenced the rural development process, being better oriented towards the implementation process of rural development instruments and mechanisms, but also a negative aspect, present in both programming periods, namely, the inability of the Romanian state to spend efficiently and direct all the allocated European money, to the entrepreneurial and public ecosystem in Romanian rural areas.

The hypothesis is not validated by the results of the research in the case of the first programming period either at EU or Romanian level. The quantitative data analyzed do not validate this hypothesis. The results obtained from the comparative analyses of the types of legislative acts **issued at European and national level** do not indicate that during this programming period the phenomenon of over-regulation has affected the rural development process. During this period of programs, 97 legislative acts were issued at

European level, and 91 normative acts at the level of our country.

The hypothesis is validated in the second programming period. The data resulting from the analyses on the legislative acts of the second programming period **validate the hypothesis** of this study. During this programming period, 129 legislative instruments were issued at EU level, 32 more than in the previous period. At the level of Romania, 331 legislative instruments were issued during this period, 240 more than in the previous period.

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ENERGY TRANSITION AND SOCIAL EQUITY IN ROMANIA: THE IMPACT OF THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL ON VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

Cristina-Matilda VĂNOAGĂ*

Abstract. *The paper analyses the impact of energy policies within the European Green Deal (EGD) on the vulnerable population in Romania, in the context of the elimination of energy price caps and the transition to a green economy. The study highlights the social imbalances generated by the application of European measures in a national context marked by energy poverty, low incomes and outdated infrastructure. Through a qualitative analysis and a case study, it is concluded that the success of the green transition in Romania depends on integrating the social dimension into energy policies to prevent the deepening of inequalities and ensure a just and inclusive transition.*

Keywords: *energy transition; energy poverty; European Green Deal; social justice; Romania.*

Introduction

The climate crisis is one of the most significant contemporary challenges, with complex effects on ecosystems, economies and human societies. The increase in global average temperature, the intensification of extreme weather events, the melting of ice caps and the rise in sea levels are just some of the manifestations of a reality that requires rapid structural changes. The 2023 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report states that "climate change is widespread, rapid and intensifying", adding that humanity is "on a warming trajectory of more than 1.5 °C unless greenhouse gas emissions are drastically reduced" (IPCC 2023, 4).

The European Union (EU) was among the first economic blocs to understand the systemic dimension of this crisis, adopting a leading role in promoting environmental and clean energy policies. According to the European Environment Agency (EEA), the energy sector is responsible for around 75% of the EU's total greenhouse gas emissions (EEA 2023). Consequently, decarbonising the energy system has become a central objective of the European political agenda, understood not only as an ecological necessity but also as an economic and social opportunity.

The energy transition refers to the process of transforming energy production, distribution, and consumption systems from fossil-fuel-based models to renewable energy and clean technology models. The concept involves not only technological change but also a profound restructuring of the economy, the labour market, and social relations.

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According to Sovacool et al. (2020), the energy transition "is not just about energy, but about power, equity and social transformation" (Sovacool et al. 2020, 217). In this sense, it is essential that energy policies are not applied exclusively through the lens of economic efficiency, but include the dimension of social justice, also known as the concept of just transition.

This perspective is also reflected in recent literature. Jenkins, McCauley and Heffron (2021) define just transition as "a process that ensures that the transition to a decarbonised economy does not amplify existing inequalities, but creates new opportunities and protections for all citizens" (Jenkins, McCauley and Heffron 2021, 45). In particular, the energy transition must protect vulnerable groups – low-income households, pensioners, communities in mining regions – from the risk of energy exclusion.

Globally, the energy transition is closely linked to the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly Goals 7 ("Affordable and Clean Energy") and 13 ("Climate Action"). The UN estimates that approximately 675 million people lacked access to electricity in 2022 (UNDP 2023), and the lack of access to clean energy directly limits economic development, education and health.

In this global and regional context, the European Commission launched the European Green Deal (EGD) in December 2019, a framework document that defines the Union's strategic vision for transforming the development model into a sustainable, fair and competitive one. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, described the EGD as "Europe's man on the moon moment" (European Commission 2019).

The EGD sets the headline target of achieving climate neutrality by 2050, later enshrined in law by the European Climate Law (Regulation (EU) 2021/1119). To achieve this goal, the EU has set itself an intermediate target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels – a target included in the Fit for 55 legislative package.

More than a climate strategy, the EGD is an integrated development vision that links energy, agriculture, industry, transport, and finance policies. Its central initiatives include: Renovation Wave – accelerating the energy renovation of buildings; Farm to Fork – transforming the European food system; Just Transition Mechanism – providing financial support for regions affected by decarbonisation; and Circular Economy Action Plan – reducing waste and promoting recycling. After Russia invaded Ukraine, the EGD was complemented by the REPowerEU plan, which aims to reduce dependence on imported fossil fuels and accelerate investment in renewable energy (European Commission 2022).

A key dimension of the EGD, often undervalued in public discourse, is the social dimension. The European Commission has explicitly acknowledged that the green transition will entail disproportionate costs for particular social groups. That is why the Fit for 55 package includes the Social Climate Fund (SCF), designed to support vulnerable households during the transition period. According to the study by Bouzarovski and Thomson, "energy poverty is a systemic threat to the EU's social cohesion" (Bouzarovski and Thomson 2022, 14). In the absence of effective compensatory policies, rising energy prices and the costs of housing modernisation risk exacerbating inequalities. The SCF, with an estimated budget of €86.7 billion (2026–2032), aims to mitigate these effects through subsidies and investments in energy efficiency. Thus, the EGD is not just an ecological strategy, but a project for societal

transformation. It combines technological transition with institutional reforms and redistributive policies, aiming for a fair economic model grounded in the principles of "climate justice" and "leave no one behind".

This paper aims to investigate how the energy policies envisaged by the European Green Deal (EGD) affect vulnerable populations in Romania, in the context of the elimination of the energy price cap and the move towards a fully liberalised green transition. The approach is based on the idea that the decarbonisation process cannot be analysed solely from a technological or economic perspective, but must also be understood through the prism of the social dimension, as the energy transition generates unequal effects across different population groups.

Research design

The general objective of the paper is to assess the compatibility between European environmental policies and Romania's socio-economic realities, with a focus on the extent to which these policies contribute to reducing or, conversely, deepening energy poverty. The paper analyses both the European instruments — the Just Transition Mechanism, the Social Climate Fund, and the Renovation Wave — and their transposition and implementation at the national level. It aims to determine whether the measures adopted actually support vulnerable populations or, in practice, exacerbate the gaps between social groups.

Specifically, the research pursues four objectives: (1) identifying the social categories most affected by the energy transition (families below the subsistence level, pensioners, single-parent families, rural communities and coal-fired industrial regions); (2) analysing Romanian public energy protection policies before and after the removal of the cap; (3) assessing the impact of these policies on the degree of access to clean energy and energy efficiency; and (4) formulating recommendations to ensure a just and inclusive transition, in the spirit of the European principle of leaving no one behind.

The research methodology combines qualitative analysis of public policies with a case study applied to Romania. In the first stage, the paper uses documentary and content analysis to examine European and national legislation (EGD, Fit for 55, REPowerEU, National Integrated Energy-Climate Plan 2023–2030, PNRR) and reports issued by the European Commission, the World Bank, UNDP, and the Ministry of Energy. This analysis allows for outlining the normative and conceptual framework governing the energy transition and for identifying the social components of each policy instrument.

The second stage consists of an in-depth case study on Romania, selected due to the high incidence of energy poverty and structural vulnerabilities: outdated energy infrastructure, dependence on polluting sources and pronounced territorial disparities between urban and rural areas. By correlating recent statistical data (Eurostat 2023; World Bank 2024) with the analysis of current government policies — such as the removal of energy price caps and the introduction of energy vouchers — the direct effects on vulnerable households and the pace of implementation of the green transition are investigated.

The research method adopted is an interpretative-comparative one, based on the qualitative analysis of documents and the triangulation of academic, institutional, and media sources. This approach allows the identification of the gap between the declared intentions of European energy policies and the results observed in practice.

Finally, the paper aims to contribute to understanding the energy transition as a social phenomenon, not just a technical one, by offering a critical perspective on how Romania balances climate objectives with the protection of vulnerable citizens. The case study demonstrates that the success of the European Green Deal depends not only on reducing emissions but also on Member States' capacity to transform the green transition into a social justice project.

Energy Policies within the European Green deal

Launched in December 2019, the European Green Deal (EGD) represents the most comprehensive transformation strategy of the European Union in recent decades, proposing a reconstruction of the European economic model on a sustainable and equitable basis. Energy is at the heart of this project, being both the engine of development and the primary source of greenhouse gas emissions. The overall objective of the EGD is to achieve climate neutrality by 2050, which implies reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels (European Commission 2019). This objective is legally enshrined in the European Climate Law (Regulation 2021/1119), which makes it an obligation for all Member States. Energy policies within the EGD are based on the principle of just transition, recognising that decarbonisation must be achieved without increasing social and regional inequalities. According to the European Environment Agency, around 75% of the Union's total emissions come from energy production and consumption, making the energy transition an indispensable element for achieving climate goals (EEA 2023). From this perspective, the EGD is not only an environmental project, but also a political strategy for redistributing resources, technological modernisation and protecting social cohesion.

European energy policies within the EGD pursue three interdependent dimensions: decarbonisation, energy efficiency and social fairness. Decarbonisation aims to gradually reduce dependence on fossil fuels, increase the share of renewable energy and promote technological innovation. In this regard, the Fit for 55 legislative package, adopted in 2021, outlines the measures needed to achieve the emission-reduction targets by revising the Renewable Energy Directive and the Energy Efficiency Directive, and by introducing the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism. The structural reform of the European energy market also aims to ensure energy security and diversify supply sources. This concern has been amplified by the energy crisis triggered by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

A key component of these policies is the REPowerEU programme, launched in 2022, which proposes to accelerate the transition to renewables to reduce dependence on gas and oil imports from the Russian Federation (European Commission 2022). The plan aims to develop green hydrogen infrastructure, double photovoltaic production capacity by 2025, and expand smart grids, giving Member States flexibility in using available funds. REPowerEU not only diversifies energy resources but also strengthens the geostrategic dimension of the EGD by positioning the European Union as a global leader in clean energy.

Another major initiative of the EGD is the Renovation Wave, a programme designed to increase the energy efficiency of European buildings, which are responsible for around 40% of total energy consumption and 36% of CO_2 emissions at the EU level (European Commission 2020). The objective of this strategy is to double the annual rate of energy renovations by 2030, with particular focus on social housing and public buildings. By reducing energy losses and improving thermal comfort, Renovation Wave

aims not only to decarbonise the construction sector but also to reduce energy poverty, especially among low-income households. In this way, energy policy becomes, at the same time, a social policy, as it promotes public wellbeing and health while reducing energy bills for vulnerable citizens.

To mitigate the economic and social impact of this transition, EGD is introducing the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM), a financial package for regions dependent on high-emission industries, such as mining or fossil fuel-based ones. The Just Transition Fund (JTF), the main component of the mechanism, has over €100 billion available for the period 2021–2027 and aims to support professional retraining, economic diversification and investment in clean technologies (European Commission 2020). This instrument reflects the recognition that the green transition cannot be purely technological, but must also be fair. In the absence of a social dimension, decarbonisation policies risk generating public resistance, job losses and regional economic tensions.

Another pillar of the EGD social architecture is the Social Climate Fund (SCF), created in 2023 to support households and micro-enterprises affected by the extension of the ETS2 emissions market to the buildings and road transport sectors. With an estimated budget of €86.7 billion for the period 2026–2032, the SCF is intended to compensate for rising energy costs and finance energy efficiency measures for vulnerable households (European Parliament 2023). Unlike the JTM, which supports industrial regions, the SCF directly addresses citizens, providing a redistributive mechanism to prevent an increase in energy poverty during the transition.

Energy policies within the EGD are therefore based on a delicate balance between sustainability, competitiveness and solidarity. On the one hand, they promote innovative technologies – such as green hydrogen, carbon capture, and network digitalisation – and stimulate private investment in clean energy. On the other hand, they recognise the vulnerability of certain social groups and regional economies and propose support instruments to avoid a "two-speed transition". Thus, the European Union is trying to transform energy policy into an instrument of social and territorial cohesion.

However, implementing these policies poses multiple challenges. Some studies highlight gaps among Member States in terms of administrative capacity and resources for the effective implementation of green programmes (Sabato and Vanhille 2024). In Central and Eastern Europe, including Romania, the difficulties are linked to outdated energy infrastructure, dependence on fossil fuels, and low per capita income. Without consistent financial support and local adaptation of measures, the green transition risks becoming an elitist process, inaccessible to the most vulnerable. Another obstacle is social acceptance: in the absence of effective communication and public participation mechanisms, energy policies can be perceived as imposed "from above" rather than collectively assumed (Sovacool et al. 2020).

In essence, the energy policies of the European Green Deal are defined by an integrated vision, which goes beyond the traditional logic of economic efficiency and includes social and moral dimensions. The EGD proposes a new development paradigm in which energy becomes the means by which the European Union redefines its prosperity model, grounded in climate responsibility and social justice. For Member States, the success of these policies depends on the coherence between national strategies and European objectives, as well as on the ability to mobilise financial resources and maintain public trust.

Therefore, the energy policies of the EGD cannot be reduced to a simple emissions-reduction agenda; they must be understood as a strategy for the systemic

transformation of European society. They represent, at the same time, a challenge and an opportunity: a challenge for vulnerable economies and communities, but also a chance to create a new development model based on sustainability, inclusion and intergenerational solidarity.

Energy Poverty in Romania and its Impact on EGD Implementation

The Concept of Energy Poverty

Energy poverty is a complex concept, approached multidimensionally in the literature. Energy – The European Commission provides an operational definition, noting the health impact aspects: “Energy poverty occurs when a household must reduce its energy consumption to a degree that negatively impacts the inhabitants' health and wellbeing.” (European Commission, n.d.) The European Parliament report (2022) underlines the multidimensional character of energy poverty: "Energy poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon, considered to be caused by a combination of low income, high energy expenses, and poor energy efficiency in buildings”. (European Parliament, 2022). The importance of comprehensive definitions is also found in the United Nations Development Programme reports on energy poverty, which defines it as "the lack of access to adequate, reliable and affordable energy for lighting, cooking, heating" (UNDP, 2024) According to a World Bank report, energy poverty is defined as the inability of households to meet essential energy needs — heating, lighting, energy for appliances — with a significant impact on quality of life, health, and economic opportunities. (World Bank, 2024) The Romanian Ministry of Energy and the Romanian Energy Poverty Observatory propose defining energy poverty as “the situation in which households cannot access essential energy services, where adequate heating, cooling, lighting and electricity supply systems are essential services that underpin a decent standard of living and good health” (UNDP, 2024) As we can see, the definitions focus on access to essential energy services (heating, lighting, hot water). There is a clear focus on the impact on the population's health and wellbeing. They also recognise a multidimensional nature, combining three old dimensions: low income, high costs and energy inefficiency.

Energy Poverty in Romania

The energy transition promoted by the European Green Deal (EGD) represents a decisive step in the fight against climate change. However, its effects are not felt uniformly by all social groups. Despite the European Union's declared aim to ensure a just and inclusive transition, some segments of the population remain disproportionately affected by rising energy costs and the economic constraints associated with infrastructure modernisation. In particular, low-income households, pensioners, single-parent families, and rural communities face specific vulnerabilities that risk being further amplified in the absence of adequate support policies (Bouzarovski and Thomson 2022).

First, households below the poverty line are the most exposed to rising energy prices and the indirect effects of the decarbonisation of the economy. For these households, energy is not only an economic resource but also a basic condition for a decent standard of living, health, and social participation. World Bank studies show that approximately 20% of households in Romania are in energy poverty, meaning they cannot afford the minimum costs for heating, lighting, and other essential services (World Bank 2024). This phenomenon is accentuated by low incomes and poorly insulated homes, leading to a structural paradox: the poorest pay proportionally more for energy but experience lower levels of comfort (Clodnitchi and Busu 2017). The increase in

prices, caused by the liberalisation of the energy market and the elimination of caps, has increased the risk that low-income families will resort to reduced consumption or to alternative polluting energy sources, such as firewood or waste, thus perpetuating the vicious circle of energy poverty and social exclusion.

The elderly constitute another segment strongly affected by the current changes in the energy system. In Romania, over 40% of pensioners live on incomes below the subsistence level, and over a third say they cannot afford adequate heating during the cold season (INS 2023). Given that the population is ageing, the lack of access to affordable energy is becoming a public health issue. Healy and Clinch (2020) show that prolonged exposure to cold indoors is associated with increased seasonal mortality and cardiovascular disease incidence. At the same time, energy efficiency policies often require initial investments that pensioners cannot afford, which keeps this category locked into an inefficient and costly consumption pattern. In the absence of direct support mechanisms, such as targeted subsidies for housing modernisation or renovation programs adapted to the needs of seniors, the energy transition risks increasing the vulnerability of this population.

Single-parent families and people living alone also face significant challenges in the context of the energy transition. In Romania, women represent over 80% of single parents, and their incomes are, on average, 25% lower than those of two-parent households (Eurostat 2024). At the same time, fixed expenses — rent, energy, food — do not decrease proportionally with household size, so these families allocate a significant share of their income to cover energy costs. Walker, Day, and Fox (2021) note that single-parent households in Europe are twice as likely to experience energy poverty as the general population. In the absence of constant economic support and affordable renovation programs, these families risk being excluded from the benefits of the green transition and remaining trapped in an inequitable energy system.

A separate segment is represented by communities in mono-industrial regions, such as Valea Jiului, Gorj, and Hunedoara, which are transitioning from coal-based industries to sustainable activities. The closure of mines and the restructuring of power plants, imposed by decarbonisation policies, directly affect thousands of jobs. In the absence of viable economic alternatives and a real process of professional reconversion, these regions risk becoming areas of economic and social exclusion. Koundouri et al. (2024) note that the success of the Just Transition Fund mechanism depends on member states' capacity to combine European funding with local development strategies and community involvement. In Romania, just transition programs are still in their early stages, and direct benefits for the local population are limited, which increases distrust in green policies and central institutions.

Energy poverty is an intersectional phenomenon: it manifests itself where economic vulnerabilities overlap with those of age, gender, education, or location. For example, older rural women—especially those living alone—are among the groups most at risk of energy exclusion in Eastern Europe (Thomson, Snell, and Bouzarovski 2017). This intersectional perspective highlights the need for nuanced public policies that recognise the diversity of forms of vulnerability and propose tailored solutions. In the context of EGD, the energy transition cannot be considered fair if its benefits are concentrated among the middle and upper classes. At the same time, marginalised groups bear the costs of the transformation.

In Romania, the problem is amplified by territorial disparities and the reduced administrative capacity of local authorities. Thermal rehabilitation programs, for

example, are predominantly concentrated in large cities, while small communities remain outside of funding. At the same time, recent government policies—such as the removal of energy price caps—have shifted the economic burden directly onto consumers, without sufficient protection for the disadvantaged. This approach risks amplifying existing gaps and generating social resistance to the green transition. As Sabato and Vanhille (2024) note, climate justice cannot be achieved through technocratic instruments, but requires real citizen participation and an equitable redistribution of resources.

The segments of the population affected by the energy transition in Romania reflect an already existing social hierarchy: those with high incomes can invest in energy efficiency solutions and green technologies, while poor households, the elderly, single parents, and rural residents disproportionately bear the costs of adaptation. EGD policies provide tools to reduce these inequalities—the Just Transition Mechanism and the Social Climate Fund being relevant examples—but their effectiveness depends on how they are translated into national policies. A truly just green transition, therefore, requires the explicit recognition of these vulnerabilities and the design of support mechanisms that transform the energy transition into a process of social inclusion rather than exclusion.

EGD Energy Policies Implementation in Romania

Romania is a revealing case for analysing the implementation of the European Green Deal (EGD) energy policies in the context of socio-economic vulnerabilities and regional disparities. On the one hand, the country benefits from diversified energy resources (natural gas, hydropower, significant wind and solar potential); on the other hand, it suffers from high energy inefficiency, outdated infrastructure, and widespread energy poverty.

According to Eurostat data (2023), approximately 31% of Romanian households reported they cannot afford to heat their homes adequately — the highest rate in the European Union, double the EU average (Eurostat 2023). This indicator reflects a structural, not just a cyclical, problem associated with low incomes, poor housing quality, and a lack of access to modern energy infrastructure.

The implementation of the EGD objectives in Romania must therefore be analysed through the lens of the tension between the European ecological transition and internal socio-economic inequalities.

Romania was, during the communist period, one of the economies with the most extensive energy production networks in Central and Eastern Europe, based on coal, oil, natural gas and hydropower. After 1990, the economic transition led to the decline of heavy industry and a significant reduction in emissions, but the modernisation of the energy system remained partial (World Bank 2024).

In 2022, Romania's energy structure was composed of: 31% natural gas, 17% coal, 29% renewable sources (including hydropower) and 23% nuclear (Ministry of Energy 2023). This diversification provides a favourable basis for the energy transition, but the energy efficiency of residential buildings is among the lowest in the EU.

According to the International Energy Agency (IEA 2023), energy losses in Romanian district heating systems exceed 35%, and over 70% of homes do not meet minimum thermal insulation standards. This context makes the EGD objectives regarding the Renovation Wave essential for reducing household consumption and costs.

According to the National Energy Poverty Report (UNDP and Ministry of Energy 2022), approximately 19% of households were in energy poverty, meaning they could not access essential energy services at a reasonable cost. The real figure could be

even higher, as many rural residents use non-commercial fuels (such as wood and agricultural waste) that are not included in official statistics.

The differences between urban and rural areas are significant: in cities, the leading causes are high prices and outdated district heating infrastructure, whereas in rural areas, the main problem is dependence on firewood —an unsustainable, polluting source.

According to the Energy Poverty in Romania study (Clodnitchi and Busu 2017), low incomes, high costs and the lack of energy efficiency in housing are the determining factors of energy vulnerability. The authors emphasise that "energy poverty cannot be seen only as an income problem, but as an expression of social and infrastructural exclusion" (Clodnitchi and Busu 2017, 139).

The World Bank (2024) confirms this perspective, estimating that approximately 50% of vulnerable households do not benefit from heating subsidies due to restrictive eligibility criteria or a lack of information (World Bank 2024). Romania has transposed Directive (EU) 2018/844 on the energy performance of buildings into national legislation, but implementation has been slow. The "Green House Plus" programme and the "Energy Efficiency in Buildings" sub-programme, financed by EGD and PNRR (National Recovery and Resilience Plan) funds, aim to renovate over 4 million homes by 2030 for thermal renovation (Ministry of Development 2023).

Although these programmes have significant potential, the European Commission Country Report – Romania (2024) reports significant delays, a lack of qualified staff and difficulties in accessing funds at the local level (European Commission 2024).

Furthermore, investments in energy efficiency are unevenly distributed: most projects are concentrated in large cities (Bucharest, Cluj, Timisoara), while rural and small-urban areas remain poorly funded.

Romania benefits from financial support from the Just Transition Fund (JTF), worth approximately €2.14 billion, which mainly targets the counties of Gorj, Hunedoara, Dolj, Galați, Prahova and Mureș (European Commission 2023). These regions have been identified as "coal regions in transition", dependent on high-emission industries.

In the Jiu Valley, the implementation of the JTF is monitored by the World Bank's Just Transition Facility (2024), which emphasises that success depends on local community participation and the workforce's reconversion. The Just Transition in Romania report notes that "the transition will only be sustainable if the people affected are active participants in the decisions, not just passive beneficiaries of the funds" (World Bank 2024, 33).

Romania is set to receive approximately €3.5 billion through the SCF (2026–2032) to compensate vulnerable households for their energy costs. According to the Ministry of Energy (2024), the funds will be used for direct subsidies, the installation of solar panels, and information programs on efficient consumption.

However, critics warn that without a clear institutional framework, these resources risk being used inefficiently. As Sabato and Vanhille (2024) argue, “in states with low administrative capacity, energy justice policies may be formally adopted but unevenly implemented” (Sabato and Vanhille 2024, 42).

In cities, the energy transition is closely linked to the modernisation of district heating infrastructure and thermal rehabilitation programs. Bucharest, for example, started a modernisation plan for its district heating network in 2021, financed by the PNRR (1 billion euros). However, network losses still exceed 30% (Termoenergetica

2024). Also, in large cities, rising energy costs affect tenants and owners of older homes, who cannot access green credits. The Energy Justice in Cities study (Walker, Day and Fox 2021) shows that "urban inequalities in access to clean energy reflect existing socio-spatial inequalities" (Walker et al. 2021, 219). In rural areas, the lack of stable gas and electricity networks generates a continuous dependence on traditional sources. According to a UNDP report (2022), over 55% of Romanian rural households heat exclusively with firewood, and 10% do not have a hot water installation.

This reality has direct consequences on health, air quality and environmental sustainability. In addition, the cost of wood has increased significantly in recent years, increasing the vulnerability of rural households.

The obstacles to implementing EGD at the national level include administrative capacity and bureaucracy, a lack of public information, and cultural resistance and distrust. Romania has limited administrative capacity to manage European funds. The European Court of Auditors' report (2023) notes that only 62% of the energy efficiency funds available during 2014–2020 were effectively absorbed. Many vulnerable citizens are unaware of available support programs. According to a World Bank survey (2024), only 14% of low-income households have heard of energy efficiency programs financed through EGD. In areas affected by the coal transition, local resistance to green projects arises from fears of job losses. Sovacool et al. (2020) explain these reactions by "the perception that the energy transition is imposed from above, without the real participation of communities" (Sovacool et al. 2020, 228).

Despite the challenges, Romania also offers positive examples. The ElectricUp program (2023) has financed over 2,000 SMEs to install photovoltaic panels, contributing to the growth of distributed generation. In rural areas, pilot projects such as the Sălacea Energy Community (Bihor) demonstrate the potential of local energy cooperatives (Delors Institute 2025). In addition, investments under the PNRR (10 billion euros for the green transition) can catalyse structural change, provided that implementation is transparent and participatory.

The gradual elimination of energy price capping and compensation measures marks a significant change in Romania's energy policy. Starting in July 2025, the government has decided to liberalise the electricity and natural gas markets fully, replacing the universal support system with a targeted mechanism based on electronic energy vouchers for vulnerable consumers, as provided in Emergency Ordinance no. 6/2025 and announced by the Ministry of Energy (Energynomics 2025; ProTV News 2025). This decision marks a shift from a generalised protection applied to all consumers to a focused one, aimed at supporting only households with incomes below the energy poverty threshold.

Economically, the elimination cap has direct effects on vulnerable households. Full liberalisation will expose consumers to market volatility, likely leading to higher bills. Low-income pensioners, single-parent families and households below the poverty line will feel these effects most acutely, as their incomes are insufficient to cover increased energy costs. World Bank studies (2024) already indicate that these categories spend on average over 20% of their income on energy, compared to the national average of 11%. The elimination of universal support thus risks amplifying energy poverty and deepening social inequalities.

In the short term, the government has introduced a temporary voucher system of 50 lei per month for households with incomes below 1,940 lei, but its impact is limited (Engie Romania 2025). Unlike general capping, these vouchers cover only a small

portion of the anticipated increase in energy costs and do not address the structural problem of home energy inefficiency. In rural areas, where wood heating remains dominant, rising solid fuel prices exacerbate energy vulnerability, leading households to reduce energy consumption or resort to more polluting sources, such as waste or low-quality coal (UNDP 2022).

The elimination of the cap also affects the dynamics of the green transition. Liberalisation without support measures for investments in energy efficiency and renewable energy may discourage the population from adopting sustainable solutions. Those with financial resources will be able to invest in photovoltaic panels and thermal insulation, reducing their costs, while vulnerable households will remain dependent on polluting sources and market fluctuations. Thus, the transition risks becoming an unequal transition, in which the environmental and economic benefits are concentrated in the middle and upper classes (Bouzarovski and Thomson 2022).

In addition, removing the cap puts considerable pressure on the social acceptability of green policies. If the energy transition is perceived as imposing additional costs on disadvantaged groups, public support for climate policies may decrease significantly —a phenomenon already observed in other European countries during the energy crisis (Sandri 2025). The lack of a precise social protection mechanism, combined with market volatility, may turn the green transition into a social justice issue.

Therefore, the decision to eliminate capping and generalised subsidies requires robust compensatory measures: extending energy vouchers, investing in efficiency for low-income households and implementing a progressive social tariff. Without such policies, the green transition in Romania risks becoming regressive, exacerbating energy poverty and eroding public trust in the European Green Deal's climate objectives.

Conclusions

The analysis in this paper has highlighted the complex relationship between the European Green Deal (EGD) and Romania's socio-economic realities, underscoring that the success of the green transition depends equally on social justice and ecological ambition. The EGD proposes a structural transformation of the European economy, oriented towards climate neutrality by 2050, through policies of decarbonisation, energy efficiency and social inclusion. However, applying these objectives in a national context, such as Romania's, highlights significant obstacles generated by persistent economic inequalities, outdated energy infrastructure, and limited administrative capacity.

The research results have shown that internal disparities deeply condition Romania's trajectory towards a sustainable energy future. On the one hand, developed urban areas can attract investments and implement green technologies, while rural regions remain dependent on traditional, polluting sources such as firewood. Although European instruments, such as the Just Transition Mechanism and the Social Climate Fund, aim to ensure a just transition, their implementation at the national level is often hampered by bureaucracy, a lack of inter-institutional coordination, and an uneven distribution of resources. This gap between policy design and its concrete implementation highlights a key reality: the energy transition cannot succeed without a concomitant social transition.

The elimination of energy price caps and generalised subsidies from 2025 onwards represents a turning point with profound social effects. While this liberalisation aligns Romania with the principles of the European market, it exposes vulnerable households to price volatility and an increased risk of energy insecurity. Low-income

families, pensioners, single parents and residents of mono-industrial regions are the most affected. In the absence of effective compensation mechanisms — such as expanded energy vouchers, progressive social tariffs, and energy efficiency programs for vulnerable households — there is a risk of increasing energy poverty and eroding public trust in the fairness of the green transition. As Bouzarovski and Thomson point out, the perception of injustice in energy reforms can undermine social cohesion and the legitimacy of climate policies.

However, Romania's integration into the European green architecture represents not only a challenge but also an opportunity. Initiatives such as Renovation Wave, REPowerEU, and the national ElectricUp or Casa Verde Plus programs can transform ageing energy infrastructure and stimulate emerging economic sectors, generating jobs in renewable energy. For these benefits to be sustainable and equitable, public policies need to combine technological modernisation with social protection, prioritising investments in disadvantaged homes and communities. Energy education and informing the population about responsible consumption and the advantages of green energy are, in turn, essential elements of a just transition.

The concept of just transition, central to EGD, requires the active involvement of affected communities in decision-making. The mining regions of Gorj, Hunedoara or Valea Jiului should not be seen only as problem areas, but as partners in transformation. Without the direct participation of the population and without professional retraining programs adapted to local realities, decarbonisation risks generating economic and social exclusion rather than development.

In conclusion, Romania's energy transition is both a social and a governance test. Achieving EGD objectives requires not only financial resources but also institutional reform, transparency, and strengthened trust between citizens and the state. Climate neutrality cannot be achieved only through technological innovation, but also by including those marginalised by economic and infrastructural inequalities.

Thus, the European Green Deal can become an instrument of social progress for Romania only if it is applied through the prism of equity and accessibility. A successful green transition must combine decarbonisation with redistribution, ecological responsibility with social equity. Without this synthesis, the green transformation risks reproducing old inequalities in a new form. The case study on Romania confirms a broader European reality: the fight against climate change is inextricably linked to the fight against social inequality, and only by ensuring equal access to clean, affordable energy can a sustainable, cohesive future be built.

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REGIONAL LABOR SHORTAGES IN THE CONTEXT OF DEMOGRAPHIC DECLINE AND EU COHESION: THE CASE OF BIHOR COUNTY, ROMANIA

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Delia-Georgeta BEKESI**
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Abstract. *Demographic decline and economic challenges have become pressing issues in the European Union (EU), where balanced development and social cohesion remain central objectives. Romania, similar to other Central and Eastern European states, faces the combined pressures of negative natural population growth and sustained emigration of skilled workers. This study investigates how these demographic shifts shape labor market dynamics in Bihor County, Romania, focusing on employers' perspectives.*

The research is based on a sociological survey conducted with 254 companies across various economic sectors. The analysis explores employer perceptions of labor shortages, identifies the main occupational areas affected, and examines preferred long-term policy responses. Results indicate that 67.7% of employers experience persistent difficulties in filling certain or most positions, with acute shortages reported in vocational professions related to heavy industry (metal processing, chemical industry) and construction. Salary levels are perceived as having only a moderate impact on recruitment difficulties, while structural factors—such as the misalignment between the educational system and labor market needs, as well as outward migration to higher-wage EU regions—emerge as key concerns.

Correlation analyses between company size, workforce deficits, and other survey variables revealed weak and inconsistent relationships, suggesting that these factors are poor predictors of employer evaluations. Importantly, while employers reject importing labor from outside the EU, they express strong support for policies aimed at reinforcing the domestic workforce, including improved working conditions and pro-natalist measures.

The findings underscore the importance of EU-level frameworks, particularly Cohesion Policy and the European Social Model, in supporting regions disproportionately affected by demographic decline and labor shortages, thereby promoting inclusive and sustainable growth across the Union.

Keywords: *economic growth, labor scarcity, labor market policies, Romania, Bihor County, EU cohesion.*

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1. Introduction and literature review: The relationship between economic growth, demographic decline and the labor market

In the literature, the relationship between demographic decline and economic growth is not emphasized sufficiently, although the problem appears increasingly prominent in developed countries, including European Union (EU) member states (Hu et al., 2021, Liao, 2021, Jones, 2022, Fraumeni, 2019). Long-term population decline, even if not incompatible with economic growth, makes it more difficult to achieve in regions striving for inclusive development, an objective at the heart of EU Cohesion Policy. Assuming limited fluctuations in productivity, access to capital, and external markets, demographic decline will lead to a slowing in economic growth, stagnation, or even negative growth. This problem has been studied mostly in Asian countries like Japan, which has gone through an economic stagnation for almost two decades, the main cause being the demographic decline caused by low birth rates and restrictive immigration policies that limited the country's productive capacities and domestic consumption (Wackernagel et al., 2019, Ashford et al., 2012), and, more recently, in China, after a long period of economic growth, there has been a trend of accelerated population decline as a result of misguided demographic policies that threaten the potential for further economic expansion (Luo et al., 2021, Liao, 2021). Yet within the EU, several Central and Eastern European countries have also encountered low birth rates and persistent emigration, prompting concern about regional imbalances and the need for better cohesion strategies.

Over the past decades, many countries, especially those in Central and Eastern Europe, including Russia and independent countries resulting from the former USSR dissolution, have experienced a combination of low growth rates, stagnation, or even population declines, with uneven rates of economic development. This revived interest in the theories of economic growth but also fueled the fear that a decrease in the population will negatively affect the economy (Filipov and Dorbritz, 2003). In an EU context, this phenomenon underscores how demographic shifts can hinder the long-term goal of a cohesive society, as outlined by the European Social Model and the EU's ambition for "inclusive growth."

The primary argument is that population decline affects both supply and aggregate demand. A decrease in the population implies a reduction in labor supply and its role in production, simultaneously with a reduction in the demand for consumer goods and services and, implicitly, in the demand for investments. A smaller population means a diminished labor pool for production, along with weaker demand for consumer goods, services, and investment. In the medium and long term, such a decrease could reduce gross domestic product (GDP), or even GDP per capita, if shrinking output surpasses the contraction of the working-age population. At the same time, an aging population can strain public revenues and social protection systems (Schwarz et al., 2014), an issue watched closely by EU institutions seeking to uphold social cohesion and fiscal sustainability.

Despite these concerns, many researchers argue that population decline and per capita consumption growth can coexist (Elgin and Tumen, 2012, Jones, 2022), provided there is a focus on high-quality human capital, technology adoption, and well-designed migration flows. Analyzing data from 19 European countries Lianos et al. (Lianos et al., 2023) concluded that the introduction of technology, increased productivity, and other structural changes often prevent GDP from falling, even when total population declines. Still, demographic growth can also be a double-edged sword: higher population growth

in developing countries may translate into environmental challenges and inefficient resource usage (Meadows and Randers, 2012, Bradshaw et al., 2021, Wackernagel et al., 2019).

Economic growth creates pressure on the demand for labor and, in combination with demographic factors such as low birth rates and emigration, leads to a contracting labor supply. From the EU's perspective, free movement of workers—while a pillar of European integration—can intensify outflows from regions with lower wages, thereby fueling regional disparities. Labor availability is among the most critical external factors for sustainable business operations. While certain intra-organizational strategies (Acikgoz, 2019; Das and Baruah, 2013) can mitigate recruitment and retention challenges, the deeper causes lie in demographic trends, immigration policies, and especially the alignment of educational or vocational training systems with real labor market needs. Labor is thus a prerequisite for all the other factors that determine the sustainability of economic agents' activity and the long-term potential for regional development (Figure 1).

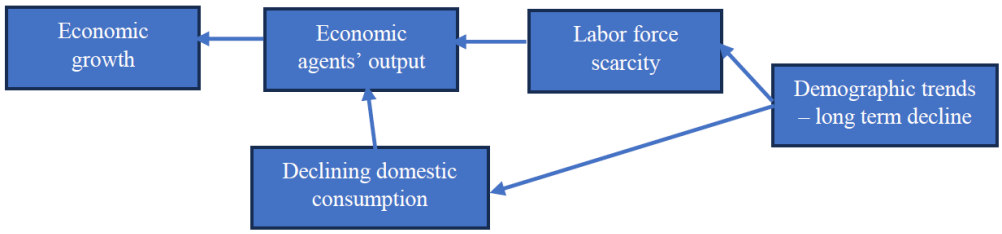

Figure 1 Theoretical model: the influence of demographic trends on economic growth
Source: research

There is considerable literature on the complex relationship between sustainable economic growth and employment. Mediated by the contemporary phenomena of globalization and innovation (Ashford et al., 2012), this relationship also explains how economies and organizations can recruit, train, and reward individuals willing to adapt and innovate (Lasisi et al., 2020b). Decent employment is essential for resource productivity as well as for sustainable development (Lasisi et al., 2020a; ILO, 2023), as it reflects both the global challenges of economic development as well as environmental protection, and the issue of social inclusion, as mentioned in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-8) or in other policy statements endorsed by international and regional bodies (United_Nations, 2023; European Commission). Studies such as Zhao and Luo (Zhao and Luo, 2017) analyzed China's economic development during 1980–2013 related to renewable energy sources, environmental quality, employment, and regulation, and considered employment and labor skills to have a significant impact on sustainable development. Tatli and Barak (Tatli and BARAK, 2019) in a survey of 29 OECD countries, found a direct relationship between energy consumption and female unemployment. The relationship between sustainable economic growth and labor market changes in Central and Eastern European states has been addressed either within the particularities of the Visegrad Group Countries (Bieszk-Stolorz and Dmytrów, 2020), discrimination (Stanila et al., 2020), or the impact of the COVID- 19 pandemic (Radulescu et al., 2020).

From an EU policy standpoint, a shrinking labor force compromises the potential for balanced growth, one of the core aims of the Cohesion Policy designed to reduce disparities across European regions.

2. Aspects regarding demography and the labor market in Romania and Bihor County

In Bihor County, Romania, the link between demographic trends and economic growth is acutely visible among private companies, which generate most of the local GDP (over 90%, insse.ro). As in other newly integrated EU regions, Bihor County faces low birth rates and emigration to more prosperous parts of Europe, resulting in ongoing labor shortages. These challenges illustrate how demographic decline interacts with labor force availability, domestic consumption, and, ultimately, the sustainable development of local businesses.

2.1. Shrinking workforce

Romania's total labor force has been on a consistent downward trajectory from 1990 to 2023. It stood at 12,086,487 in 1995 and declined to 8,282,417 in 2023, a drop of approximately 31%, or 3.8 million people (WorldBank.org).

Following its accession to the EU in 2007, Romania recorded an average unemployment rate of 5.96% between 2007 and 2023, with a general downward trend, starting at 6.4% in 2007 and reaching 3.9% in 2019, the year before the pandemic (WorldBank.org). Labor force participation (ages 15–64) from 2007 to 2022 averaged 65.93%, peaking at 68.89% in 2020 (WorldBank.org). Meanwhile, job vacancy rates rose from approximately 0.5% in 2013 to 0.91% in early 2023[1], indicating an increasing strain on the labor supply.

The evolution of the unemployment rate at the Bihor County level is similar to that recorded at the national level, indicating that the unemployment rate values are lower on average by 2 percent. The highest values were recorded in 2009 and 2010 of 5.8% and 5.9%, respectively, as a result of the effects of the economic crisis in that period, while the lowest values of 1.4% and 1.2 % were recorded in 2018 and 2022. The civilian employed population decreased by approximately 15% from 2007 to 2022, from 275,600 to 235,100 (insse.ro).

In the period 2007-2022, the employment rate in Bihor County was above the national employment rate, in 2022, 67.6% in Bihor County, and 65.2% nationally. The labor force participation rate followed a trend similar to that of the employment rate. The employment rate in Bihor County decreased starting in 2008 after Romania's integration into the EU, primarily due to the county's location on the western border, which made it more affected by emigration (insse.ro).

2.2. Demographic decline: low birth rates and high emigration

Romania's demographic decline stems primarily from negative natural population growth and emigration to Western Europe.

During 1967–1989, the country's average fertility rate was 2.58 (WorldBank.org), pushing Romania's population from 19.53 million to 23.16 million by 1989. This growth was propelled by pro-natalist policies under the communist regime

[1] Romania Job Vacancies Rate. Link: https://tradingeconomics.com/romania/job-vacancies. (Accessed in 2024)

(Rotariu and Dumănescu, 2014). After 1989, Romania abolished strict pro-natalist measures, including bans on abortion and contraception, and experienced high abortion rates due to economic and cultural factors (Otovescu and Otovescu, 2019). The transition to a market-based economy brought unemployment, inflation, and reduced social services, complicating the ability of many families to support multiple children. Evolving social norms, inequality, and emigration further contributed to a sustained drop in fertility, averaging 1.51 between 1990 and 2022. Consequently, Romania's population had fallen to 19.06 million by 2023 (WorldBank.org).

Large-scale temporary emigration to Western Europe intensified after the 1989 collapse of the communist regime. Salary differentials make Romanian jobs less attractive for qualified workers, many of whom do not return after initially migrating (Anghel et al., 2017; Hinks & Davies, 2015). Net migration fell from –39,265 in 1990 to –138,327 in 2008, later easing somewhat post-2008 crisis (WorldBank.org). Overall, Romania has sustained an average negative net migration of –73,384 annually since 1989, losing around 4 million people, roughly 20% of its population, to emigration. While remittances have bolstered domestic consumption (over 3% of GDP since 2015), they have not offset the labor loss (Bunduchi et al., 2019; Cismaș et al., 2020).

The same demographic trends can be observed in Bihor County, where the total population decreased from 631,741 in 2002 to 610,726 in 2022, a decrease of 3.33%. During this period, emigration from Bihor County is increasing, and the maximum number of emigrants (681) was registered in 2022 (insse.ro).

Romania's relatively low immigration levels are influenced by its cultural homogeneity and comparatively lower standard of living than other EU member states. Attitudinal measurements suggest that Romanians have a generally positive outlook on immigrant integration (Pogan, 2021), although the country has not experienced the immigration pressures seen elsewhere. Hungary, for instance, shares historical parallels with Romania and also grapples with labor shortages (Matyas, 2019) but faced a strong influx of migrants in 2015, which led to significantly different attitudes (Barna & Koltai, 2019).

3. Research objectives and methodology

To explore employers' perspectives on these issues, we conducted a sociological survey in Bihor County with a representative sample of 254 companies. The research aims to (1) determine how employers evaluate current labor market conditions, (2) identify the factors they believe are primarily responsible for labor scarcity, and (3) highlight which long-term policies—particularly those aligned with EU cohesion strategies—employers favor for skill development and workforce retention. These objectives align with broader European Commission goals of fostering inclusive labor markets, reducing regional disparities, and enhancing social cohesion.

Research objectives:

- Examine the perceived impact of demographic trends—specifically low birth rates, aging, and emigration—on local labor supply.
- Identify the extent to which employers believe systemic factors (e.g., education, wage levels, EU freedom of movement) shape labor shortages.
- Investigate how employer size and the severity of workforce deficits influence their policy preferences, including EU-aligned reforms.

Methodology:

- Sample: The sample was constructed through a stratified approach, accounting for the main categories of employers in Bihor County: heavy industry, light industry, services requiring medium-to-low qualifications, and services requiring medium-to-high qualifications. Microenterprises, small, medium, and large enterprises were included, but we ensured significant representation of small, medium, and large companies due to the prevalence of inactive microenterprises.
- Data Collection: We administered 254 questionnaires to employer representatives visiting the Bihor County Employment Agency between January and February 2023. The instrument investigated local labor market perceptions, the role of EU-level factors like cross-border labor mobility, and the feasibility of potential policy interventions.
- Analysis: Correlation tests and contingency tables were used to examine associations between employer characteristics (e.g., size, workforce deficit; see Figure 2) and their assessments of labor scarcity. Results were interpreted within the framework of EU social and economic cohesion policies.

By focusing on Bihor County, we illustrate how demographic challenges, labor market changes, and European integration intersect. In doing so, we provide empirical evidence for debates on demographic decline and underscore the importance of EU-level initiatives—especially Cohesion Policy and the European Social Model—in mitigating labor shortages and ensuring inclusive regional development.

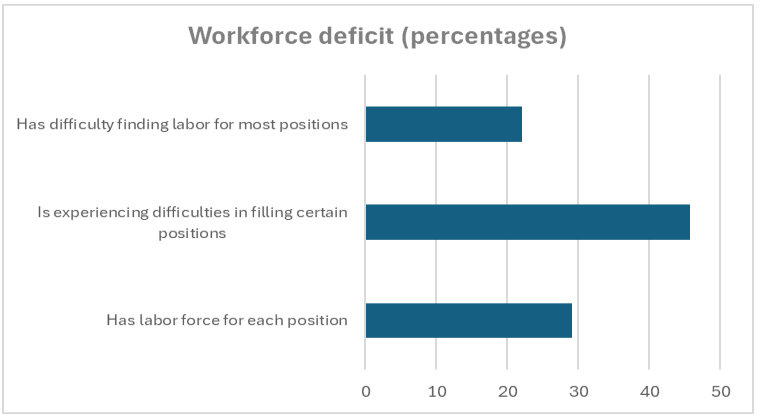

Figure 2 Workforce deficit experienced by the employers in our sample (percentages)
Source: research data

2. Results & Discussion

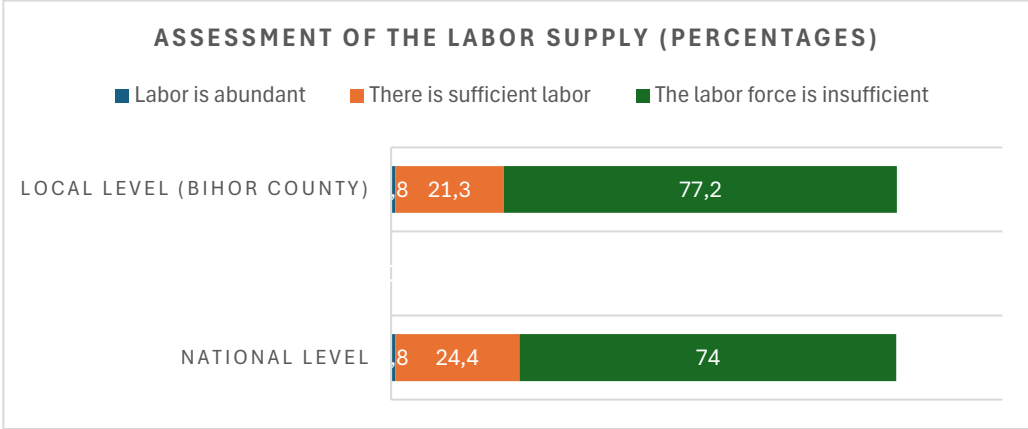

Figure 3 Assessment of the labor supply at national level (percentages)
Source: research data

The sample largely confirms macroeconomic and demographic expectations, with more than 70% of employers stating that both local and national labor markets face a labor shortage (Figure 3). At the local level, 77.2% of employers report insufficient labor (Figure 3). Employer size negatively correlates with labor market assessments at the national (Kendall's tau-b: –0.198, $p < 0.001$) and local (Kendall's tau-b: –0.365, $p < 0.001$) levels, indicating that larger employers perceive labor supply more adversely. Workforce deficit also shows a moderate negative correlation with assessments at both the national (Kendall's tau-b: –0.355, $p < 0.001$) and local (Kendall's tau-b: –0.365, $p < 0.001$) levels.

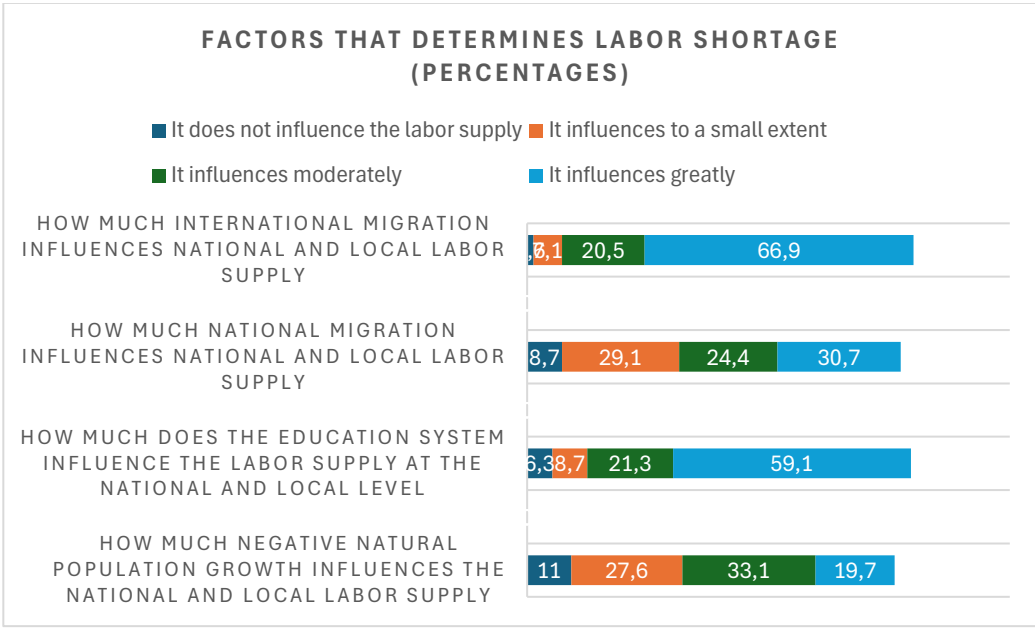

Figure 4 Factors that determines labor shortage at national and local level (percentages)
Source: research data

The data in Figure 4 show that the employers consider the educational system (59.1%) and international migration (66.9%) as the main factors that influence labor supply. Negative population growth is considered less of a problem by employers, as it was less debated in Romania, unlike the issue of emigration to work abroad. On the other hand, national migration is perceived differently, as it has a balancing contribution to the labor market. Employer size seems to be associated with the extent to which negative natural population growth influences national and local labor supply in the opinion of employers ($p<0.001$). From the contingency table, we observed that the demographic situation is considered a problem for the labor market, mostly by the representatives of micro enterprises and significantly less by the representatives of medium and large enterprises. We found no significant association between employer size and the other factors presented in Figure 4 ($p>0.005$). The workforce deficit presents a statistically significant association with the extent to which national migration influences national and local labor supply in the opinion of employers ($p=0.003$). The data from the contingency table show that, as the workforce deficit increases, the perceived influence of national migration on labor supply increases slightly.

The data from Figure 5 (see below) show that employers' representatives consider that their labor shortage experienced by them is determined by the inadequacy of the educational system and emigration, and to a lesser extent by competition in the local market. There was a statistically significant positive correlation between employer size and the opinion expressed by the employer's representative that the emigration of specialized personnel is a factor for labor shortage for the employer (Kendall's tau-b: 0.172, $p=0.002$), which means that representatives of larger companies would consider this factor to be more responsible for labor shortage. There was no statistically significant correlation between employer size and the other two variables from Figure 5 ($p>0.005$). In addition, we did not observe a statistically significant correlation between the workforce deficit and the variables presented in Figure 5 ($p>0.005$).

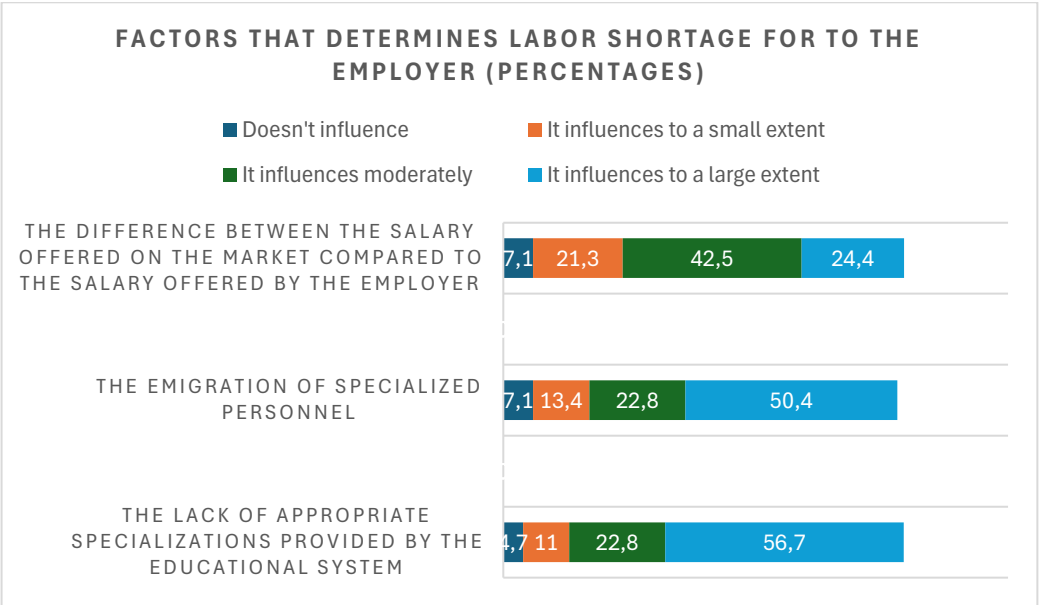

Figure 5 Factors that determines labor shortage for to the employer (percentages)
Source: research data

Regarding long-term measures that would affect the labor market (Figure 6, see below), employers consider that a reform of the educational system is necessary, along with public policies of the Romanian state that encourage the remaining in the country of the working population. Policies to encourage the return of Romanians who have gone to work in the West, the adoption of pro-natalist policies, and the creation of working conditions similar to those in the West by the private sector are also seen favorably. Employers have a strong reserve against the idea of importing labor from outside the EU as a long-term solution. The idea of limiting the right to work in the EU is also rejected, emphasizing the pro-Europeanism of Romanians, despite the fact that emigration to work in the West generates labor shortages in Romania and Bihor County, undermining the sustainability of economic growth. The data showed no statistically significant results regarding the effect of employer size and workforce deficit on the variables in Figure 6 ($p>0.005$).

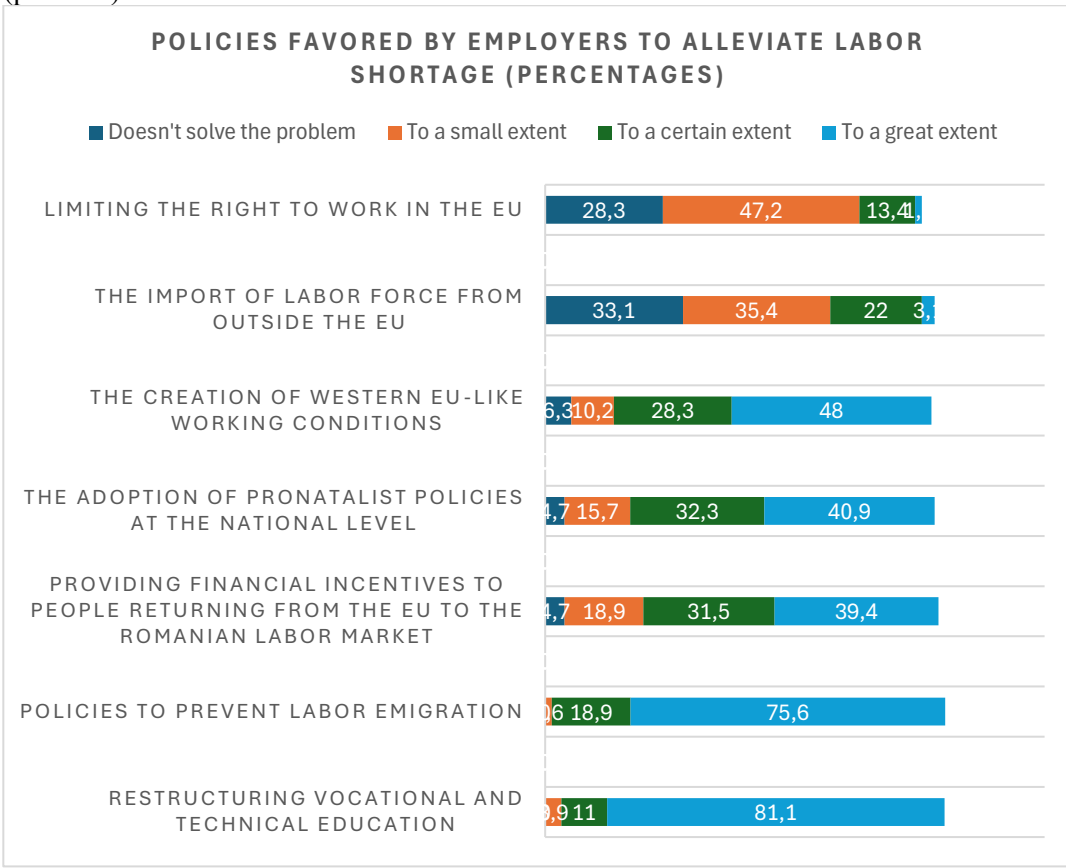

Figure 6 Policies favored by employers to alleviate labor shortage (percentages)
Source: research data

Turning to long-term policy measures (Figure 6), employers support educational reforms and Romanian state policies aimed at retaining the workforce. They also favor pro-natalist policies and creating working conditions more closely resembling those in Western Europe. By contrast, they remain hesitant about importing labor from outside the EU, and they reject any notion of restricting the right to work within the EU, reflecting

strong pro-European sentiment. Interestingly, neither employer size nor workforce deficit significantly affected views on these long-term policy proposals ($p > 0.005$).

3. Conclusions

This study finds that Bihor County experiences significant labor market pressure resulting from declining birth rates, persistent outmigration to more prosperous EU regions, and an educational system misaligned with local employer needs. Over two-thirds of respondents report difficulties filling positions, particularly in vocationally demanding sectors like heavy industry and construction. The most commonly cited drivers of labor scarcity are skilled-worker emigration and educational shortfalls relative to market requirements.

In response to these challenges, local employers overwhelmingly support broader, long-term policies that address root causes. They endorse reforms to modernize education, promote competitive wages, and encourage skilled workers to remain in or return to Romania. Although participants generally hold positive attitudes toward immigrant integration, enthusiasm for large-scale workforce imports from outside the EU is limited—likely reflecting cultural factors and apprehensions about labor-market competition.

From a European standpoint, these findings underscore the need to align local and national strategies with EU-level programs, notably Cohesion Policy, which aims to reduce regional disparities and foster inclusive growth. By synchronizing local educational reforms with broader EU objectives around skill development, and by leveraging existing instruments for labor mobility and social cohesion, Romanian policymakers can strengthen economic resilience in Bihor County. While demographic decline poses serious challenges, coordinated efforts by local stakeholders, national authorities, and EU institutions can mitigate its impact and pave the way for more balanced, sustainable development in Bihor and other similarly affected regions.

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II. EUROPEAN STUDIES, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND SECURITY STUDIES

Svetlana CEBOTARI, Victoria BEVZIUC ⇔ *The Impact of the War in Ukraine on the Security of the Black Sea Basin*

Mircea BRIE ⇔ *EU Accession of the Republic of Moldova: the Challenges of the Internal and Geopolitical Context*

Svetlana CEBOTARI, Violeta COTILEVICI ⇔ *L'espace Integrationniste Européen Dans Le Contexte Des Nouveaux Processus D'expansion Géopolitique*

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THE IMPACT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE ON THE SECURITY OF THE BLACK SEA BASIN

Svetlana CEBOTARI [*]
Victoria BEVZIUC [**]

Abstract. *The Black Sea region over the centuries has played an important geostrategic role in the relations between the great powers. Currently, at the confluence of two universal cultures and religions, the European Christian and the Islamic, and several families of peoples, the Black Sea is a space of both convergence and collision of the interests of the riparian countries, especially those of the Russian Federation. Currently, the Black Sea Region is a strategic fault line between Russia and the NATO alliance. In the post-Cold War era, the Black Sea basin has turned into a climate of deep uncertainty about the potential strategic direction of its riparian states. The East-West divide led to a succession of conflicts that culminated in the all-out invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Russia's war against Ukraine became the most violent and consequence since World War II.*

Since the beginning of the century, Russia has lost its economic, political and military influence in several countries bordering the Black Sea basin, and by seizing Crimea in 2014, the Russian Federation tried to restore its former influence. The unjustified invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in 2022 recalls the precedent of 2014, when Russia occupied part of the sovereign territory of Ukraine by military force. The illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula then allowed the Russian Black Sea fleet to practically strangle the entire region.

The emergence of the Russian-Ukrainian war has its consequences in the Black Sea basin, especially on the security of this region. Thus, by analyzing the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the main consequences on the security of the Black Sea basin will be highlighted.

Keywords: *Black Sea basin, Ucraina, Russian Federation, geopolitical interest, geostrategic interest, geo-economic interest, war, security.*

Introduction

Over the centuries, from a geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geostrategic perspective, the importance of the Black Sea has been primarily based on the region's role as a crossroads of former powers and empires (Hellenic, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, Russian). It has simultaneously served as a connection, a border, a buffer zone,

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and a transit area between West and East, as well as between South and North. Additionally, the Black Sea has historically been—and continues to be—a key hub for trade networks and regions rich in energy resources. The Black Sea Basin spans an area of 413,000 km², stretching 1,150 km from west to east and 600 km from north to south (*Maior, Konopliov, 2011*). Furthermore, the Black Sea region is home to a diverse array of cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious identities. This heterogeneity is also reflected in the structure, size, and economic orientation of the countries within the region (*ibidem*).

Surrounded by Europe, the Caucasus, and the Anatolian region, the Black Sea Basin is connected to the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean Sea to the south via the Bosphorus Strait and the Sea of Marmara. The Black Sea, as a region, has been historically contested due to its dual role as both a bridge and a border. Its strategic importance is further underscored by its size and the increasing capabilities for power projection, as well as the fact that it is an inland sea with a single outlet to the global ocean—an outlet controlled exclusively by Turkey.

Positioned at the confluence of two major civilizations and religions—European Christianity and Islam—as well as several distinct national groups, the Black Sea serves as both a zone of convergence and a battleground for the interests of the riparian states and various international actors. The geopolitical and security dynamics of the Black Sea region, its geographical positioning, the existing risks and threats to stability, and aspects related to political, economic, and military cooperation are all factors that have drawn increasing attention from the international community, European institutions, and Euro-Atlantic organizations. These considerations have led to a more strategic approach to addressing the region's challenges.

In the context of evolving Euro-Atlantic geopolitical and geostrategic realities—particularly following NATO and EU expansion—the Black Sea Basin has gained recognition as an area of significant geostrategic importance (*Frunzeti, Zodian, 2009*). It is a key intersection of strategic routes that facilitate links between the West and the East, a zone of competition and cooperation among major international actors, and a meeting point of differing socio-economic structures and conflicting value systems.

Since 2004, the Black Sea has been defined as the Eastern border of the EU and NATO, marking a frontier near the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The region also holds substantial economic value due to its maritime energy resources, raw materials, modern and developing industrial capabilities, educated population, and extensive regional and transregional trade (*Frunzeti*).

Due to its geographical position, economic potential, and the escalating Russian-Ukrainian tensions, the Black Sea holds significant geopolitical importance. Numerous security aspects are linked to this region—not only from a military perspective (*following Russia's annexation of Crimea*) but also in terms of energy and economic considerations.

Over the centuries, the geostrategic significance of the Black Sea Basin has been shaped by its dual role as both a connecting bridge and a border, a buffer zone, and a transit corridor between Europe and Asia, lying at the intersection of former powers and empires. Additionally, the Black Sea has served as a crucial hub for trade routes and regions rich in energy resources.

The Black Sea has always been a strategic area for the deployment and mobilization of armed forces, both from defensive and expansionist perspectives. Its unique position between the hydrocarbon reserves of the Caspian Basin and Europe

further enhances its strategic importance. While the opportunity to transfer Caspian oil and gas to European markets promotes economic development and regional prosperity, competition for control over pipelines, waterways, and shipping routes—critical for securing political and economic influence—raises the risk of confrontation not only within the region but on a global scale.

At the same time, the increasing number of transit routes, coupled with the potential for enhanced bilateral cooperation, could lead to redundancy due to excessive transport capacity relative to the available supply of oil and gas (*A 2020 Vision for the Black Sea Region*).

The Security of the Black Sea Basin in the Context of the War in Ukraine

The Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, represents the most significant military conflict in Europe since the end of World War II. Wars of this magnitude—especially the high-intensity conflict unfolding in Ukraine—typically trigger political-military and socio-economic transformations, which, in turn, alter the security landscape.

Given the complexity of the subject, this analysis does not aim to cover all aspects of the ongoing war. However, it will highlight key developments related to the war's impact on illicit drug trafficking. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the protracted conflict have profound long-term implications for regional security and stability. The presence of an active, high-intensity war on the European continent for over two years and eight months—directly affecting Ukraine's immediate neighbor, Moldova—has led to a growing interest in its impact on security, particularly regarding illicit drug trafficking.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has disrupted established trafficking routes, forcing some criminal networks to seek alternative pathways. According to an analysis conducted by the EU Drugs Agency, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), and Europol—published on January 24, 2024—the European heroin market (the most commonly used illicit opioid) relies on four primary trafficking routes from Afghanistan to Europe: the Balkan, Southern, Caucasus, and Northern routes (*Războiul rusesc împotriva Ucrainei*).

Main Heroin Trafficking Routes to Europe:

- The Balkan Route – Historically the main heroin trafficking corridor from Afghanistan through Iran and Pakistan to Turkey, continuing via Bulgaria, Greece, or the Mediterranean Sea.
- The Southern Route – Transporting heroin through Iran or Pakistan, either via East Africa's coast or the Arabian Peninsula, before reaching Europe.
- The Caucasus Route – Moving heroin from Afghanistan through Iran to Armenia or Azerbaijan, then into Georgia and across the Black Sea to Bulgaria, Romania, or Ukraine.
- The Northern Route – Running from Afghanistan to Tajikistan, then via Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan to Kazakhstan, before reaching Russia, Ukraine, and ultimately the EU (primarily the Baltic states and Poland) (*EU Drug Market*).

According to the study, the Caucasus route typically involves smuggling heroin on ferries crossing the Black Sea from Georgia to Bulgaria, Romania, and, until recently, Ukraine. Several heroin seizures along this route in recent years confirm that it is used to traffic large quantities of opiates from Iran into Europe via Armenia or Azerbaijan and Georgia. Historically, Ukraine has served as a transshipment and storage hub for heroin

trafficking along both the Northern and Caucasus routes, according to an analysis by the EMCDDA and Europol (*Războiul rusesc împotriva Ucrainei*).

Increased security along Russia's borders with European countries, combined with sanctions against the Russian government and restrictions on trade, has significantly reduced the potential for heroin trafficking from Russia to the EU via the Northern route. However, this decline has led to adaptations in the Caucasus and Northern routes, redirecting heroin flows through Ukraine—particularly via Odesa. Additionally, activity has increased along alternative routes, such as the Balkan and Southern routes (*ibidem*).

The EU Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction has already observed shifts in drug trafficking patterns around the Black Sea and toward other neighboring countries. This change explains the growing concerns of European authorities about drug shipments now passing through the Greek islands and the southern Mediterranean. "We are seeing traffickers attempting to use European ports to establish new supply chains, which could alter the dynamics of criminal networks in Eastern Europe and create new routes into Europe."

Poland is also emerging as an alternative transit route for heroin moving from Russia through Belarus, potentially replacing the Ukrainian route. However, the reinforcement of border controls with Belarus, including the construction of a border wall, could complicate this new pathway.

The war in Ukraine has also disrupted the trafficking of other illicit substances, such as synthetic opioids and methamphetamines, which were previously transported from Europe to Russia via Ukraine. Since the war began, these routes have shifted toward the Czech Republic, Slovakia, the Baltic states, and Belarus. While the war initially disrupted the illicit drug trade, it has also created new opportunities—particularly for synthetic drugs, which are easier to produce and distribute. The demand for these substances remains high, and the profit margins in war zones are substantial (*La guerre en Ukraine*).

However, the war in Ukraine has also fueled the expansion of organized crime networks and their activities. Human trafficking, drug smuggling, arms trafficking, money laundering, counterfeiting, and the smuggling of tobacco, oil, semiconductors, and spare parts have all intensified. Throughout history, wars have acted as disruptive yet accelerating forces, altering established smuggling routes while simultaneously creating new ones. The war in Ukraine is no exception, particularly as Odesa and its port—once a major hub—remain under siege (*ibidem*).

A United Nations report published on December 22, 2023, highlights that the ongoing conflict has led to an increase in synthetic drug production. Even before the war, the number of amphetamine laboratories in Ukraine was on the rise. In times of chaos, activities that are typically prohibited and prosecuted often flourish, and Ukraine is unlikely to be an exception. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) warns in its annual report that war often creates conditions that facilitate illicit drug production and trafficking, posing a significant long-term risk (*Ukraine: la guerre pourrait profiter*).

Data from the past two to three years indicate that Southeastern Europe has become a critical transit region for illicit trafficking, as evidenced by significant drug seizures at ports in the Adriatic, Aegean, and Black Seas. These ports are emerging as key entry points for Ukraine's cocaine supply. The ports of Constanța in Romania and Varna in Bulgaria have become strategic hubs for both imports and exports to and from Ukraine. However, both have historically struggled with corruption and security issues.

The increased volume of legal trade, combined with inefficient cargo scanning and verification systems, has heightened the vulnerability of ports in the Black Sea region to illicit trafficking.

The war in Ukraine has also fueled the expansion of illicit arms trafficking networks. Even before the Russian invasion, Ukraine was a known center for arms trafficking. However, since the war began, experts have raised serious concerns: thousands of tons of weapons supplied by the United States and the European Union to the Ukrainian military risk falling into the hands of international criminal organizations and terrorist groups. These illicit arms are not limited to small firearms and ammunition but also include advanced weaponry such as Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, which are portable, easy to operate, and capable of shooting down commercial aircraft. Reports indicate that arms stockpiles in eastern Ukraine are being looted (*Guerre en Ukraine*).

Western allies have provided Ukraine with unprecedented military support, as Kyiv continues its resistance against Russian forces, who control large swaths of Eastern and Southern Ukraine. As the conflict persists, there have been growing concerns about black-market sales of NATO-supplied weapons originally intended for Ukrainian forces. The potential for these weapons to fall into the hands of radical groups and terrorist organizations is now a major concern for European governments and the United States. Many fear a repeat of the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s, when uncontrolled arms shipments fueled the global illicit arms trade. Similar scenarios have occurred in more recent conflicts, such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

According to estimates by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, nearly €85 billion in military, financial, and humanitarian aid has been provided to Ukraine since the war began. The European Union has contributed a total of €23.28 billion, including €11.74 billion in bilateral aid and €11.54 billion from joint EU funds. Key contributions include: United Kingdom: €3.7 billion, Poland: €1.8 billion, Germany: €1.4 billion, France: Increased aid from $1.7 billion to $2 billion. Additional significant military aid has come from Canada, Norway, Japan, and Australia. The United States remains the largest donor, having provided €49 billion in aid by the end of January 2022, of which €25 billion (56%) was military assistance (*Lombardi*). Furthermore, on April 24, 2024, U.S. President Joe Biden announced an additional $61 billion arms package for Ukraine, marking the largest single military aid shipment since the war began. This package includes: Harpoon anti-ship missile launchers, Howitzers and artillery ammunition, Anti-tank weapons, HIMARS multiple rocket launchers with a range of 70 kilometers (*Congresul SUA aprobă*).

Despite the intention of strengthening Ukraine's defense, international security experts warn of unintended consequences. Interpol Secretary-General Jürgen Stock cautioned in June 2023 that Western-supplied arms could end up on the global black market, exacerbating international arms trafficking and posing long-term security risks (*Cachinero*).

As the conflict between Russia and Ukraine unfolds, there are various complaints about the black-market sales of many weapons donated by NATO countries to Ukrainian fighters. Indeed, the illegal acquisition by radical and terrorist organizations of weapons originally intended for the defense of Ukraine is currently one of the main concerns for the European political class, but also for the United States government. Therefore, what some consider to be a "military aid spillover" to Ukraine threatens to become a ticking time bomb that no one knows when or where it might explode. With the war in Ukraine, drug and arms trafficking routes are changing, creating new opportunities for traffickers.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has consequences not only for food security and global energy security, but also has a direct impact on drug and arms trafficking routes.

The recent data from Southeastern Europe paints a concerning picture of the region's role in illicit trafficking, with major drug seizures at ports along the Adriatic, Aegean, and Black Seas, such as the ports of Constanța in Romania and Varna in Bulgaria. These ports have become key hubs for goods moving to and from Ukraine, but they face significant issues with corruption and security, making them vulnerable to exploitation by criminal networks. The increasing volume of legitimate trade, coupled with inefficiencies in cargo verification and scanning, has made these ports even more susceptible to illicit activities.

The escalation of illicit arms trafficking, particularly linked to the ongoing war in Ukraine, has raised alarms internationally. While Ukraine was already a known point for arms trafficking prior to the conflict, the situation worsened after Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022. Experts warn that the large quantities of military aid supplied by the United States and the European Union to Ukrainian forces—ranging from small arms to advanced weaponry like Stinger anti-aircraft missiles—could fall into the wrong hands, including criminal organizations and terrorist groups. This issue is compounded by the looting of arms stockpiles in eastern Ukraine, which only increases the potential for black-market proliferation.

According to Interpol Secretary-General Jürgen Stock, the risk of these weapons surfacing on the global black market is real. This situation mirrors past crises, such as the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s, where arms proliferation contributed to global illicit trade networks. The same concerns extend to other conflicts like those in Iraq and Afghanistan.

On the military assistance front, the sheer scale of aid to Ukraine is unprecedented. As of early 2024, Ukraine had received approximately €85 billion in combined military, financial, and humanitarian support, with the United States contributing the lion's share—€49 billion, of which €25 billion is earmarked for military aid. The European Union, alongside nations like Germany, Poland, and France, also significantly bolstered Ukraine's defense efforts.

However, experts remain concerned about the unintended consequences of such massive military shipments. The flow of sophisticated weaponry could exacerbate global security risks if strict oversight mechanisms are not put in place to prevent unauthorized sales or diversions to radical groups or criminal organizations. The risk of weapons falling into illicit hands, combined with the region's vulnerabilities to trafficking and corruption, underscores the urgent need for tighter security measures and accountability in both the flow of goods and military aid. The significant increase in military aid to Ukraine has undoubtedly bolstered the country's defensive capabilities, but it also raises critical concerns regarding the unintended consequences of such massive shipments. The flow of sophisticated weaponry—ranging from anti-tank weapons to HIMARS multiple rocket launchers—has the potential to exacerbate global security risks if robust oversight mechanisms are not implemented. Experts warn that, without stringent tracking systems and effective monitoring, weapons intended for Ukrainian defense forces could be diverted to unauthorized groups, including radical organizations or criminal networks.

The threat of arms diversion is not a new issue. Historical precedents, such as the Yugoslav Wars and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, have demonstrated how uncontrolled flows of military aid can lead to the proliferation of weapons, fueling illicit arms markets and contributing to prolonged instability. The concern today is that the advanced military hardware being supplied to Ukraine could end up in the hands of actors

with far-reaching and destabilizing effects, not only within the region but across the globe. This includes the potential for weapons to reach terrorist organizations, insurgent groups, and transnational criminal gangs, which could use them to further their own agendas and undermine regional peace efforts.

The potential diversion of weapons supplied to Ukraine, especially as the conflict evolves and the frontlines shift, poses a significant challenge for both Ukrainian authorities and international partners. The growing concerns about unauthorized sales and transfers are compounded by the vulnerabilities in the Black Sea region. As we have seen in recent years, the region is already a hotspot for illicit trafficking, and the ongoing war has made monitoring and controlling the flow of goods even more difficult. The proximity of conflict zones and the subsequent lack of security measures in certain areas have created opportunities for organized crime to thrive.

To mitigate these risks, there is an urgent need for stricter regulations and oversight mechanisms surrounding the transfer and tracking of military aid. Efforts to track weapons should include both physical and digital monitoring, ensuring that each shipment can be traced at every stage of its journey. This would involve not only close collaboration with the European Union and NATO, but also with international organizations such as Interpol and the United Nations, to create a coordinated global response to weapon proliferation.

Moreover, it is essential that the states of the Black Sea region—such as Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey—enhance their cooperation in combating illicit arms trafficking. These countries play a pivotal role in controlling the movement of goods across the region, and their active involvement in tracking arms shipments, conducting joint operations, and enforcing border security measures is critical. Increased surveillance of key transit routes, such as the Bosphorus Strait, and bolstering border control efforts in maritime and land transport corridors are vital to preventing the diversion of military supplies.

The risks associated with military aid diversion are not limited to weapons alone; they also extend to the trafficking of other illicit goods, such as narcotics and human trafficking. The presence of sophisticated weapons in the hands of criminal organizations could further fuel these illegal activities, creating a more dangerous and unstable environment in the Black Sea region. This interconnected web of criminal enterprises underscores the need for a holistic approach to security, where both arms control and the fight against trafficking are addressed in tandem.

Furthermore, the accountability of arms suppliers, particularly Western nations, is of paramount importance. Countries like the United States and United Kingdom, which are major contributors to Ukraine's defense efforts, must ensure that their support does not inadvertently fuel global insecurity. This requires thorough due diligence in the arms export process, including vetting recipients and recipients' intermediaries, to ensure that weapons do not fall into the wrong hands. Additionally, the international community must work together to strengthen legal frameworks that prevent the unauthorized sale or transfer of military goods. These frameworks should incorporate stringent reporting, auditing, and compliance measures to ensure transparency and accountability at all levels of the supply chain.

In conclusion, the massive scale of military aid flowing into Ukraine, while necessary for its defense, also presents substantial risks that must be addressed. The diversion of advanced weaponry into illicit channels is a pressing concern that could destabilize the region and beyond. To prevent such outcomes, there must be a concerted

effort to implement rigorous oversight measures, enhance regional cooperation, and ensure that military aid does not contribute to the growth of global illicit arms markets. The consequences of failing to do so could have far-reaching implications, not only for the security of Ukraine but for global peace and stability.

Conclusions

The ongoing confrontation between the Russian Federation and Western powers, particularly since the end of 2021, has dramatically reshaped the security landscape in the Black Sea region. This conflict, centered around the war in Ukraine, has not only escalated tensions between Russia and NATO but has also had significant ramifications on the proliferation of illicit activities, particularly in drug and arms trafficking. The geopolitical dynamics in the Black Sea have created a volatile environment, where the military and political crisis in Ukraine directly influences regional security, with far-reaching consequences.

At present, the Black Sea has become a critical point of interest for both military strategy and illicit activities. The region is witnessing a dual reality: while there is an ongoing process of reinforcing the regional security architecture as part of the Euro-Atlantic area, there is also an intensification of security challenges due to the war in Ukraine. This war has led to the disruption of established control over parts of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, opening the door to more transnational criminal activities, including the trafficking of drugs and weapons.

One of the most concerning aspects of the current situation is the impact of the conflict on the flow of illicit goods across the region. Ukraine and its neighboring countries have long been identified as significant transit routes for both arms and narcotics, but the war has created new vulnerabilities. Ukrainian ports, such as Odessa on the Black Sea, have become increasingly difficult to monitor and secure due to the ongoing hostilities, making them prime entry points for illegal shipments. The collapse of regulatory oversight in conflict zones allows organized criminal groups to exploit these gaps, fueling regional and global trafficking networks.

Moreover, the proximity of Russia to the Black Sea and its involvement in the conflict has complicated the situation even further. The Russian Federation itself has been accused of playing a role in facilitating illicit arms and drug trade, either through direct involvement or by turning a blind eye to such activities as part of its broader strategic objectives. The use of the Black Sea as a logistical corridor for the movement of illicit goods, especially to and from countries in the Middle East and Europe, has become an alarming trend. The ongoing war in Ukraine has disrupted the region's security architecture, allowing for the further entrenchment of these criminal activities.

In response to these challenges, there is a growing recognition among the Black Sea riparian states of the need to strengthen regional cooperation and security measures. The complexity of the situation demands a multifaceted approach, involving diplomatic, military, and law enforcement efforts. Strengthening border controls, improving surveillance of key transit points such as the Bosporus Strait, and enhancing intelligence-sharing between regional partners are all critical steps to curb the flow of illicit drugs and arms.

The role of NATO and the European Union is also crucial in this context. Both organizations have shown increasing interest in stabilizing the Black Sea region, not just from a military standpoint, but also in terms of countering illicit activities that threaten regional stability. NATO's presence in the region, along with the EU's support for

Ukraine and its neighbors, is intended to both reinforce defense capabilities and create a robust framework for combating organized crime. These efforts must be accompanied by targeted sanctions, capacity-building initiatives for law enforcement, and closer cooperation with Interpol and other international bodies.

Given the intricate web of political, economic, and security dynamics at play, it is clear that regional security in the Black Sea is no longer just about traditional military defense. The war in Ukraine has highlighted the vulnerability of the region to the expansion of illicit trafficking networks, which, in turn, exacerbate the challenges of maintaining peace and stability. As such, combating these illegal activities is not only a matter of securing borders but also of ensuring that the Black Sea does not become a safe haven for criminal enterprises that undermine the efforts of the international community to promote peace and security.

In conclusion, the Black Sea has emerged as a critical zone of both conflict and illicit trade, where the war in Ukraine serves as a catalyst for the intensification of these dangerous activities. To address these challenges, it is essential for the riparian states of the region to enhance their collective efforts in securing their borders, improving maritime monitoring, and working together to dismantle trafficking networks. By doing so, they can contribute to the broader goal of regional stability and security, reinforcing the Black Sea's role within the Euro-Atlantic framework while simultaneously combating the rise of transnational criminal activities that threaten both regional and global peace.

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EU ACCESSION OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: THE CHALLENGES OF THE INTERNAL AND GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

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Abstract. *The geopolitical context, but also by internal political changes have had a considerable impact on the dynamics and evolution of the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova. During the last two decades, the geopolitical reality has fundamentally changed in the area of Central and Eastern Europe. The accession of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine to the European Union is a complex and highly topical issue that has come again to the forefront of discussions in Brussels and in the European chancelleries on the background of Russian aggression since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The objective of this analysis is to identify and view and discuss the challenges posed by the beginning of the EU accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova from the perspective of a geopolitical contextualization and under the influence of internal identity cleavages, with an emphasis on the reality in Transnistrian region and Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (ATU Gagauzia). From a methodological point of view, in order to understand the internal and geopolitical contextualization, we consider a diachronic analytical approach, as well as an explanatory-descriptive one, following in particular the evolution of the relationship between the Republic of Moldova and the EU after the launch of the Eastern Partnership (EaP).*

Keywords: *Republic of Moldova, geopolitical context, EU, Transnistrian region, ATU Gagauzia.*

Introduction and methodology

The accession of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine to the European Union is a complex and highly topical issue that has come again to the forefront of discussions in Brussels and in the European chancelleries on the background of Russian aggression since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The geopolitical challenges are very high and complicated by the internal context for both states. In particular, the Republic of Moldova is obliged to take into account, in addition to the aspirations of the majority of the population and the identity cleavages within society. The political connotations of this reality are considerable and have been impacted by the Russian interference and

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influence on some political parties, on a part of the Orthodox church in the Republic of Moldova, but also the direct or indirect control it has had over the last decades over a significant part of the media (press). The Republic of Moldova has clearly and categorically manifested its pro-European orientation by formulating the application for opening of accession negotiations with the European Union. It has received the status of candidate country alongside Ukraine, on June 25th 2024, the first intergovernmental conference in the accession negotiations was officially opened for both countries (The European Council, 2024).

The *objective* of this analysis is to identify and view and discuss the challenges posed by the beginning of the EU accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova from the perspective of a geopolitical contextualization and under the influence of internal identity cleavages, with an emphasis on the reality in Transnistrian region and ATU Gagauzia.

The *research questions* are: 1. What are the geopolitical challenges and how do they act upon the endeavors of approach of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union; 2. How do the separatist and centrifugal tendencies in Transnistrian region and ATU Gagauzia act and influence the process of accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU?

From a methodological point of view, in order to understand the internal and geopolitical contextualization, we consider a diachronic analytical approach, as well as an explanatory-descriptive one, following in particular the evolution of the relationship between the Republic of Moldova and the EU after the launch of the Eastern Partnership (EaP).

The geopolitical challenges for enhancing of the Republic of Moldova's approach to the EU

From a geopolitical view, the Central and Eastern European space at the beginning of the IIIrd millennium was marked by then European Union enlargement and NATO expansion to the east, and also by the tendency of the Russian Federation to reposition itself as a relevant actor, to regain the influence of Moscow from the USSR times, inclusively through the exercise of military force on neighbors. The scene of the international system is increasingly moving towards a multi-polar world, with a more prominent role for China. All these were added to the multiple crises that the European space in particular had to face: from the economic and financial crisis, to the very high pressure of migration generated by multiple factors, including the instability in the Near East and North Africa, to the COVID-19 crisis and the war in Ukraine.

The evolution of the relationship between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union was greatly influenced, in particular, by several events and processes having a strong geopolitical impact:

The NATO expansion by including the former communist states of Central and Eastern Europe, to the borders of the former Soviet Union, including the Baltic countries

The 2004 and 2007 EU enlargement

The War in Georgia of 2008

The launch of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009

The Russian aggression in Ukraine after the annexation of Crimea in 2014

The war launched by Russia after the invasion of Ukraine after February 2022

After the launch of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) in 2003, with regard to the external relations of the European Union, it constituted a support and starting point, the results of which were noted by the European Commission as positive from the first years (European Commission 2004). Thus, "*the ENP strengthened relations with partner countries and brought concrete benefits to both the Union and its partners, including the launch of regional initiatives and support for democratization in the European neighborhood*" (JOUE 2014). Seen in a regional context, the ENP appears against the background of the expansion of the EU to the East, in conjunction with the change in Russia's strategy towards Eastern Europe.

Shortly after the accession of the former communist states from the Central and Eastern Europe area (the 2004 and 2007 enlargement), the EU was forced to *reform its European Neighbourhood Policy.* This was not due to the fact that the new eastern neighbours were too much of a challenge for the EU, although it can also be said that, but the fact that this period brought a lot of changes to its external border. New neighbour countries were less stable. In the East, the European partners faced big problems, both of an internal nature, and especially because of the pressure, including of a military nature on the part of Russia. The European Union has been put in a position to protect its partners confronted with an increasingly expansive Russian state. The Georgia crisis of 2008 or the conflict in Ukraine after 2014 are eloquent for this reality to which the EU had to adapt (For more details to be seen Brie 2017, p. 55-71).

Retrospectively viewed, the process of the Euro-Atlantic expansion to the east was marked by oscillating developments in relations with the Russian Federation. Diachronically following the events after the fall of the Iron Curtain, we find that the shy initiatives of openness to cooperation between Russia and the West in the first decade after the collapse of the USSR were abandoned along the way. Russia began increasingly to consider the approach of former communist states to NATO and then to the EU as a threat to its own security, a process that affects its regional and geopolitical interests.

Contextually, beginning with the year 2000 when Vladimir Putin became the president of the Russian Federation, the vision of this state towards the West changed. If in the case of the Yeltsin government we could observe a policy aimed at cooperation, in the case of Putin, he affirms the right and necessity of the "independence" of Russian politics. The concept of independence does not refer to the internal independence of the policies of this state, but it must rather be understood in an antithetical relationship to the EU, and especially to NATO, therefore externally. From the perspective of this thesis, Russia is in a continuous state of external threat generated by its geographical position (lack of maritime borders, expansion of the EU and NATO to the East and the growth of China's influence in the West) (Tsygankov 2012, p. 31). Such a perception can generate two types of strategies: on the one hand, one can talk about a foreign policy the purpose of which is to defend one's own interests, thus a *defensive policy* (characteristic of the period 2000-2008, until the outbreak of the Georgian war). After 2008, the direction of Russian policy strategy changes and generates a pattern with aggressive accents, elements that can be observed in the war in Ukraine (after 2014), thus an *offensive policy* (Bărbulescu *et al.* 2016, p. 63). Russia has often used concepts such as "Russian-Soviet identity"" (Perepelytsia 2010, p. 105) when it considered the identity of the ex-Soviet European space (especially with reference to Ukraine). Under this paradigm, Ukrainians were considered to be "Russians who speak one of the dialects of the Russian language" (Perepelytsia 2010, p.105). Rusia perceives Eastern Europe as part of its immediate neighborhood, a historical legacy of the Tsarist imperial *hinterland*, the "other Russias".

This space (area), which includes Ukraine, Belarus, the Republic of Moldova or the Caucasian countries, is -at most- a region that separates it from the EU and NATO, but in no way part of the Western system. The use of symbolic, cultural and religious values, the so-called *„Ruski mir"* (the Russian world/Russian cultural area) is what Russia often refers to. Last but not least, the *ideology of "Eurasianism"* (widely discussed in the specialized literature) is used to justify Russia's right to intervene in the post-Soviet states. In this way, Russia perceives any rapprochement of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine with the EU/NATO as a loss of its own influence in the area.

This is the context in which the ENP[The European Neighbourhood Policy] evolved and was reformed. In 2009, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was launched, after the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) was more clearly shaped in Paris in 2008, thus consolidating the regional component of the ENP. The reforming of the European Neighborhood Policy has conferred a particular touch to the eastern part of Europe. By initiating the Eastern Partnership, the EU aimed to strengthen and deepen the ENP in the former Soviet Eastern European space. The Eastern Partnership therefore represents the specific eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy. The declared aim of this initiative was to support and accelerate the rapprochement of the states of Eastern Europe with the Union. The partnership was based on common values such as democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, the application of the principles of the market economy, sustainable development and good governance. The EaP is grounded on "common interests and commitments, as well as shared involvement and responsibility", being "governed by the principles of differentiation and conditionality"." (The European Commission 2009, p. 5). The EU leaders welcomed and accepted the Polish-Swedish project, delegating the European Commission to conceptualize the new program and come up with proposals, concrete ways, to implement the project by the spring of 2009. At the same time, at the European Council in Brussels, on June 19th-20th 2008, the need to promote the eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy and to deepen regional cooperation between the EU's eastern neighbours was reiterated. (The EU Council 2008, p. 19). The European Commission was mandated by the European Council and invited "to prepare a proposal on the Eastern Partnership" (The EU Council 2019). The Russian military intervention in Georgia led the European Council, meeting in extraordinary session on September 1st 2008, to examine the regional effects of the new geopolitical context and to request the Commission to expedite the process of the EaP initiative. (The EU Council 2019). The need for a single and cohesive political sphere regarding the Eastern Neighbourhood was evident. The steps taken towards the development of a coherent policy, accompanied by specific European programmes and instruments, gained substance with the organisation of the first *Summit of the Eastern Partenership in Prague* (May 7-th, 2009). The Eastern Partnership was designed to complement the European Neighborhood Policy and was intended to intensify political and economic integration, none of the six ex-Soviet states obtaining promises regarding eventual accession to the European Union (Rinnert 2013, p.

2). As part of the European Neighborhood Policy, the Eastern Partnership created direct links between the ENP and the European integration and enlargement policy (Bocková & Lenč 2014, p. 161; Kochenov 2009, p. 29).

From the very first years of the existence of the EaP, one can see the beginning of an increasingly clear differentiation in the future relations of the six with the EU. The *more for more* principle is increasingly targeted by European officials in response to the different aspirations of partners (especially after the *PaE Summit in Warsaw* in September 2011). In the period after the *Vilnius Summit* (November 2013), this redefining of the paradigm in which the ENP was seen, was also required by the fact that the EaP somewhat reached its limits under the conditions of the annexation of Crimea and the open conflict in Ukraine. The European Union proved constrained in managing the Ukrainian crisis in the period between the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Russian invasion in February 2022. On a symbolic level, in the immediate period of the context of 2014, the process of the rapprochement of the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine with the European Union was deliberately accelerated by the EU. Thus, despite some obvious lack of concrete steps of a reforming-integrating nature, these states receive certain benefits with a high impact on the media and public perception of integration. The Republic of Moldova, because it was almost the only one that remained within the parameters established in the context of Vilnius, but also because the EU wanted to send clear messages to the others, became the first country in the Eastern Partnership to benefit from a visa-free travel regime (April 2014). Subsequently, these three states signed bilateral Association Agreements with the EU. The other three states (Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan) repositioned themselves in the context of geopolitical changes, taking a step back in their relationship with the EU. (Brie, 2022).

The EaP Summit in Riga (May 21st-22nd 2015) was marked by mutual assurances that the EaP would continue and that the ENP represented a viable solution for Eastern Europe. The European leaders reaffirm the particular importance the EU gives to the Eastern Partnership as a „specific dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy". The summit joint declaration reaffirms the shared vision regarding „this strategic and ambitious partnership as one based on mutual interests and commitments and supporting reform processes" promoted in the EaP partner states (The EU Council 2015, p.1). We cannot but not notice the change in the perspective in which things are presented: each state can decide its level of European integration, respectively the areas of cooperation or the objectives it aspires to in its relationship with the EU. The "sovereignty" of the partner states is reaffirmed (The EU Council 2015a, p. 1), not only in relation to possible (potential) aggressors (such as the Russian one!), but also in relation to the proximity to the European Union. In the text of the joint declaration the tone and message is much more cautious regarding the horizon of European expansion to the east (Matache-Zaharia 2015, p. 254). The shift from the *multilateral*, common *dimension* of the EaP implementation framework to the *bilateral dimension*, specific and applicable differently to each partner, is evident. Thus, "the differentiated relationship between the EU and the six sovereign and independent partners" (The EU Council, 2015, p. 3) is a priority for multilateral cooperation platforms that are addressed only at a general-declarative level (Brie,

2022). The reforming of the EaP by moving the emphasis from the multilateral dimension to the bilateral one and on the *more-for-more* principle highlights the flexibility of EU policies regarding the EaP in direct agreement with the limitations given by these national interests correlated to the specific geopolitical context.

The sixth *EaP Summit in Brussels* (December 15th, 2021) brought together only five of the partners: **Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova** and **Ukraine**. Belarus has suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership, but the EU is determined to continue cooperating with the Belarusian people (EaP Summit 2021a)[1].

The text of the joint declaration (EaP Summit 2021b) contains a reaffirmation of the EU's commitment to the EaP states, welcoming the agreements that the Eastern partners and the EU have concluded or are currently undergoing negotiation:

the full entry into force of association agreements and deep and comprehensive free trade areas with Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine

the entry into force of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CPA) between the EU and Armenia in March 2021

progress registered in the negotiations between the EU and Azerbaijan on a new comprehensive agreement

The EU recognized the initiative of the *trio* of associated partners (Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine) to strengthen their cooperation with the EU(Summit EaP 2021b).

The Ukrainian issue, however, has highlighted once again the limits of the EaP (more details to be seen in Brie, 2022). Moreover, the 2015-2024 period revealed and outlined major geopolitical blockages and repositioning moves. Thus, the EaP[PaE] Format has reached its limits[2]. What is even more, from many perspectives we can consider that this initiative of the European Union is a failure in the sense of its regional dimension. The initial project had to be adapted to a bilateral dimension and a sectoral deepening based on the *more for more* principle. Even if some states, of which the Republic of Moldova, Ucraine, Georgia[3] or as of late Armenia, prove obvious progress in the bilateral relationship with the EU with regard to the year 2009, when the EaP was launched, în our opinion, these rapproachement relations have gone beyond the EaP framework/format. The European agenda has adapted itself to the new reality. We find that the regional challenges are very big. At the bilateral level, relations are marked by the new geopolitical context. Belarus has self-suspended itself from the partnership.

1"The EU regrets the decision of the Belarusian authorities to suspend their participation in the Eastern Partnership and looks forward to resuming cooperation with them as soon as the necessary conditions for a peaceful democratic transition are created to develop a common agenda based on shared values and interests" (Summit EaP 2021a).

2 The sixth EaP Summit in Brussels (December 15, 2021) brought together only five of the partners: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Belarus has suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership, but the EU is determined to continue cooperating with the Belarusian people."*The EU regrets the decision of the Belarusian authorities to suspend its participation in the Eastern Partnership and looks forward to the resumption of cooperation with them as soon as the necessary conditions are created for a peaceful democratic transition in order to develop a common agenda based on common values and shared interests*" (EaP Summit 2021a).

3 In recent years, the position of this state has been oscillating in relation to the process of getting closer to the EU and the trend of the first decade within the EaP.

Ukraine has to face an aggressive Russian invasion. Armenia and Azerbaijan failed to overcome in a constructive manner under the umbrella of the EU the tense episodes of the tortuous course of the conflictual bilateral relations generated by the Nagorno-Karabakh issues. Georgia and the Republic of Moldova live under direct threat in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war and are forced to be much more attentive to the separatist republics supported by Russia on their territory.

In this new context, the European Union is forced to adapt 'on the way' its policies regarding the eastern neighborhood. The limits of eastward expansion are obvious. At the same time, the EU cannot afford to abandon its partners to whom it can offer limited concrete solutions in the current geopolitical context.

By an analysis of policies, context and outcomes, we identify **the current limits of EaP** in three main directions (without excluding other perspectives) (this section is a synthesis of the analysis found in Brie 2022):

The limits of the EU's reduced commitment in relation to the integration of the EaP states

The general geopolitical context and Russia's opposition to this project in particular

The specific national interests of the EaP states

The ***EU's limited commitment to the European integration of the EaP states*** was evident from the very beginning of this partnership project. Until the end of 2023, the EU has always avoided offering a clear accession perspective to the six EaP states. Despite numerous political statements of support from European leaders, there have not been offered firm guarantees and commitments accompanied by precise deadlines to any of the six partners.

The limits of the EU's commitment were already apparent in 2011. Despite progress made in particular by the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, during the Warsaw Summit, the EU gave the impression of the existence of political and geopolitical limits. The Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk – a politician who would mark the next period of European politics – said „*We know that Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine had higher expectations from this summit: they wanted a clear perspective of joining the Union. But we do not have sufficient conditions in place to provide a clear outlook. We are waiting for all the conditions to be met, then we can move forward*." (EaP Summit, 2011).

In the new context after 2014, it is obvious that the simple reforming of states, accompanied by the implementation of EU policies and the *acquis*, is no longer sufficient in order to achieve European enlargement. The ENP, as it was conceived, no longer corresponds to geopolitical realities. It suffices to recall that the ENP had long been seen as a kind of "*antechamber*" for the enlargement of the European Union. Forced to take into account a complex combination of factors, the EU is not taking any chances/nor can it afford to promise accession to the EaP states. This reality is given by both the external context, including the geopolitical one, and the internal EU context. The latter is also related to the erosion of the momentum of enlargement after the accession waves of 2004, 2007 and 2013. Many states have become reluctant to expand further. The financial and economic crisis, which has shifted the focus much more towards domestic political issues has undoubtedly contributed this state of affairs. The need for institutional reform, but also the increasingly complicated geopolitical context (the conflict in Ukraine; the situation in the Middle East and North Africa; the refugee/immigrant crisis; trade tensions

and the paradigm shifts in US foreign and security policy that marked Donald Trump's presidency, etc.) are likely to further complicate this picture. Last but not least, another vulnerability of the EU common policies regarding the neighborhood, visible also in the period after the Riga Summit, is given by the security dimension in the ENP approach. This proves to be insufficiently clear and not correlated with the current geopolitical situation, security thus proving to be a "weak point" (Gogolashvili, 2015, p. 18) on the agenda of the European neighborhood (Bărbulescu *et al.,* 2016, pp. 110-111). The Russian invasion of Ukraine that began in February 2022 confirmed the blockages and shortcomings of the EaP, but also the limits of the guarantees that the EU could have given to the EaP states (Brie, 2017, p. 63-66).

The general geopolitical context and Russia's opposition to this project, in particular, have shaped the policies of the EaP member states. Brutal Russian interventions in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (after 2014 with the annexation of Crimea, with the support of the separatists from the east, and primarily through the military invasion that began on February 24, 2022) were associated with the total subjugation of Aleksandr Lukashenko's regime to Putin, but also the maintenance of a constantly tense atmosphere in Transnistrian region and especially in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The conclusion that results from a simple analysis is that the states that did not accept the political and geopolitical orientation drawn by the Russian Federation were forced to face internal and external challenges supported by the Russians, often of a military nature. The invasion and war in Ukraine are eloquent for the Russian Federation's response to Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic orientation.

Putin's public speech and political actions reveal a rhetoric that often refers to the glorious imperialist past of his own history that he would like to revive, if only in the minds of his own citizens whom he mobilizes in support of such projects in relation to internal and external enemies (Brie, 2018, p. 239). The glorification of the past of the *tsarist* empire, but also of the Soviet Union, highlight Russian ambitions that undermine the stability and balance of the international system. In fact, the entire foundation of the current world order was shaken with the invasion of Ukraine because the principles of international law were flagrantly violated. Moreover, Russia was not condemned by all relevant actors, it benefits from economic and military support especially from China or India. Last but not least, regimes hostile to the West and previously isolated have gained importance through the development of the relationship with Russia (North Korea and Iran are included here). For the Russian Federation, the entire international ostracism, accompanied by the drastic sanctions and corroborated with he huge cost represented by the war in Ukraine, weighed less than blocking Ukraine's free route to the West. This highlights once in a pulse the stakes established by Putin and his regime in view of the withdrawal of its own sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.

The Russian aggressiveness at all levels has thus put pressure on the fragile European integration initiatives that had begun to develop in the EaP states, and the EU could not respond effectively through the mechanisms it had at its disposal.

The specific national interests of the EaP States*,* often divergent in relation to European integration have also led to the failure to meet the original objectives of the EaP. The level of ambition in relation to European integration proved to be different in the six states. Moreover, some of the states have never even expressed themselves in this direction, the EaP being rather seen as an instrument of pragmatic facilitating of some economic gains, not integrating political implications.

The national interests of the EaP states did not diverge only in relation to the objectives of European integration, they proved to be divergent in many cases and in relation to neighbouring partners in the partnership.

Without aiming at making here a synthetic presentation of the specific interests of the six EaP states (this can be found in Brie, 2022), we mention that the analysis of specific interests highlights the limited levels of ambitions of each of the EaP States. Actually, reforming the EaP by shifting the emphasis from the multilateral to the bilateral dimension and the *more-for-more* principle highlights the flexibility of EU policies on the EaP in direct agreement with the limitations given by them national interests related to the specific geopolitical context.

The pro-European orientation of the ***Republic of Moldova*** is clearly expressed by the application for opening accession negotiations, receiving the status of candidate country and, on June 25th 2024, the official opening of the first intergovernmental conference in the accession negotiations with Ukraine (European Council, 2024). The process is complicated. Chișinău must also take into account the regional context, the current Russian-Ukrainian conflict, as well as the Russian support granted to Transnistrian region and ATU Gagauzia.

The war triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine after February 2022 complicated the geopolitical context, introducing significant repositionings and mutations on the international scene. The EU has reassessed its policies on the eastern neighbourhood area, including that of the EaP states. An obvious opening is manifested by the beginning of the accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The two states remain procedurally connected, being placed together in the process. In anticipation of a diplomatic solution to the military conflict, Ukraine will have to take into account in the post-war period the future clauses and the joint commitment to ending the war. This reality, in the absence of a solution in the short or medium term, is not to the advantage of the Republic of Moldova, which could see its accession delayed for geopolitical reasons that are easy to understand.

The geopolitical reality generated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine highlights an existing gap between the West and the East, to which the states that tried, until now, to have a policy of neutrality must resort to. In this respect, we can also understand the new NATO enlargement achieved through the inclusion of Finland and Sweden in 2023 (NATO, 2024). The Russian Federation, through its abusive intervention in Ukraine and its obvious disdain for international law, has acquired the image of an aggressor who has no limits on violent actions in relation to its neighbors. The status of neutrality and international treaties no longer represent the guarantor of national security in the classical sense or in the sense of the new threats posed by the hybrid war. This was the context that prompted the states in the Russian neighborhood to look for security guarantees near NATO (this approach can be noticed at various levels, from a sectoral cooperation, partnerships and until joining the military bloc). The Republic of Moldova is in a similar situation. The status of neutrality did not weigh heavily in front of the many Russian leaders who posed direct threats of militated action against this state (often taking advantage of the complicated context of the management of the frozen conflict in Transnistrian region, the evolution of relations with the autonomous region of Gagauzia or the situation of the Russian-speaking minority in the Republic of Moldova).

In a broader context, the EU is also repositioning itself in relation to the acceleration of the integration process of the Western Balkans. The new geopolitical

reality requires adequate responses and leads to a different order of internal and external affairs of the European Union.

Moreover, the internal consensus at the level of the EU decision-making process suffers in the context of the prolongation of the Ukrainian crisis. Some states see their economic interests threatened against the background of international sanctions against Russia, especially in the field of energy resources supply (see the positioning of Hungary, Austria, Slovakia, but not only).

The Republic of Moldova is seriously affected by the war in Ukraine economically, socially, but also at the level of national and societal security. Then the hybrid war supported by Russia against this vulnerable state contribute to a process of erosion of democracy and threatening the consolidation of the rule of law and political balance. Transnistrian region and ATU Gagauzia are used by Russia to generate instability and to block the initiatives of the Chișinău authorities related to the European integration process. The frozen war in Transnistrian region in the context of the events in Ukraine has shown several times signs that it can be reactivated. Political leaders from ATU Gagauzia publicly support, including through visits to Moscow, Putin's regime and its policies towards the Republic of Moldova and its European integration.

In view of supporting the Republic of Moldova, with the aim of reducing the major effects of the Ukrainian crisis, the ***Partnership Platform for the Republic of Moldova was created.*** (PPRM). This project was launched at the initiative of France, Germany and Romania in 2022. "The Partnership Platform for Moldova has proven to be a useful tool for coordinating efforts and resources from various parties involved in addressing the significant internal and external challenges faced by the Republic of Moldova." (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2024). The first editions of the Partnership Platform for Moldova took place in Berlin (April 5th, 2022), Bucharest (July 15th, 2022), Paris (November 21st, 2022) and Chișinău (October 17th, 2023). More than 50 partner countries and international organizations came together, reaffirming their strong support for the Republic of Moldova, especially due to the effects of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

In preparation for the PPRM Conferences, meetings of thematic working groups are held, established on 6 pillars: *humanitarian effort* (managing the flow of refugees and their resettlement in European states); *energy* (supporting the energy security of the Republic of Moldova); *the fight against corruption* (supporting the government in implementing the ambitious reform agenda); inclusively in the field of in the areas of justice, fighting corruption and promoting economic development); *border management* (internal affairs and effective border management); *financial assistance* (increasing socio-economic resilience); *administrative reform and public financial management.*

The fifth PPRM conference took place on September 17, 2024 in Chișinău and brought together over 65 international delegations with the aim of mobilizing and focusing aid from developed countries for the Republic of Moldova. The aim is to generate political, financial and material assistance, as well as in-depth expertise for the democratic reform process of the Republic of Moldova. On the occasion of this event, several financing agreements worth 380 million euros were signed, in the form of grants and loans (RRA, 2024). "*Support in the amount of around 25 million Euros will be allocated for assistance from the World Bank and the European Union, which will enable the Republic of Moldova to develop the energy system in order to prevent energy wringing, which can still take place*," the head of French diplomacy said in Chișinău. (RRA, 2024). In her turn, the German Foreign Minister, Analenna Baerbock, declared

that she "will continue to support the Republic of Moldova in front of the Russian Federation's aggression and interference in the democratic processes of the Republic of Moldova." (RRA, 2024). "*The Republic of Moldova is not alone, and the meeting is proof of this*", the head of diplomacy from Bucharest, Luminița Odobescu declared. She also emphasized on this occasion that "Romania has been and will always be by the side of the Republic of Moldova", drawing attention to the aggressive information war that Russia is waging in the Republic of Moldova (RRA, 2024). The Romanian Foreign Minister "also highlighted the bilateral cooperation agenda with the Republic of Moldova, which includes interconnection projects in the fields of energy and transport, but also a complex support program for the benefit of the Republic of Moldova by sending government experts from Romania to provide support in the negotiation process for accession to the European Union." (*Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 2024). On the other hand, according to the statement of the *Ministry of Foreign Affairs* from Bucharest, "Romania continues to provide financial support for the projects proposed by the authorities from Chișinău *based on the Agreement between the Government of Romania and the Government of the Republic of Moldova regarding the implementation of the technical and financial assistance program based on a non-refundable financial aid in the amount of 100 million Euros granted by Romania to the Republic of Moldova" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).*

The supporting of joint projects or those from the Republic of Moldova has benefited from considerable financial support from the Romanian state and the EU in the last decade. On the occasion of the final conference of the cross-border cooperation program Romania-Republic of Moldova 2014-2020 which took place in Chișinău on March 7th, 2024, an assessment of these projects was made. The event brought together the structures that managed the program from the two countries, the beneficiaries of the projects, diplomatic missions in Chișinău and representatives of the European Commission. "Romania and the Republic of Moldova share an experience of over 20 years of cross-border cooperation, supported by the European Union. We have invested almost 100 million Euros in the modernization of medical units, in the rehabilitation and equipping of schools and universities on both sides of the border, in the rehabilitation of roads and the efficiency of border crossing points. We are preparing ourselves to invest a similar amount in the period 2021-2027 and we hope to have projects at least as good, for the benefit of local communities", Aurel-Dragoș Drăghescu said, Undersecretary of State in the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration from Romania, present at the event (Romania-Republic of Moldova. ENI-Cross Border Cooperation, 2024). „*The results with great impact achieved within the Romania-Republic of Moldova cross-border cooperation program, supported by European Union funds, reconfirm this strong partnership that generates opportunities for growth, concrete benefits for people and a better life on both banks of the Prut*," Artur Mija stated, the general secretary of the Government of the Republic of Moldova added(Romania-Republic of Moldova. (ENI-Cross Border Cooperation, 2024). By the *Cooperation Program Romania - Republic of Moldova 2014-2020,* 81 projects totaling 99 million Euros were financed, funds that were invested in the rehabilitation of roads, in the modernization of schools, universities and hospitals, in the preparation of institutions and the population for emergency situations, as well as in the restoration and promotion of the objectives tourist centers located on both banks of the Prut (Structural Funds, 2024).

The Internal Contextualization: The Challenges of Managing the Frozen Conflict in Transnistrian region and Developments in ATU Gagauzia

The discussions and developments in the relations between the EU and the Republic of Moldova are influenced and marked both in terms of contradictions and determinisms, by the management of the situation in the Transnistrian and Găgăuz regions. The EU is obliged to take into account the special situation of these regions. Moreover, the government of the Republic of Moldova is encouraged to resolve these identity disputes peacefully and in an integrative manner.

The origin of the ***Transnistrian conflict*** can be found in the last years of the existence of the USSR, when the political class of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic was divided on two fundamental issues: the nature of the relations between Chișinău and Moscow and the place of the Russian or Romanian languages in the public domain. While the political forces, which pursued the dual goal of separation from the Soviet Union and increasing the role and status of the Romanian language, took control in Chișinău, some of the Soviet officials who wanted to preserve the Soviet Union established, with the support of the influential Moscow political circles, an alternative center of political power at Tiraspol (Victor, 2024). Beyond this perspective, somewhat simplistic and idealistic, it is absolutely obvious that the conflict outbreak on the territory of the Republic of Moldova was inspired, stimulated and used by the power in Moscow. This pattern has also been used in the case of other former Soviet republics in order to maintain effective control over all republics to counteract their natural aspirations for sovereignty, freedom and national revival (Stăvilă & Bălan, 2010, p. 4). The proclamation of independence by the Republic of Moldova, on August 27th, 1991, led to a deterioration of relations between Chișinău and Tiraspol (Rusnac, 2022). Although the first fight(ing) between the forces controlled by the Chișinău authorities and the separatist troops took place on December 13th, 1991, the war broke out *de facto* on the night of March 1st-2nd, 1992, when the separatists attacked the headquarters of the police station in Dubăsari (Rusnac, 2022). The stage of the military conflict lasted until July 21st, 1992, but the political dispute continued and persists even nowadays. On 21 July 21-st 1992, in Moscow, the president of Russia, Boris Yeltsin and the president of the Republic of Moldova, Mircea Snegur, together with the separatist leader Igor Smirnov, signed a Convention establishing the principles of the peaceful settlement of the armed conflict. The settlement was in effect a freeze of the conflict that perpetuated and ensured continued Russian interests and control in the region. Russian soldiers were kept in the region with the stated purpose of "maintaining the peace".

The numerous and complex negotiations to resolve this frozen conflict have not resulted in a lasting peace regardless of the negotiation format so far.

The territorial reintegration of the country benefited throughout this period of special attention from the government in Chișinău. At the level of its structures, there is a portfolio of deputy prime minister for reintegration with the role of coordinating the activities related to this endeavor. Through the coordination of this structure, in the period 2011-2023, 13 government programs for the reintegration of the country were implemented, which provided for allocations for 544 projects, worth over 170 million lei (MLD), with the objective of solving pressing problems in The Security Zone (Area), sustainable community development, achieving the desired reintegration of the country (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2024). On May 15th, 2024, the members of the Government approved the program of activities for the reintegration of the country for the year 2024, which provides for the financing of 26 projects of sustainable development,

infrastructure modernization, institutional support and community interest to be implemented in the localities of the Area of Security (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2024).

Despite the efforts and various public policies coordinated from Chisinau, reintegration remains a difficult goal to manage and to achieve. The Transnistrian conflict cannot be resolved without the demilitarization of the Transnistrian region, and the right moment could come when the situation in the war in Ukraine is clarified, the Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration, Oleg Serebrian said in an interview for the public television station Moldova 1 (Radio *Europa Liberă* [Free Europe] Moldova, 2024). Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine in 2022, Moscow can no longer rotate its military from Transnistrian region, so it has resorted to recruiting men from the region, where about 200,000 people with Russian passports are said to live. „*There are many military or militarized entities with which we have to see what to do, because the fact that the Russian flag of a military unit will leave the Transnistrian region will not mean the solution to the problem. The right moment for resolving this issue, without which we cannot move forward in the political settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, will undoubtedly appear when the situation in the war in Ukraine becomes clearer, as we wish*", the deputy prime minister for reintegration also said (Radio Europa Liberă [Free Europe] Moldova, 2024).

In the process of bringing the Republic closer to the EU, the Transnistrian issue proved to be a difficult problem to manage. It is difficult to imagine European integration without being able to have the full exercise of national sovereignty and control of the entire territory by the government from Chișinău. Then, the Republic of Moldova, but also the EU, seem willing to make concessions to Tiraspol in order to determine a proactive reaction and facilitate a deepening of economic integration that would at least stimulate the Transnistrian elites to be more open to dialogue with Chișinău. The separatist regime in Tiraspol can still use its energy leverage to extract certain commercial concessions from Chișinău, inclusively with the permission of the EU institutions. These concessions could be perceived by Moldova and the EU as a temporary price paid to limit the range of instability generated by the war in Ukraine (Cenusă, 2023). Ukraine is also determined to support the Republic of Moldova in the reintegration process. This has already been signaled by Volodymyr Zelenskiy on the sidelines of the European Political Community summit in June 2023, on which occasion he expressed his confidence that the Transnistrian issue will end with the end of the war in Ukraine (Radio Chișinău, June 2023).

Not solving the Transnistrian conflict is a threat to the national security of Moldova and Ukraine. Therefore, both sides are interested in eliminating the Russian political-military presence from the Transnistrian region, preferably immediately after the end of the war (Cenusă, 2023). In the event of a diplomatic or military arrangement favorable to Russia, the latter could demand concessions related to the restoration of the transit of Russian military units through Ukraine, previously possible under the 1998 agreement, canceled in 2015, to bring the Transnistrian region out of its isolation (Cenusă, 2023). In the equation of negotiations between Chișinău and Tiraspol, the position of the separatist regime has lost its previous advantages. Russia, weakened by the effort of the war and international sanctions, supports the regime in Tiraspol less and less. Moreover, against the backdrop of the Ukrainian blockade there is an obvious logistical barrier. In the same direction, Tiraspol's energy advantage in negotiations with the right bank is significantly losing ground as a result of deepening the energy

interconnection of the Republic of Moldova with Romania. Planned to be put into operation no earlier than 2025, the high voltage line that will connect Chișinău to the Isaccea-Vulcănești interconnection will provide direct electricity to Chișinău, avoiding the transmission networks that intersect the Transnistrian region. Also, this interconnection will enable reducing the risks related to Russian attacks on the Ukrainian energy infrastructure. At the same time, the electricity received from the EU will be able to reach the territory controlled by the Chișinău authorities without risking disconnections from Tiraspol (Cenusă, 2023).

On the other hand, in view of the foreseeable cessation of the transit of Russian gas via Ukraine after January 1, 2025, the Transnistrian regime is compelled to make concessions. Getting the Russian gas to Tiraspol could stop suddenly and earlier if the gas compression station at Sudja (Russian territory now controlled by Ukrainian forces) were affected by the bombing in the area. The lack of Russian gas would generate a humanitarian disaster in Transnistrian region. The pressure is, therefore, now even greater on Tiraspol. This is all the more so since, anticipating the situation and benefiting from the direct support of the EU and Romania, the Republic of Moldova has taken decisive steps in the process of finding alternative sources of supply. It is certain that the government in Chisinau can no longer be blackmailed by Moscow via Tiraspol through the energy issue. In the context of the possible deterioration of the situation in the Transnistrian region, Chisinau has a scenario of keeping the region 'afloat' through a dialogue of reconciliation and reintegration. "At the same time, we will have to absorb the consequences for the Transnistrian region. We understand that there is a very limited payment capacity on the left bank of the Dniester and we cannot allow a humanitarian crisis to occur there," said Victor Parlicov, Moldovan Minister of Energy. (Călugăreanu, 2024).

The path to territorial reintegration is difficult and must first be deepened at the economic level. The rapprochement with the EU and its socio-economic benefits can generate positive effects in the relationship with Transnistrian region. "The separatist region of Transnistria will be at least economically integrated into the Republic of Moldova by 2030". Thus,"...at least at the economic level, the region should be practically integrated into a customs, fiscal, and monetary area with the right bank" were the statements made by the Moldovan Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration, Oleg Serebrian. This economic integration will represent more than half of the actual process of integrating Transnistrian region within the Republic of Moldova. (Pricop, 2024). The first steps have been taken since this year. From January 1st, 2024, the new Customs Code of the Republic of Moldova entered into force, by which companies from Transnistrian region will have to pay customs duties to the budget of the Republic of Moldova.

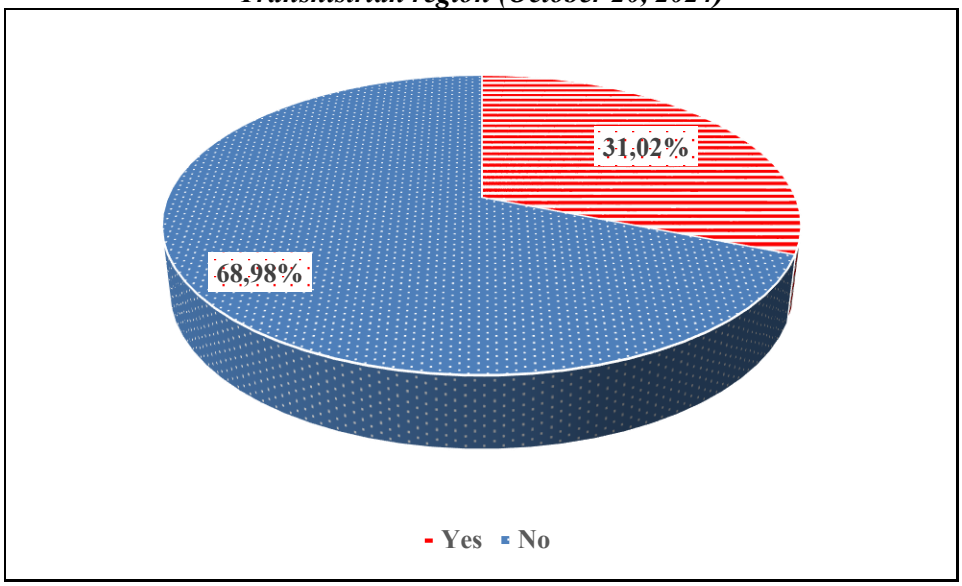
Until then the challenge remains. In order to break the deadlock, the Moldovan authorities are ready to accept the reality of European integration in two stages, whereby the first stage would be the accession of the part west of the Dniester, i.e. without Transnistrian region. Maia Sandu, the president of the Republic of Moldova stated in this case that "we want to integrate into the EU unified, with the Transnistrian conflict resolved, but if this cannot be done, then we are ready to integrate in two steps." (g4media.ro, 2024).

On October 20, 2024, during the referendum on amending the constitution in order to join the European Union, the citizens of the Republic of Moldova were asked to answer the question: "*Do you support amending the Constitution in order to join the*

European Union?". This referendum was won by the pro-European side with only 50.46%, a reality that confirms the polarization and geopolitical fragmentation at the national level. This reality may have other explanations than those related to the community-identity dimension. This fragmentation is social, economic, political, but from our point of view it is also identity-based.

Only 31.02% of the citizens of the Transnistrian region answered "YES". Thus, 68.98% of the inhabitants of the Transnistrian region present at the polls voted against the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union (Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova, 2024). As the majority of the inhabitants of the Transnistrian region assume the ethnic and linguistic Russian identity, we tend to deduce that this ethno-national community chose to vote against an initiative that would set the direction of Moldova's EU accession at the constitutional level. This behavior, in our opinion, can be extrapolated to other regions or localities where the Russian-speaking community is in the majority (of course, we cannot say that all Russians or Russian speakers voted NO in the referendum).

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



Source: own drawing with information from the Central Electoral Commission, 2024

The evolution of the situation in the ***Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia*** is also complicated, especially at the political and identity level. The Găgăuz community has always been a border community. This reality is precisely due to the positioning, often controversial, between the Bulgarian, Turkish and more recently Russian identity of the members of this community. Apart from their controversial origin, their identity carries significant nuances along some historical stages that marked their existence. More and more, this community transformed its identity towards what today is a Russophile community, systematically supported by Moscow.

Without being very numerous (according to the 2004 census, it counted 147,500 members, of which 127,835 lived in the Gagauzia Autonomous Territorial Unit), this community stands out for the importance it had in the history of Bessarabia (The National

Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, 2024a). According to the 2014 census data, 134,535 inhabitants lived in the ATU Gagauzia. According to the 2014 census data, 134,535 inhabitants lived in the ATU Gagauzia, of which 112,387 were Găgăuz (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, 2024b).

The most accepted theory regarding their origin is that they are descendants of Turkic tribes, possibly Oghuz or even Seljuks. Other historians speak of the Cuman, Pecheneg or Bulgarian origin[4]. Certainties, however, are the Turkic origin of their language and the fact that they became Christians, renouncing Islam under the influence of Byzantium (Pârlog, 2012). Their presence in the area of Bessarabia is linked to a migration from the Bulgarian area to Dobrogea and Bessarabia at the end of the XVIIIth century. The annexation of Bessarabia by the tsarists transformed them in their dispute, often with the Turks, but also for the control of the new province, into Christian Orthodox allies increasingly willing to accept cultural-political rapprochement. In return, the Russians granted them privileges, tax exemptions, military service, a.o. (Pârlog, 2012). The Soviet period brought them even closer to the Russians as identity, so that now the Russian language is assumed at a collective level. After the Republic of Moldova won state independence, together with other minorities, they campaigned for the creation of an autonomous region of Gagauzia, culturally supported by Ankara, which opened a Turkish Cultural Center and a Turkish Library here. All this transforms this community into a border identity, one of cultural-identity contact.

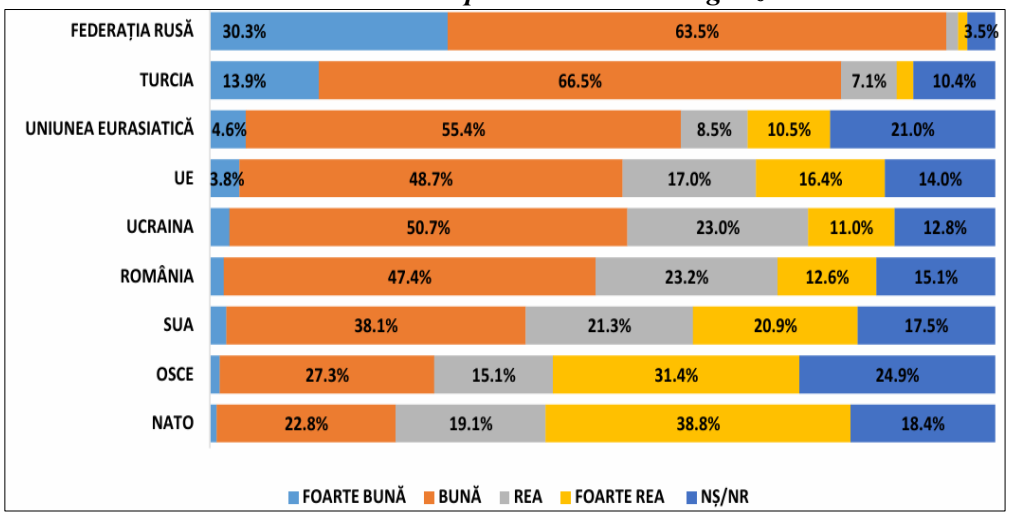
ATU Gagauzia is perhaps the most Russophile region of the Republic of Moldova. A separatist entity in the early 1990s, ATU Gagauzia eventually accepted Chisinau's sovereignty, but claims the right to secede in the event of a union with Romania or even European integration. Moreover, the approaching to Russia, the visits made to Moscow and the pro-Russian policies of the bashkan woman Evghenia Guțul made her being included on the sanctions lists of the West. „*The USA imposed sanctions against Evghenia Guțul for involvement in hybrid actions against the state of the Republic of Moldova and its citizens, actions financed with money from criminal sources. The decision comes as a result of effective collaboration with our external partners and we will continue to take decisive measures to counter corruption and threats to national security*", Dorin Recean, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Moldova wrote in June 2024. Later on, on October 9th, 2024, the European Union also included in the list of those sanctioned for attempts to destabilize the Republic of Moldova five more people, among whom Evghenia Guțul is, the current bashkan of ATU Gagauzia, affiliated with the fugitive named Ilan Șor (HotNews.ro, 2024).

The perception of public opinion in ATU Gagauzia regarding the EU and the European integration of the Republic of Moldova was captured by the Public Policy Institute, which has been conducting opinion polls focused on the residents of ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia district since 2011. The most recent one was published in 2022 and includes analyzes of some data collected in September-October 2021 (thus before the Russian invasion of Ukraine and during the period when Irina Vlah was still the bashkan of ATU Gagauzia). We mention the fact that on July 19, 2023, the new bashkan is

4 The Bulgarian historians consider them to be simple *Turkish-sized* Bulgarians who kept their Christian-Orthodox religious identity. According to https://romaniabreakingnews.ro/cine-sunt-de-fapt-gagauzi-cei-folositi-azi-de-rusia-pe-post-de-unealta-geostrategica-si-amenintare-permanenta-la-adresa-suveranitati-integritatii-teritoriale-a-r-moldova/, retrieved on Sept.16th 2024.

Evghenia Guțul, *whose positions proved to be even more radical regarding the rapprochement with the Russian Federation and the opposition to the rapprochement of the Republic of Moldova with the EU. However, the public perception towards EU rapprochement has improved in the post-2015 period in this region* as well. In 2021, 17.6% would vote for joining the European Union (compared to only 3.6% in 2015) and 58% against joining (compared to 80% in 2015). If they were to choose between joining the European Union and joining the Eurasian Economic Union, then 44.1% would vote for joining the Eurasian Economic Union (86.9% in 2015) and 19% for joining the European Union (2.6 % in 2015) (Public Policy Institute, 2021, p. 34).

The attitude towards the external partners in ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia

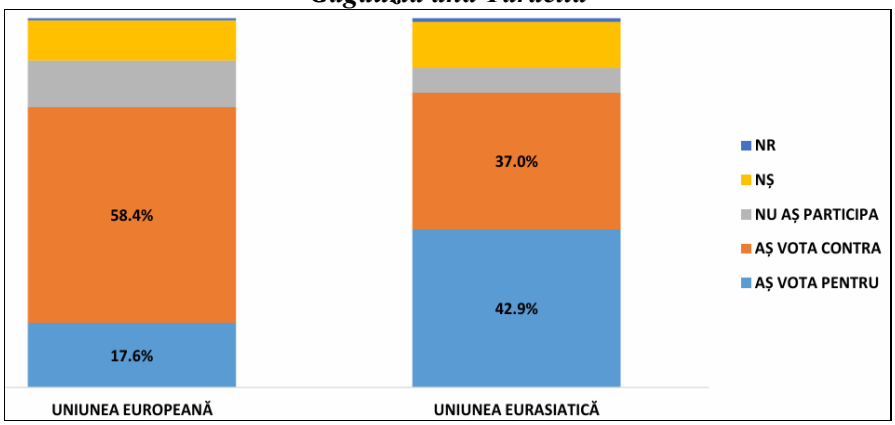


Source: Public Policies Institute, 2021, p. 34

It is therefore visible the preference of the population of ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia District for integration into the Eurasian Economic Union compared to the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU. And the vote against is relevant to be analyzed, 58.4% would vote against joining the European Union.

The political messages were very radicalized in favor of a pro-Russian position in the context of the war in Ukraine, especially after the election of the new bashkan Evgenia Guțul (July 2023). The political evolution and the messages of the leaders of ATU Gagauzia in 2024 seem to lead to a scenario reminiscent of the situation in Transnistrian region in the early '90s. There is a visible attempt to link the region economically and politically to Russia. The agreement signed between Bashkan Guțul and Promsvyazbank, along with adherence to the Russian alternative financial infrastructure to SWIFT, called „Mir", indicates an even deeper anchorage in the Russian sphere of influence. „These actions not only strengthen financial and economic ties, but create a structural dependency that can be difficult to reverse in the medium and long term. This, of course, if it materialized. „Mir" cards would rather be used to pay SHOR protesters and voters, to vote against the referendum on EU" accession, held on October 20th, 2024 (Pleșca, 2024).

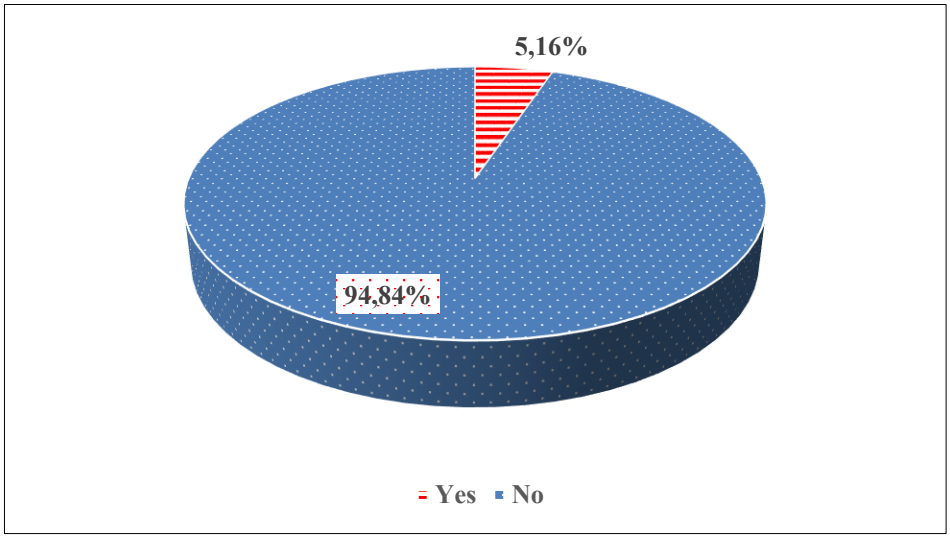
Preferences in term of external integration of the Republic of Moldova in ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia



Source: Public Policies Institute, 2021, p. 34

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

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



Source: own drawing with information from the Central Electoral Commission, 2024

In the case of this region, inhabited mainly by Gagauz, 57,847 people voted in this referendum, and only 2,985 were in favor of amending the Constitution in order to join the EU, while 54,862 people voted against.

We can conclude that the Gagauz people almost completely reject the idea of joining the EU, while at the same time preferring a geopolitical rapprochement with the Russian Federation.

Conclusions

The geopolitical context, but also by internal political changes have had a considerable impact on the dynamics and evolution of the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova. During the last two decades, the geopolitical reality has fundamentally changed in the area of Central and Eastern Europe. NATO and the EU expanded to the East by integrating former communist states, including some from the former USSR, into the Euro-Atlantic structures. Russia, once with the coming to power of Vladimir Putin in 2000, returned to the policy of hostility, of direct competition in relation to the West. In the absence of political, economic or social arguments, Russia has forced the blockade of states and populations in its sphere of interest using military force and energy extorsion. The Republic of Moldova was also drawn into this orbit. The population was vulnerable to manipulation and hybrid warfare. The result has been [and lead to] a fragmented society that often reacts disproportionately and uncertainly in the choices it makes. Russia has most often used identity cleavages that it has exploited in its own interest. Transnistrian region and ATU Gagauzia were used to exert pressure and control on the government in Chișinău.

The relations of the Republic of Moldova with the EU have been marked by oscillating developments in relation to internal political vectors. Keeping a distance or moving closer to the EU corresponded to electoral cycles, with governments or presidents against or in favor of getting closer to the EU. Generally, this reality of the geopolitical choices also overlapped with a similar policy in relation to Romania, but the opposite in relation to the Russian Federation. If, broadly speaking, the period of Igor Dodon's presidency was marked by the maintenance of a rapprochement with Russia and of a distance in relation to the EU and Romania, the subsequent period, after the election of Mrs. Maia Sandu as president, was characterized by a considerable effort to approach the EU and Romania.

The European support was considerable, and the political openness towards the Republic of Moldova, in the context of the deepening of cooperation in the bilateral framework conferred by the PaE through the more for more principle, attracted the population towards an increasingly obvious attachment to the EU and democratic values. After the 2014 moment, when Russia annexed Crimea, the EU was more careful and determined to stop the European course of the Republic of Moldova. Since 2014, the citizens of this state have had free access to the EU area, unrestricted by visa requirements.

Then followed the deepening within the Association Agreement and an integrative deepening at several levels, especially of an economic nature as a result of the expansion of customs agreements and the free trade area. The economy of the Republic of Moldova benefited from the opening of the single market for Moldovan products. These benefits were immediately transferred to Transnistrian region or ATU Gagauzia, despite the preservation of some political and societal barriers.

The geopolitical context and internal political reality of the Republic of Moldova was deeply marked by the war initiated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine after February 2022. This event complicated the general geopolitical context, triggering significant repositioning actions and mutations on the international stage. The EU has reassessed its policies regarding the Eastern Neighborhood area, including that of the EaP states. An obvious openness is manifested by the commencement of the accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The two states remain connected from a

procedural point of view, being placed together in this process. If in the first part of the process of drawing closer to the EU, through the special attention received from the EU and the opening of EU accession negotiations, the Republic of Moldova can be said to have been a beneficiary of the new geopolitical reality marked by the Ukrainian war, in the second stage things get complicated. The linkage to Ukraine can mean a delay in major decisions in the accession process in the event of a prolongation of the war or a cease-fire agreement that freezes the conflict or keeps the area in uncertainty at the junction of geopolitical interests. The equation of the intricate negotiations to be announced is also complicated by the EU's need to reposition itself in relation to the acceleration of the integration process of the Western Balkans. The new geopolitical reality requires adequate responses and leads to a different order of the internal and external affairs of the European Union.

In conclusion, the Republic of Moldova is seriously affected by the war in Ukraine economically, socially, but also at the level of national and societal security. The hybrid war supported by Russia against this vulnerable state contributes to a process of eroding democracy and threatens the strengthening of the rule of law and political balance. Transnistrian region and ATU Gagauzia are used by Russia to generate instability and to block the initiatives of the Chișinău authorities related to the European integration process. The 'frozen' war in Transnistrian region in the context of the events in Ukraine has repeatedly shown signs that it can be reactivated. Political leaders from ATU Gagauzia publicly support Putin's regime and its policies towards the Republic of Moldova and its European integration, inclusively by means of visits to Moscow.

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L'ESPACE INTEGRATIONNISTE EUROPÉEN DANS LE CONTEXTE DES NOUVEAUX PROCESSUS D'EXPANSION GÉOPOLITIQUE

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Abstract. *The European integration process Currently, under the conditions of the new geopolitical realities present on the European continent, conditioned in particular by the emergence on February 24, 2022 of the Russian-Ukrainian war, it has contributed to the acceleration of the European Union's relations with the states of the Balkans, including also with the states of Eastern Europe - Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. In the last decades, the process of European integration has become a subject of increased interest. Nine states from this area have expressed their desire to become members of the European Union. In order to align with European standards and values, the candidate states for joining the European integrationist space are making efforts to implement reforms in various areas, including electoral legislation, the judicial system, the fight against corruption and organized crime, as well as the improvement of detention conditions. However, the process of European integration is not without challenges and obstacles, and some states have made slower progress than others.*

Thus, the primary objective of this article is to analyze the current situation of the states that hold the status of candidate for joining the EU space, including highlighting the degree of preparation of the states for joining the European integrationist space, as well as highlighting the problems faced by the candidate states for joining.

Keywords: *enlargement, negotiations, process, status, candidate state, European Union.*

Introduction

Acteur important des relations internationales, unanimement reconnu pour sa puissance politique et économique, l'Union européenne (UE) intéresse aujourd'hui l'ensemble de la communauté internationale, y compris le monde universitaire (*Chaaban, Lippert, Laude, 2025*). Positionnée parmi les trois premières économies mondiales (après

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la Chine et les États-Unis), l'UE continue d'affirmer son statut de facteur d'influence sur la scène internationale et représente 17,5% de la richesse produite au niveau global. Le PIB de l'UE selon les estimations de 2023 s'élèverait à 17 190 milliards d'euros en 2023 (*Lequeux, Olivier, 2024*). En outre, le « poids » de l'UE se fait sentir dans la coordination des questions environnementales, sanitaires, commerciales et économiques, en matière de sécurité et d'opérations de paix et de stabilité sur le continent européen, y compris dans le monde entier (*ibidem*). Ses origines remontent à la création de la Communauté européenne du charbon et de l'acier (CECA), fondée à la fin de la Seconde Guerre mondiale par le Traité de Paris (1951). Peu de temps après, le Traité de Rome (1957) a établi la Communauté économique européenne (CEE), un traité qui a marqué le début d'une nouvelle ère de coopération la plus étroite jamais vue en Europe. Au fil du temps, la CEE a connu de nombreuses évolutions et réformes, tant au niveau de son nom (CE, puis UE), qu'au niveau de ses compétences, de son fonctionnement et bien sûr du nombre de ses membres. Partant du succès du Traité instituant la Communauté européenne du charbon et de l'acier, les 6 pays fondateurs (Allemagne, France, Italie, Pays-Bas, Belgique et Luxembourg) étendent leur coopération à d'autres secteurs économiques. Cette décision est formalisée par la signature de deux traités instituant la Communauté économique européenne (CEE) et la Communauté européenne de l'énergie atomique (Euratom). Ces organismes ont été créés le 1er janvier 1958. Un autre moment important dans l'évolution de la création de l'UE est la signature, le 7 février 1992, du Traité de Maastricht, qui a créé une Union européenne fondée sur les communautés européennes et complétée par des formes de coopération. L'UE était une construction dont l'activité était centrée sur trois piliers : la Communauté européenne, la politique étrangère et de sécurité commune (PESC) et la coopération dans le domaine de la justice et des affaires intérieures (JAI), mais la cohérence et l'unité étaient assurées par le cadre institutionnel unique. Le Traité ouvre une nouvelle étape dans le processus intégrationniste européen à travers laquelle la légitimité démocratique des institutions de l'Union est renforcée et qui contribue également au lancement de l'intégration politique : il établit la citoyenneté européenne, généralise le principe de subsidiarité et de proportionnalité, comme principes fonctionnels de l'Union européenne, et le rôle du Parlement est renforcé. Sur le plan institutionnel également, le Traité élève la Cour des comptes au rang d'institution. L'adoption du traité d'Amsterdam en 1997 représente une étape importante dans le processus de création de l'Union. Le rôle du Traité d'Amsterdam réside dans le fait que sa signature apporte des éléments significatifs à la réforme des institutions communautaires, notamment en ouvrant la perspective d'un élargissement des communautés par l'accueil de nouveaux États, notamment d'Europe centrale et orientale. Un autre moment essentiel pour l'évolution de l'Union européenne est la signature du Traité de Nice (2000), qui a initié la réforme du cadre institutionnel de l'Union, ce qui a permis d'élargir l'Union à un nombre impressionnant d'États. La cinquième vague d'adhésion amènera ainsi 12 nouveaux États à rejoindre l'Union. En 2004, Chypre, l'Estonie, la Lettonie, la Lituanie, Malte, la Pologne, la République tchèque, la Slovaquie, la Slovénie et la Hongrie sont devenus États membres de l'UE, et en 2007, deux autres États ont rejoint l'UE - la Roumanie et la Bulgarie, puis, en 2013 - la Croatie. Actuellement, le fonctionnement de l'Union européenne est régi par le Traité de Lisbonne (2007), qui comporte en réalité deux parties : le Traité sur l'Union européenne (TUE) et le Traité sur le fonctionnement de l'Union européenne (TFUE). Aujourd'hui, l'Union européenne est reconnue comme un modèle sans précédent d'intégration régionale, les États membres déléguant un certain nombre de pouvoirs à des institutions supranationales

et s'organisant pour coopérer efficacement dans un cadre juridique contraignant. Ainsi, dans l'espace d'intégration européenne, il y a 27 États membres : l'Allemagne, l'Autriche, la Belgique, la Bulgarie, Chypre, la Croatie, le Danemark, l'Espagne, l'Estonie, la Finlande, la France, la Grèce, la Hongrie, l'Irlande, l'Italie, la Lettonie, la Lituanie, le Luxembourg, Malte, les Pays-Bas, la Pologne, le Portugal, la République tchèque, la Roumanie, la Slovaquie, la Slovénie, la Suède. Il convient de mentionner qu'actuellement 9 pays ont le statut de candidats à l'adhésion à l'espace intégrationniste européen : l'Albanie, la Bosnie-Herzégovine, la Géorgie, la Moldavie, le Monténégro, la Macédoine du Nord, la Serbie, la Turquie, l'Ukraine (*Daratos, 2015*).

Tendances géopolitiques de l'élargissement de l'UE

75 ans après la signature du Traité instituant la Communauté européenne du charbon et de l'acier (CECA) par les six pays fondateurs, l'Union européenne reste l'exemple le plus réussi d'intégration régionale au monde. Le succès de l'UE s'est manifesté par le développement actif de processus d'intégration et de coopération à grande échelle fondés sur la conception classique de l'intégration régionale, qui représente une région clairement définie. L'une des définitions faisant référence au terme « macrorégion » suggère qu'une région est « un nombre limité d'États interconnectés par une proximité géographique et un degré élevé d'interdépendance ». Officiellement, selon les dispositions de l'article 98 du Traité instituant la Communauté européenne du charbon et de l'acier : « tout État européen peut présenter une demande d'adhésion au présent traité ». Le même principe est également confirmé dans l'article 49 du Traité UE. Cependant, à partir des nouvelles réalités géopolitiques conditionnées par l'effondrement de l'URSS et les vagues d'élargissement de l'UE, actuellement, neuf pays ont le statut d'États candidats à l'adhésion à l'espace intégrationniste européen (Annexe n° 1). Ainsi, selon les dispositions du Traité, « Tout État européen qui respecte les valeurs de l'Union européenne peut demander à devenir membre ».

En analysant les dispositions du Traité, y compris la pratique concernant l'adhésion des États à l'espace d'intégration européenne, le processus d'adhésion commence lorsque les États membres de l'UE accordent le statut de pays candidat à l'État qui demande à rejoindre l'UE, après consultation de la Commission européenne. Une fois ce statut approuvé, la tâche essentielle des États membres est de valider à l'unanimité l'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion pour les États candidats. À cette étape également, la Commission s'assure que le pays candidat remplit trois critères d'adhésion (critères de Copenhague), qui font notamment référence au fait que le pays candidat est démocratique, dispose d'une économie de marché viable et a transposé la législation de l'UE dans son droit national. Sur la base de ces considérations, et pour une meilleure compréhension des nouvelles tendances géopolitiques, notamment celles qui visent l'espace européen, il est nécessaire de passer brièvement en revue l'état actuel des relations de l'UE avec chaque État candidat à l'adhésion.

Un exemple intéressant pour l'analyse des nouvelles tendances géopolitiques dans l'espace intégrationniste européen est celui qui se réfère à l'Albanie. Depuis 1992, l'Albanie est engagée dans un processus visant à ouvrir la voie à son intégration dans l'Union européenne, étant l'un des premiers pays des Balkans à établir une relation contractuelle avec la Communauté européenne en signant l'Accord de commerce et de coopération (*Shtalb, 2023*). Pour concrétiser cette perspective, notamment pour répondre aux critères de Copenhague fixés par le Conseil européen en 1993, l'Albanie a entamé un processus de réformes multidimensionnelles, que Tirana met progressivement en

œuvre (*Ah-Pine, 2012)*. En outre, afin de rationaliser le processus de réforme, en 2006, le Comité interinstitutionnel de coordination pour l'intégration et les Groupes de travail interinstitutionnels (structures dédiées à des domaines spécifiques de négociation) ont été créés.

Si l'on se réfère aux premières étapes de l'harmonisation de la législation nationale albanaise avec celle de l'UE (1999 à 2006), il convient de mentionner que durant cette période, les institutions albanaises avaient un niveau de connaissance relativement faible de ce processus. Le processus d'harmonisation, y compris l'obligation d'aligner la législation albanaise sur les normes et la législation de l'UE, était difficile à comprendre pour les institutions centrales de Tirana. Ce n'est qu'après plusieurs années de formation dispensée par la Commission européenne dans le cadre du programme d'assistance technique et d'échange d'informations (TAIEX) consacré à l'intégration et à l'harmonisation des aspects législatifs que l'administration albanaise a acquis une meilleure compréhension et connaissance du problème et a rédigé des lois conformes aux exigences et à la législation de l'UE (*Xhuvani, Mecalla, 2023*). Bien que l'Albanie ait demandé son adhésion à l'Union européenne en avril 2009, ce n'est qu'en 2012 que la Commission européenne a recommandé de lui accorder le statut de pays candidat, sous réserve de l'adoption de réformes spécifiques, notamment dans les domaines judiciaire et administratif. Constatant certaines lacunes dans l'harmonisation de la législation nationale avec la législation européenne, la Commission a de nouveau recommandé en octobre 2013 que l'Albanie se voie accorder le statut de pays candidat, statut qui a finalement été obtenu en juin 2014 (*Strati*). Bien que l'Albanie ait obtenu le statut de pays candidat à l'adhésion à l'UE, l'État présente actuellement un nombre considérable de lacunes : plusieurs réformes restent inachevées, notamment dans des domaines critiques liés aux critères politiques. Tirana déploie des efforts pour progresser dans la mise en œuvre des valeurs démocratiques et de l'État de droit (liberté d'expression, lutte contre la discrimination, système électoral, justice, administration publique, etc.), y compris la lutte contre la corruption et le crime organisé. L'interprétation erronée du néolibéralisme occidental a créé un modèle inachevé, issu de réformes libérales justifiées par l'adoption de l'acquis communautaire, mais entravées notamment par la lutte contre la corruption. Cette situation a conduit à un exode massif des citoyens albanais du pays.

Malgré le fait que ces dernières années, l'UE a privilégié une politique d'approfondissement au détriment d'un nouvel élargissement, le retour des guerres sur le continent européen (comme celle menée par la Russie en Ukraine, y compris dans d'autres domaines comme la guerre entre Israël et le Hamas) a accéléré les relations albano-européennes (*Shtalb, 2023*). Ainsi, dans le contexte des nouvelles réalités présentes sur le continent européen, a lieu le lancement officiel des négociations d'adhésion de l'Albanie à l'UE, négociations officiellement autorisées le 19 juillet 2022 (en même temps que la Macédoine du Nord). L'Albanie a également été reconnue comme candidate potentielle à l'adhésion lors du sommet européen de Thessalonique en juin 2003 (*Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Albania*). Une étape importante dans le renforcement des relations entre l'Albanie et l'UE a été la signature de l'Accord de stabilisation et d'association (ASA) en 2006 (*ibidem*). Un moment tout aussi important dans l'évolution des relations de l'Albanie avec l'UE est la soumission officielle en 2009 de la demande d'adhésion du pays à l'espace d'intégration européenne. Déjà en novembre 2010, sous réserve de réformes importantes dans 12 domaines, la Commission avait recommandé d'accorder à l'Albanie le statut de pays candidat. Pour répondre aux priorités identifiées par l'exécutif européen en 2011, le pays a adopté un plan d'action.

En décembre de la même année, l'Union européenne a accordé un régime sans visa, permettant aux citoyens d'Albanie et de Bosnie-Herzégovine de se rendre dans les pays Schengen avec un simple passeport biométrique.

Ainsi, en juin 2014, l'Albanie a été officiellement reconnue comme pays candidat à l'adhésion. Le Conseil indique cependant que le pays doit « intensifier ses efforts pour réformer l'administration publique, le système judiciaire et poursuivre la lutte contre le crime organisé [...], intensifier ses efforts en matière de respect des droits de l'homme et de politiques de lutte contre les discriminations, notamment à l'encontre des minorités ». En 2016, la Commission européenne a adressé de nouvelles recommandations à l'Albanie concernant la mise en œuvre de réformes dans les domaines judiciaire et administratif. Grâce aux efforts déployés, en avril 2018, les progrès réalisés par l'Albanie ont été jugés suffisants et l'exécutif bruxellois a proposé le lancement officiel des négociations sur l'adhésion du pays à l'UE. Toutefois, en juin 2019, le Conseil des affaires générales a décidé de reporter la décision sur l'ouverture de négociations formelles à l'automne 2019. Plusieurs Etats membres - dont la France et les Pays-Bas - ont invoqué le prétexte que l'Albanie n'était pas prête à entamer le processus de négociation de l'accord d'adhésion à l'espace européen. La présence en Albanie de problèmes liés à la corruption, au crime organisé et à l'instabilité politique (*Oliver, 2024*) a été le principal obstacle au processus d'ouverture des négociations.

L'Albanie a de nouveau tenté de lancer un processus de négociation en 2015, mais la situation s'est répétée. Le 15 octobre 2019, plusieurs ministres des Affaires européennes ont refusé d'ouvrir des négociations pour l'adhésion de l'Albanie à l'UE. La France, les Pays-Bas, le Danemark et l'Espagne se sont prononcés contre l'ouverture de négociations, considérant que les garanties quant au respect des critères européens ne sont pas suffisantes. Grâce aux efforts déployés par l'Albanie, les ministres des Affaires européennes ont exprimé, le 24 mars 2020, leur satisfaction quant aux progrès réalisés. Ainsi, sur la base du rapport de la Commission européenne, les ministres des Affaires étrangères ont voté en faveur de l'ouverture de négociations pour l'adhésion de l'Albanie à l'UE. La décision des ministres des Affaires étrangères a été confirmée par le Conseil européen du 26 mars 2020. Selon la procédure établie, la Commission a travaillé sur le cadre de négociation qu'elle a présenté aux États membres en juillet 2020. Mais son adoption est bloquée par la Bulgarie, qui a des différends politiques et linguistiques avec la Macédoine du Nord. Les candidatures macédonienne et albanaise étant liées à l'UE, les négociations d'adhésion de l'Albanie n'ont pas pu non plus démarrer. Un moment marquant dans les relations de l'Albanie avec l'UE est la levée du droit de veto de la Bulgarie en 2022. Le 19 juillet 2022, le Conseil de l'UE ouvre officiellement les négociations d'adhésion avec l'Albanie et la Macédoine du Nord (*ibidem*). Aujourd'hui, l'avenir de l'Albanie au sein de l'UE n'est pas considéré comme un processus de négociation purement technique. Il s'agit plutôt d'un engagement politique renouvelé envers les citoyens, visant à renforcer le processus de démocratisation et l'État de droit, notamment en convaincant les jeunes en Albanie de rester et de contribuer à la prospérité de leur pays (*Madhi*).

Un autre État qui détient actuellement le statut de pays candidat à l'adhésion à l'espace intégrationniste européen est la Bosnie-Herzégovine. Le moment qui marque officiellement l'établissement du processus de négociation de la Bosnie-Herzégovine avec l'UE est la date du 21 octobre 2005. Ainsi, la Commission européenne a lancé le processus de négociation pour la conclusion de l'Accord de stabilisation et d'association (ASA) avec la Bosnie-Herzégovine, un accord qui établit un partenariat et approfondit

les liens politiques, économiques et commerciaux entre les parties signataires. L'accord de stabilisation et d'association est devenu le principal cadre juridique des relations entre la Bosnie-Herzégovine et l'UE, préparant davantage le pays à une future adhésion à l'UE. L'ASA a amélioré les relations entre les parties signataires en établissant un cadre institutionnel dédié : le Conseil de l'ASA, le Comité de l'ASA, ainsi que des sous-comités sectoriels. Une commission parlementaire sera également créée entre le Parlement européen et l'Assemblée parlementaire de Bosnie-Herzégovine (*Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Bosnia and Herzegovina*).

En 2006, le processus de négociation a fait l'objet d'un examen plus approfondi sur un certain nombre de priorités, notamment la réforme de la police. Grâce aux efforts déployés en 2007 par le gouvernement bosniaque, l'ASA a été signé le 16 juin 2008. En 2010, la Commission européenne a levé l'obligation de visa pour les citoyens de Bosnie-Herzégovine (y compris ceux d'Albanie) souhaitant se rendre dans les pays de l'espace Schengen. Toutefois, la Commission regrette le blocage des réformes clés par les dirigeants bosniaques. Pour remédier à cette situation, la Commission suggère à la Bosnie-Herzégovine d'aligner sa constitution sur la Convention européenne des droits de l'homme et d'améliorer le fonctionnement de ses institutions afin d'intégrer le droit européen. À la suite de l'examen du rapport de suivi sur la Bosnie-Herzégovine du 23 mai 2013 et dans l'attente d'un engagement politique plus fort de la part des autorités, le Parlement européen a exprimé ses réserves quant à l'ouverture de négociations d'adhésion de la Bosnie-Herzégovine à l'UE. Elle appelle la Bosnie-Herzégovine à garantir l'égalité d'accès à l'alimentation pour tous les citoyens et à respecter les règles européennes en matière de sécurité alimentaire. Enfin, le Parlement européen appelle le pays à « mieux préparer l'adhésion de la Croatie à l'Union européenne ». Cette nouvelle décision pourrait poser des difficultés à la Bosnie-Herzégovine en termes de commerce transfrontalier et de mobilité. Toutefois, grâce aux efforts déployés, le 1er juin 2015, l'Accord de stabilisation et d'association entre l'Union européenne et la Bosnie-Herzégovine est entré en vigueur, accord qui constitue aujourd'hui le cadre principal de leurs relations (*Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Bosnia and Herzegovina*).

En examinant le texte de l'accord, il convient de noter qu'il établit une zone de libre-échange entre l'UE et la Bosnie-Herzégovine. L'Accord identifie également des objectifs politiques et économiques communs et encourage la coopération régionale entre les parties signataires. Dans le cadre de l'adhésion à l'Union européenne, l'accord sert de base à la mise en œuvre du processus d'adhésion du pays à l'espace intégrationniste européen. En outre, la signature de l'accord permettra à la Bosnie-Herzégovine de progresser dans ses relations avec l'UE et servira de stimulant positif pour la poursuite des réformes socio-économiques, juridiques et autres nécessaires à l'intégration du pays dans l'UE. L'objectif général est de permettre à la Bosnie-Herzégovine de se préparer à une future adhésion à l'UE (*Bosnie-Herzégovine*).

Un moment clé marquant les relations de la Bosnie-Herzégovine avec l'UE est la soumission officielle de la demande d'adhésion de la Bosnie-Herzégovine à l'Union européenne, le 15 février 2016. Ainsi, selon les déclarations de Johannes Hahn, alors commissaire européen à l'Elargissement, le dépôt de la candidature représente « le début d'un long voyage » pour le pays. Afin d'accélérer le processus de négociation d'adhésion à l'UE, l'État a adopté un ensemble de lois liées aux priorités fixées par la Commission, qui mettent l'accent sur la démocratie et le fonctionnement de l'État de droit, les droits fondamentaux de l'homme et, notamment, la réforme de l'administration publique.

Certaines de ces lois visent notamment à lutter contre le blanchiment d'argent et les conflits d'intérêts. Dans son avis publié le 29 mai 2019, la Commission explique que « les négociations d'adhésion à l'Union européenne devraient être ouvertes avec la Bosnie-Herzégovine dès que ce pays aura atteint le degré nécessaire de conformité avec les critères d'adhésion, et notamment avec les critères politiques de Copenhague exigeant la stabilité des institutions et garantissant la démocratie et l'État de droit ». En proie à l'instabilité politique et aux velléités sécessionnistes de son entité serbe, la Bosnie-Herzégovine signe le 12 juin 2022 un accord politique avec le Conseil de l'Union européenne. Douze dirigeants politiques du pays s'engagent à maintenir la paix, la stabilité et l'indépendance de l'État, contribuant ainsi à l'adhésion du pays aux valeurs de l'UE. Le Conseil s'est déclaré, à son tour, prêt à accorder à la Bosnie-Herzégovine le statut de pays candidat à l'adhésion à l'UE. Le 12 octobre 2022, la Commission européenne recommande aux États membres d'accorder à la Bosnie-Herzégovine le statut de pays candidat à l'adhésion à l'UE. Environ un mois plus tard, le 15 décembre 2022, les 27 États membres de l'UE ont décidé, d'un commun accord, d'accorder à la Bosnie-Herzégovine le statut de pays candidat à l'adhésion à l'UE *(Oliver, 2024).* Toutefois, avant que les négociations d'adhésion puissent être officiellement lancées, la Bosnie-Herzégovine doit mettre en œuvre des réformes supplémentaires (*EU Agrees to Open Membership*). Il s'agit principalement de l'État de droit, de la lutte contre la corruption et le crime organisé, de la gestion des migrations et des droits de l'homme. Le pays doit également avancer sur la réforme constitutionnelle et la réforme électorale (*EU leaders grant Bosnia 'candidate*). La décision d'accorder à la Bosnie-Herzégovine le statut de pays candidat à l'adhésion à l'Union marque le début d'un long chemin vers l'adhésion.

Ainsi, depuis que le pays a obtenu le statut de candidat à l'adhésion à l'UE en décembre 2022, l'engagement public des dirigeants politiques en faveur de l'objectif stratégique de l'intégration européenne s'est poursuivi à travers d'importantes réformes et a apporté des résultats positifs. La Bosnie-Herzégovine a démontré une ferme volonté de faire avancer le processus de mise en œuvre des réformes, notamment dans le domaine juridique, avec notamment l'adoption de la loi sur la prévention des conflits d'intérêts, de la loi sur la lutte contre le blanchiment d'argent et la lutte contre le financement du terrorisme. La Bosnie-Herzégovine a pris des mesures importantes pour améliorer le système judiciaire et de poursuites, la lutte contre la corruption, le crime organisé et le terrorisme, notamment en améliorant la gestion des migrations (*Huskić, 2024*).. La Bosnie-Herzégovine a atteint et maintenu un alignement complet sur la politique étrangère et de sécurité commune de l'UE, ce qui constitue une étape positive dans le contexte des nouvelles réalités géopolitiques présentes sur le continent européen (*EC has proposed to open EU Accession Negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina*). Sur la base des « recommandations de la Commission du 12 mars 2024, y compris les recommandations du 12 octobre 2022 » (*Borić, 2024*), le 21 mars 2024, les chefs d'État et de gouvernement des États membres de l'UE donnent le feu vert à l'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion de la Bosnie-Herzégovine à l'espace intégrationniste européen. *(EU agrees to begin membership negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina).*

Dans ce contexte, la délégation de l'UE en Bosnie-Herzégovine a annoncé le plan des prochaines étapes que le pays doit franchir en vue de son adhésion à l'UE. À ces étapes, il est souligné que la Bosnie-Herzégovine doit établir sa structure, son mandat et son cadre de négociation après l'ouverture officielle des négociations. La Commission européenne continuera également à préparer le cadre des négociations, avant qu'il ne soit validé par le Conseil de l'UE. Plus de trois décennies après le déclenchement de la guerre

de 1992-1995, qui a fait plus de 100 000 morts et des millions de déplacés, la Bosnie est toujours un État ethniquement et politiquement divisé. Il faudra peut-être encore de nombreuses années avant que le pays ne rejoigne officiellement l'UE, car davantage de réformes économiques et démocratiques doivent être mises en œuvre. Le lancement officiel des négociations d'adhésion à l'UE place la Bosnie-Herzégovine au début d'un long processus de réformes qui prend généralement plusieurs années avant qu'un pays ne rejoigne l'UE. Les voisins régionaux de la Bosnie-Herzégovine, comme la Macédoine du Nord, le Monténégro, la Serbie et l'Albanie, bien qu'ils soient en avance dans leurs efforts de réforme, restent loin de l'adhésion à l'UE.

Dans l'analyse des relations entre les États qui manifestent leur intérêt à rejoindre l'espace intégrationniste européen, le cas de la Géorgie mérite l'attention. L'effondrement de l'Union soviétique en 1991 a conduit à un rapprochement considérable de la Géorgie avec l'UE. Déjà dans les années 1990 et au début des années 2000, l'UE a aidé le pays dans le processus de construction de l'État par le biais d'un soutien financier et technique, créant une relation institutionnalisée à travers l'Accord de partenariat et de coopération UE-Géorgie (APC) (*EU relations with Georgia revisited*) en 1994. Signé à Luxembourg le 22 avril 1996, l'APC UE-Géorgie définit le cadre des relations futures entre les parties signataires. En 1999, l'accord bilatéral de partenariat et de coopération (APC) entre l'UE et la Géorgie est entré en vigueur (*Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA*).

Depuis 1995, la Géorgie bénéficie du Système de préférences généralisées (SPG) de l'UE. Le 1er septembre 1997, conformément à la résolution du Parlement géorgien, le pays a entamé le processus d'harmonisation de la législation nationale avec la législation de l'UE. Le 7 juillet 2003, l'UE a nommé un Représentant spécial pour le Caucase du Sud, démontrant ainsi l'intérêt de l'UE pour la région. Un moment tout aussi important dans les relations entre l'UE et la Géorgie est le lancement de la politique européenne de voisinage. Ainsi, le 14 juin 2004, le Conseil de l'Union européenne a décidé de lancer la Politique européenne de voisinage (PEV) pour l'Arménie, l'Azerbaïdjan et la Géorgie afin de renforcer la coopération avec les pays voisins (*Georgia-EU cooperation*).

Une des mesures qui a renforcé les relations entre la Géorgie et l'UE a été le lancement en 2009 du Partenariat oriental (PO). En 2009, la Géorgie a rejoint l'Initiative du Partenariat oriental lancée lors du Sommet de Prague le 7 mai 2009. La Géorgie participe activement à la coopération dans les dimensions bilatérales et multilatérales du Partenariat oriental. Le Forum de la société civile est un autre élément clé de l'initiative du Partenariat oriental. De même, un moment qui a renforcé les relations entre l'UE et la Géorgie est la guerre russo-géorgienne de 2008. Dans le contexte de la guerre russo-géorgienne, l'UE a condamné l'usage de la force par la Russie. De même, dans le contexte de l'annexion de la péninsule de Crimée en 2014 par la Fédération de Russie, les relations UE-Géorgie passent à un stade supérieur. En 2014, le Parlement européen a souligné que, conformément à l'article 49 du traité sur l'Union européenne, la Géorgie dispose d'une « perspective européenne » et peut demander à devenir membre de l'UE. En analysant l'évolution des relations entre l'UE et la Géorgie, il convient de mentionner qu'un moment clé a été la signature de l'Accord d'association (AA) en 2014. L'entrée en vigueur en 2016 de l'Accord d'association UE-Géorgie (*Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community)* a prévu une coopération de grande envergure et une relation institutionnalisée qui a également obligé la Géorgie à mener des réformes conformément à l'acquis européen. L'AA UE-Géorgie représente également une étape qui reflète les ambitions de la Géorgie de devenir membre

à part entière de l'Union européenne. Une autre étape qui a renforcé les relations de la Géorgie avec l'UE a été l'octroi par l'UE d'un régime sans visa aux citoyens géorgiens en 2017 (*EU relations with Georgia revisited*). D'un point de vue économique, les relations entre la Géorgie et l'UE n'ont cessé de se développer au cours des deux dernières décennies, l'UE devenant la principale destination des exportations et la principale source des importations de la Géorgie.

L'émergence de la guerre russo-ukrainienne le 24 février 2022 a accéléré les relations entre la Géorgie et l'Union européenne. Ainsi, le 3 mars 2022, la Géorgie soumet officiellement sa demande d'adhésion à l'Union européenne. Toutefois, contrairement à l'Ukraine et à la République de Moldavie, qui ont présenté leur demande au cours de la même période, la Géorgie n'a pas obtenu d'avis positif de la Commission européenne concernant sa demande d'intégration. Les États membres de l'UE refusent de lui accorder le statut de pays candidat à l'adhésion à l'espace d'intégration européenne et lui demandent de faire des efforts supplémentaires pour atteindre ses objectifs. Dans un contexte où un gouvernement pro-russe est en train de s'installer à Tbilissi et où les attaques contre l'État de droit se multiplient. Toutefois, le 8 novembre 2023, la Commission a révisé sa position, recommandant aux 27 États membres de l'UE d'accorder à la Géorgie le statut de pays candidat à l'adhésion. Réunis le 14 décembre 2023 au Conseil européen, les chefs d'État et de gouvernement de l'UE ont décidé d'accorder à la Géorgie le statut de pays candidat. Bien qu'en décembre 2023, le Conseil européen ait accordé à la Géorgie le statut de candidat, son processus d'adhésion à l'UE a depuis été interrompu en raison des mesures prises par le gouvernement géorgien au printemps 2024 (*ibidem*).

En outre, compte tenu des orientations politiques du parti au pouvoir « Rêve géorgien », qui a remporté à nouveau les élections législatives en octobre 2024, le processus d'obtention par la Géorgie du statut de pays candidat a conditionné son gel. Accusé de fraude par l'opposition, le gouvernement avait déjà adopté plusieurs mesures controversées, dont une loi censée contrer les ingérences étrangères. La plupart des experts estiment que la Géorgie mérite ce statut pour des raisons à la fois géopolitiques et technocratiques. Actuellement, la Géorgie est confrontée au même impérialisme russe que l'Ukraine et, malgré la stagnation, elle reste objectivement un leader en termes d'alignement sur l'UE. En effet, selon un rapport de 2021 comparant l'alignement des pays des Balkans occidentaux et du Caucase du Sud, la Géorgie a obtenu de meilleurs résultats que trois des six candidats des Balkans, y compris un meilleur score que la République de Moldavie et l'Ukraine, tant sur le plan économique que politique. Compte tenu du climat politique polarisé et des signes croissants de capture de l'État dans le pays, l'espoir de la plupart des experts géorgiens selon lequel l'octroi du statut de candidat pourrait motiver de nouvelles réformes peut être accueilli avec de sérieux doutes. Les expériences dans les Balkans occidentaux montrent que les encouragements de l'UE par la création de mesures incitatives ne peuvent être efficaces que si un gouvernement orienté vers les réformes est déjà en place. Il y a donc un argument en faveur de la décision de l'UE en juillet 2022 de ne pas accorder le statut de candidat à la Géorgie, à la fois pour la crédibilité de l'UE et pour ne pas maintenir la pression sur le gouvernement dans le processus de réforme. Lors des manifestations qui ont eu lieu dans les rues de Tbilissi immédiatement après la décision de l'UE, les citoyens géorgiens ont exprimé leur mécontentement envers leur gouvernement pour ne pas avoir obtenu le statut de candidat, montrant ainsi leur compréhension de la décision de l'UE suite à l'échec du gouvernement à mettre en œuvre des réformes.

La décision de l'UE de ne pas accorder à la Géorgie le statut de candidat en 2022 s'est avérée d'autant plus justifiée dans le contexte des développements survenus début mars 2023, lorsque le parti « Rêve géorgien » a tenté de promouvoir au parlement géorgien une loi, proposée par une faction parlementaire proche du gouvernement, qui qualifierait les organisations et les sociétés civiles d'agents étrangers lorsqu'elles reçoivent plus de 20 % de leur financement de l'étranger. De telles organisations, notamment celles qui se consacrent à la défense des droits de l'homme ou de la démocratie, seront par la suite soumises à des exigences strictes en matière de rapports au gouvernement géorgien. En cas de non-respect, ils s'exposent à des amendes considérables, et les particuliers risquent également des peines de prison. Les parlementaires, représentants du « Rêve géorgien », ont fait valoir que la loi servirait à limiter l'influence étrangère en Géorgie et fonctionnerait de manière similaire à une loi américaine sur l'ingérence étrangère. Dans la pratique, cela ressemble toutefois davantage à la loi russe sur les agents étrangers, introduite par le Kremlin en 2012 et qui a marqué le début de la fin de la liberté d'expression et d'association. La loi aurait rendu l'activité des organisations de la société civile pratiquement impossible, si ce n'était l'effet contraire qui s'en est suivi. Les 8 et 9 mars 2024, les citoyens géorgiens ont envahi les rues de Tbilissi pour protester contre ce qu'ils ont décrit comme la « loi russe » et ont exigé son retrait. Les dirigeants de l'UE ont à leur tour clairement fait savoir que cette loi serait diamétralement opposée au cheminement de la Géorgie vers l'intégration à l'UE(*EU relations with Georgia revisited).*

Deuxièmement, les développements politiques ont démontré à la fois la fragilité du chemin de la Géorgie vers l'UE, mais aussi l'orientation pro-européenne de la population géorgienne. Les manifestations à Tbilissi début mars 2024 ont trouvé du soutien dans tout le pays. Le soutien global à l'UE est resté élevé en Géorgie ces dernières années, avec 85 % des Géorgiens soutenant l'UE en 2022 (Les relations de l'UE avec la Géorgie revisitées). Le 26 octobre 2024, les citoyens géorgiens ont voté aux élections parlementaires. Les conclusions préliminaires de la Mission internationale conjointe d'observation électorale en Géorgie, dirigée par le Bureau des institutions démocratiques et des droits de l'homme de l'OSCE (OSCE/BIDDH), ont identifié plusieurs lacunes apparues dans un environnement tendu et hautement polarisé. Les faiblesses signalées comprennent, entre autres, des changements dans la législation géorgienne sur le processus électoral, des compromis fréquents sur le secret du vote, des incohérences procédurales, des intimidations et des pressions sur les électeurs qui ont eu un impact négatif sur la confiance du public dans le processus. Ces résultats préliminaires confirment la nécessité d'une réforme électorale globale (*Commission adopts 2024 Enlargement Package*). Ainsi, en raison de l'arrivée au pouvoir du parti Rêve Géorgien en Géorgie, l'acquisition par la Géorgie du statut de pays candidat est actuellement « gelée ».

Dans le contexte de l'analyse des relations de l'UE avec les États qui aspirent à devenir membres de l'Union à l'avenir, le cas de la Macédoine du Nord, un pays enclavé de la péninsule balkanique, qui partage des frontières avec la Serbie, la Bulgarie, la Grèce, l'Albanie et le Kosovo, mérite également l'attention. Avec une superficie de près de 26 000 km² et une population d'environ 2 millions d'habitants, la Macédoine du Nord est un pays riche en patrimoine culturel et en diversité historique complexe. La Macédoine du Nord a été le premier des six États des Balkans occidentaux à obtenir le statut de candidat à l'adhésion à l'UE en 2005. Alors que la Croatie a réussi à rejoindre l'UE en 2013, la Macédoine du Nord reste encore assez loin de cet objectif. Le conflit avec la Grèce

voisine au sujet du nom constitutionnel du pays à l'époque, la République de Macédoine, a compliqué la candidature du jeune pays à l'adhésion à l'ONU dès le début des années 1990, et a par la suite considérablement affecté sa candidature à l'adhésion à l'UE et à l'OTAN. Le pays a réussi à rejoindre l'ONU sous le nom provisoire d'« Ancienne République yougoslave de Macédoine » (ARYM), mais le veto grec à la fin des années 2000 l'a empêché d'ouvrir des négociations d'adhésion avec l'UE et l'OTAN(*North Macedonia*).

À la suite de la signature de l'Accord de stabilisation et d'association (ASA) le 20 mars 2004, la Macédoine du Nord a été reconnue comme pays candidat à l'adhésion en décembre 2005. Le premier rapport annuel sur la situation en Macédoine du Nord a été présenté par la Commission européenne le 8 novembre 2006. L'institution a indiqué que la Macédoine du Nord était « en passe de remplir les critères politiques » et que des progrès économiques avaient été notables. Comme la Serbie et le Monténégro, la Macédoine du Nord a obtenu, le 19 décembre 2009, l'exemption de visa pour ses citoyens se rendant dans l'Union européenne. En mai 2013, après un nouvel examen, le Parlement européen a voté en faveur de l'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion de la Macédoine du Nord à l'espace d'intégration européenne. En octobre de la même année, la Commission et le Parlement européen ont demandé au Conseil de se prononcer en faveur de cette ouverture. Cependant, le processus s'est heurté à un certain nombre d'obstacles. Tout d'abord, à cause du conflit sur le nom du pays, qui dure depuis 1992. La Grèce, dont l'une des régions s'appelle aussi Macédoine, estime que le nom du pays candidat a une revendication territoriale sur la province du même nom. Officiellement, le pays est appelé « Ancienne République yougoslave de Macédoine» par l'Union européenne jusqu'en juin 2018. À cette date, le pays a changé de nom et est devenu «Macédoine du Nord » (accord de Prespa) afin de faire avancer les négociations. Saluée par le Conseil Affaires générales de l'UE le 18 juin 2019, cette réforme ne convainc pas tous les États membres. Alors qu'en avril 2018 la Commission européenne avait de nouveau recommandé l'ouverture formelle des négociations d'adhésion, le Conseil a reporté cette décision à l'automne. Le 15 octobre 2019, il ne parvient pas à s'entendre sur l'ouverture de négociations : la France et les Pays-Bas s'y opposent. La situation a été résolue en mars 2020, lorsque le Conseil des ministres des Affaires européennes puis le Conseil européen se sont déclarés en faveur de l'ouverture de négociations pour l'adhésion de la Macédoine du Nord à l'Union. La Bulgarie, en revanche, en raison de conflits linguistiques et culturels avec le pays, bloque à son tour le lancement des négociations. En juin 2022, des 27 États membres de l'UE, seule la Bulgarie s'y est opposée, en raison d'un différend bilatéral. Il s'agit en fait d'un conflit historique aux implications identitaires, comme le souligne une analyse du groupe de réflexion European Stability Initiative (ESI), qui a considérablement ralenti le processus et n'a été surmonté qu'au prix d'un compromis négocié. En octobre 2019, le gouvernement bulgare, dirigé par le Premier ministre de l'époque, Boyko Borisov, a défini ses conditions pour accepter le début des négociations. Un examen approfondi du passé commun est nécessaire : une commission mixte devrait établir que la population macédonienne descend de la population bulgare et qu'après la Seconde Guerre mondiale, elle a traversé un processus de déconstruction de son identité, soutenu par un solide récit anti-bulgare (*The struggle of North Macedonia for EU accession*).

Le 17 juillet 2022, la Bulgarie et la Macédoine du Nord ont signé un protocole bilatéral, à l'initiative de la présidence française du Conseil de l'Union européenne. La Macédoine du Nord s'est engagée à modifier la Constitution du pays (qui requiert une majorité des deux tiers des députés macédoniens) pour reconnaître les Bulgares parmi les

ethnies qui construisent la nation, ainsi que pour protéger les droits des minorités dans le pays, pour modifier les manuels scolaires qui contiennent des références négatives à la Bulgarie et pour introduire le discours de haine comme un crime dans le code pénal. Le texte du protocole prévoyait également que la langue macédonienne deviendrait une langue officielle de l'UE. Cette « erreur » d'interprétation historique devrait être corrigée par une nouvelle version du passé commun, à présenter au public et à enseigner dans les écoles macédoniennes. Les demandes bulgares ont été incluses dans le protocole bilatéral en six points en 2021. Le document a été examiné par l'équipe d'experts de Birn Balkan. En outre, selon les dispositions du protocole, il contenait la reconnaissance d'une minorité bulgare sur le territoire macédonien (environ 120 000 personnes, selon le gouvernement de Sofia), la lutte contre les prétendus discours de haine anti-bulgare, l'admission de racines ethniques communes et même l'identité de héros nationaux comme l'ancien révolutionnaire Goce Delchev, que les Bulgares et les Macédoniens considèrent comme leur héros national (*ibidem*).

Une proposition de compromis élaborée par le gouvernement parisien a été approuvée d'abord par le parlement de Sofia, puis, avec beaucoup plus de résistance, par celui de Skopje. Il prévoit, entre autres, un amendement à la Constitution macédonienne précisément pour garantir la reconnaissance et les droits de la minorité bulgare. C'est peut-être pour cette raison que la « proposition française » n'a pas satisfait une partie de la classe politique et de la population de Macédoine du Nord, ce qui menace de compromettre le cheminement du pays vers l'Union. Avec la signature du protocole final le 17 juillet 2022 par les ministres des Affaires étrangères des deux pays, et à la suite du retrait du veto de la Bulgarie, le Conseil de l'UE ouvre officiellement les négociations d'adhésion avec l'Albanie et la Macédoine du Nord le 19 juillet 2022. L'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion du pays des Balkans, avec l'Albanie, intervient après la signature d'un protocole d'accord entre les gouvernements macédonien et bulgare, qui - après avoir résolu la "question du nom" - a maintenu l'ensemble du processus bloqué *(ibidem).*

Après « 17 ans dans la salle d'attente », le début des négociations a marqué un tournant dans les relations de la Macédoine du Nord avec l'Union européenne. Le processus d'adhésion s'annonce long. Un sondage mené par l'Institut pour la démocratie en 2021 indique que plus des deux tiers des Macédoniens sont favorables à l'adhésion à l'UE. Environ un tiers des personnes interrogées (ibidem) estiment en revanche que l'adhésion de la Macédoine du Nord à l'UE n'aura jamais lieu. Le rapport d'étape 2023 de la Commission européenne a également mis en évidence d'importantes préoccupations concernant les progrès de la Macédoine du Nord, marquant ainsi un écart par rapport aux évaluations positives des dernières années. Le rapport exhorte le pays à passer d'un soutien déclaratif à des actions concrètes, notamment dans les domaines des réformes internes, de l'état de droit et de la lutte contre la corruption. Cependant, la Macédoine du Nord a fait des progrès en alignant sa politique étrangère sur les positions de l'UE, notamment dans sa réponse à la guerre de la Russie contre l'Ukraine. Cependant, le paysage national présente plusieurs défis. Le système judiciaire est un domaine particulièrement préoccupant, les évaluations négatives soulignant un manque d'indépendance et d'intégrité, ainsi qu'une susceptibilité aux influences politiques. La corruption demeure un problème omniprésent, exacerbé par les changements législatifs qui ont réduit les peines pour les crimes connexes. Un autre problème présent en Macédoine du Nord est la polarisation de l'environnement politique, qui conduit à des blocages législatifs et à l'affaiblissement des institutions démocratiques. Cette

polarisation a entravé le fonctionnement du Parlement, ralentissant la dynamique des réformes nécessaires à l'adhésion du pays à l'UE (i*bidem*).

Dans le cadre de l'analyse des relations de l'UE avec les États candidats à l'adhésion, la République de Moldavie est également incluse. Pour une meilleure compréhension des relations moldo-européennes, influencées par la guerre en Ukraine, il est nécessaire de souligner les principaux événements présents dans le dialogue République de Moldavie-UE. Environ 9 ans après la signature de l'Accord d'association par la République de Moldavie lors du 3ème Sommet du Partenariat oriental (*Cebotari, 2020*), qui a eu lieu les 28 et 29 novembre 2013 à Vilnius, le dialogue entre la République de Moldavie et l'UE est passé à une étape supérieure (*Cebotari, 2023*).

Dans les circonstances de la guerre en Ukraine, à deux jours de l'Ukraine (le 28 février, l'Ukraine a demandé son adhésion à l'UE, et le lendemain, le 1er mars 2022, les députés ont approuvé à une majorité de 637 voix la résolution qui offre à l'Ukraine une perspective européenne), la Géorgie et la République de Moldavie ont présenté des demandes d'adhésion à l'Union. Pour ces pays, le statut de pays candidat sert de bouclier politique de protection contre la Russie, qui n'a jamais accepté le rapprochement des États du Trio associé du Partenariat oriental avec l'UE (*Analiză. Integrarea Ucrainei, Georgiei și a Republicii Moldova în UE*).

Le pas qui a rapproché la République de Moldavie de l'UE a été la signature, le 3 mars, par la présidente Maia Sandu, de la demande d'adhésion de la République de Moldavie à l'Union européenne. La demande a également été signée par le président du Parlement Igor Grosu et la Première ministre Natalia Gavriliță, et a été envoyée au président français Emmanuel Macron, dirigeant du pays qui assure la présidence tournante de l'Union européenne (*Ursu*). Dans ce contexte, il convient de mentionner le discours du chef de l'État selon lequel « les citoyens de la République de Moldavie démontrent au monde qu'ils sont un peuple mûr » et qu'ils ne permettent pas « à la tyrannie de s'installer dans le pays, ... que nous vivrons selon les règles lorsque nous avons défendu la démocratie lors des élections » (*Maia Sandu a semnat cererea de aderare)*. Dans ce contexte, s'inscrivent également les déclarations de l'ancien ministre des Affaires étrangères, Nicu Popescu, selon lesquelles « cette procédure est historique et constitue une étape d'une importance majeure pour notre pays et notre société, c'est un pas vers la paix ». Pour la République de Moldavie, l'adhésion à l'Union européenne est un moyen d'assurer la paix, la stabilité et la liberté de notre pays" (*Ursu).*

Ainsi, le 3 mars 2022 est une date historique pour la République de Moldavie, c'est la date à laquelle la demande d'adhésion à l'Union européenne a été officiellement déposée. Cette étape marque un changement significatif dans les relations entre la République de Moldavie et l'UE, puisque la République de Moldavie a officiellement entamé le processus d'adhésion à l'UE. Cette évolution des relations aura un impact significatif sur les exigences de l'UE à l'égard de la République de Moldavie et sur l'approche de la République de Moldavie à l'égard de l'Union européenne. Même si l'Accord d'association existant entre la République de Moldavie et l'UE est très exigeant, la demande d'adhésion de la République de Moldavie élèvera les exigences à un niveau plus élevé. La demande a été présentée en vertu de l'article 49 du traité sur l'Union européenne (TUE), qui dispose que « tout État européen qui respecte les valeurs visées à l'article 2 et s'engage à les promouvoir peut demander à devenir membre de l'Union ». Également, l'accord de partenariat et de coopération entre les Communautés européennes et leurs États membres, d'une part, et la République de Moldavie, d'autre part, qui

reconnaît les aspirations européennes et le choix européen de la République de Moldavie (*ibidem).*

Ainsi, le 11 avril 2022, à Luxembourg, le commissaire chargé du voisinage et de l'élargissement, Olivér Várhelyi, a remis au vice-Premier ministre, ministre des Affaires étrangères et de l'Intégration européenne, Nicu Popescu, le questionnaire de la Commission européenne concernant la demande d'adhésion de la République de Moldavie à l'UE. Les réponses aux questions de ce questionnaire constitueront une radiographie de la situation actuelle de notre pays, montrant le niveau de préparation à l'adhésion à l'Union européenne et, en même temps, mettront en évidence les domaines dans lesquels des efforts supplémentaires sont nécessaires. « Notre pays accélère son parcours européen. « J'ai réitéré que nous faisons partie de l'Europe non seulement géographiquement, mais aussi à travers l'identité que nous portons, les valeurs que nous partageons, à travers la langue roumaine, la langue officielle de l'UE que nous parlons, et à travers l'histoire commune que nous avons. » – a déclaré le vice-Premier ministre Nicu Popescu (*ibidem*).

Selon la position du chef de la diplomatie de la République de Moldavie, à partir du moment de la réception du questionnaire, une période de travail intense suivra, notant que les institutions de l'État sont prêtes à fournir les informations nécessaires dans les plus brefs délais. Dans le même temps, le dignitaire moldave a communiqué sur l'implication dans le processus de remplissage du questionnaire non seulement des autorités, mais aussi de la société civile, considérant que l'adhésion à l'Union européenne représente un projet de pays qui vise l'avenir de chaque citoyen. « Une fois de plus, nous voulons démontrer que nous sommes un pays où la démocratie fonctionne, où les réformes sont possibles, où les processus de transformation donnent des résultats et où notre avenir européen est irréversible » (*Ministrul Nicu Popescu...).*

Les questions reçues ont été réparties entre les institutions au sein des groupes de travail nouvellement constitués (qui seront ultérieurement transformés en groupes de négociation), afin que tous les organismes/acteurs compétents puissent contribuer à chaque question. La réponse à une seule question nécessitait le travail de plusieurs institutions qui, d'un commun accord, apportaient une réponse commune et unifiée à cette question. Toutes les réponses d'un chapitre doivent être synchronisées et une réponse commune doit être définie pour l'ensemble du chapitre. Tous les chapitres doivent être synchronisés par l'institution qui dirige l'ensemble du processus. Les réponses finales devraient être adoptées par le gouvernement puis envoyées à la Commission européenne à Bruxelles. Les réponses à toutes les questions pourraient totaliser environ 8 000 à 10 000 pages.

De plus, toutes les réponses (préparées d'abord en roumain) ont ensuite été traduites par la République de Moldavie en anglais. Si la traduction n'est pas effectuée correctement, la qualité des réponses de la République de Moldavie en souffrira et/ou sera inexacte. En outre, toute la législation de la République de Moldavie (principalement les lois et certains règlements) qui sous-tendent les réponses doivent également être traduites en anglais et jointes aux réponses. Par conséquent, le Gouvernement de la République de Moldavie devrait créer un service/une unité de traduction pour coordonner et assurer une traduction de qualité des réponses au questionnaire et de la législation pertinente, et par la suite de tous les documents liés aux négociations d'adhésion. La demande d'adhésion à l'UE et le questionnaire qui en résulte représentent le début d'un niveau de relations avec l'Union européenne complètement différent et plus large.

Depuis 2014, la République de Moldavie met en œuvre l'Accord d'association avec l'Union européenne. Si le soutien politique nécessaire est assuré (en reconnaissant que répondre au futur questionnaire est une priorité stratégique pour la République de Moldavie) et si tous les préparatifs administratifs nécessaires sont effectués dans les mois à venir (y compris la création de groupes de travail et l'organisation du processus de traduction), il n'y a aucune raison de douter que la République de Moldavie puisse franchir cette étape avec autant de succès que nombre de pays précédents. Le projet d'assistance technique financé par l'UE « Soutien au dialogue politique structuré, à la coordination de la mise en œuvre de l'accord d'association (AA) et à l'amélioration du processus de rapprochement juridique en République de Moldavie » fournit le soutien nécessaire, sur la base de l'expérience acquise à partir des réponses au dernier questionnaire, ainsi que sur la réorganisation interne dans divers pays des Balkans occidentaux (*Cererea de aderare a Republicii Moldova la Uniunea Europeană)*.

Un pas tout aussi important dans les relations moldo-européennes a été la visite de travail du chef de l'État à Bruxelles et à Paris les 17 et 18 mai, au cours de laquelle Maia Sandu a eu des entretiens avec le président de la France, le Premier ministre du Royaume de Belgique et le président de l'Assemblée législative de l'UE (*Baciu*). Le discours de Maia Sandu, présidente de la République de Moldavie, prononcé le 18 mai au Parlement européen à Bruxelles, représente les aspirations européennes de la République de Moldavie (*Statutul de candidat la aderare)*.

Dans le contexte de l'obtention par la République de Moldavie du statut de candidat à l'adhésion à l'UE, la discussion tenue le 31 mai 2022 entre le Premier ministre roumain, Nicolae Ciucă, avec la présidente de la Commission européenne, Ursula von der Leyen, et la présidente du Parlement européen, Roberta Metsola, mérite également l'attention. Au cours de ces discussions, l'importance pour la Commission européenne d'émettre un avis positif sur la demande d'adhésion de la République de Moldavie à l'UE a été soulignée. Le responsable roumain a également demandé à l'exécutif bruxellois de reconnaître la perspective d'intégration européenne de Chisinau et de recommander le statut de candidat à l'adhésion à l'Union européenne. Un autre sujet de discussion a porté sur l'importance du soutien actif de l'Union européenne au parcours européen de la République de Moldavie, ainsi qu'aux réformes initiées par la présidente de la République de Moldavie, Maia Sandu (*Bolotnicov*). Sur fond de guerre en Ukraine, Chisinau a reçu la visite de plusieurs responsables européens, dont le haut représentant de l'UE pour les affaires étrangères, Josep Borrell, et le commissaire européen à l'élargissement, Oliver Varhelyi.

Le 19 mai 2022 est une date importante pour la République de Moldavie. C'est la date à laquelle le Parlement européen a adopté le rapport annuel sur la mise en œuvre de l'Accord d'association UE-République de Moldavie, avec 512 voix « pour », 43 voix « contre » et 39 abstentions. Le rapport appelle notamment l'Union européenne à fournir un soutien stratégique plus important à la Moldavie après qu'elle ait soumis sa demande d'adhésion au bloc.

Motivée par l'invasion de l'Ukraine par la Russie, la demande officielle d'adhésion à l'UE de la République de Moldavie, le 3 mars, a été saluée par les députés européens, car elle confirme la voie européenne du pays. Ainsi, conformément à l'article 49 du TUE et « sur la base des mérites», les députés ont appelé les institutions de l'UE à accorder à la République de Moldavie le statut de pays candidat. En attendant, selon les acteurs, l'Union européenne et la République de Moldavie devraient continuer à travailler

à l'intégration du pays dans le marché unique de l'UE. En analysant le texte de la Résolution, il convient de noter qu'elle demande à la Commission européenne d'aider la République de Moldavie à préparer une stratégie crédible pour la période de pré-adhésion à l'UE. Les députés ont également attiré l'attention sur la nécessité d'apporter une assistance stratégique plus importante à la République de Moldavie, notamment en créant un groupe de soutien de la Commission, similaire à celui existant pour l'Ukraine. Le rapport souligne également que les demandes d'adhésion de l'Ukraine, de la République de Moldavie et de la Géorgie ouvrent un nouveau chapitre dans leur intégration européenne, qui devrait être caractérisée par des efforts renforcés pour mettre en œuvre les accords d'association et les volets de libéralisation du commerce. Les députés ont également exprimé leur inquiétude face aux incidents de sécurité dans la région séparatiste de Transnistrie, les condamnant comme des actes de provocation dangereux. Ainsi, les députés se sont prononcés en faveur d'une résolution pacifique du conflit en Transnistrie, fondée sur la souveraineté et l'intégrité territoriale de la République de Moldavie, estimant que « l'UE doit d'urgence accorder à la République de Moldavie et à l'Ukraine le statut de pays candidats » (*Chirtoc*).

Le texte de la Résolution stipule que la République de Moldavie a été affectée de manière disproportionnée par la guerre russe en Ukraine. Cela est dû principalement à l'arrivée de plus de 450 000 réfugiés ukrainiens depuis le début de l'invasion – dont près de 800 000 sont restés en République de Moldavie – mais aussi au déclin des échanges commerciaux et à l'augmentation des prix de l'énergie et des transports. À cette fin, les députés appellent l'UE à apporter davantage de soutien au pays, notamment par le biais d'une nouvelle assistance macrofinancière, de nouvelles mesures de libéralisation des transports et du commerce, et d'un soutien continu à la gestion des réfugiés et aux fins humanitaires.

Dans le contexte de la guerre de la Russie contre l'Ukraine, le Parlement a salué la demande officielle d'adhésion à l'UE de la République de Moldavie présentée le 3 mars 2022 et a déclaré que l'UE devrait lui accorder le statut de pays candidat, conformément à l'article 49 du TUE et « sur la base du mérite ». Dans l'intervalle, l'Union européenne et la République de Moldavie devraient toutefois poursuivre leurs efforts pour intégrer le pays au marché unique de l'UE et renforcer la coopération sectorielle. Les députés ont également appelé la Commission européenne à finaliser rapidement l'évaluation de la candidature et à fournir à la République de Moldavie une assistance complète tout au long de ce processus, affirmant que les autorités moldaves sont sur la bonne voie en adoptant des réformes clés, notamment en ce qui concerne la démocratie, l'État de droit et les droits de l'homme. Le Parlement souligne également qu'il est inacceptable que la Russie utilise les approvisionnements en gaz comme une arme pour exercer une pression politique sur la République de Moldavie, pour influencer la trajectoire politique et l'orientation géopolitique du pays, en particulier après la récente installation du gouvernement pro-occidental du pays. Les députés appellent la Commission et les pays de l'UE à soutenir la Moldavie pour assurer son indépendance énergétique, sa connectivité, sa diversification et son efficacité énergétique, ainsi que pour accélérer le développement des sources d'énergie renouvelables (*PE: UE trebuie să acorde Republicii Moldova statutul de țară candidată).*

Grâce à la décision « historique » prise à l'unanimité par les dirigeants de l'UE, l'Ukraine et la République de Moldavie ont reçu le statut de pays candidats à l'adhésion à l'UE. En accordant le statut de candidat à l'Ukraine et à la République de Moldavie, le paradigme de l'élargissement de l'UE a changé et la politique d'élargissement a reçu un

nouvel élan, qualifiant la décision des dirigeants de l'UE de « grand pas » et d'entreprise historique. Bien que la République de Moldavie ait reçu le statut de pays candidat à l'adhésion à l'Union européenne (UE) le 23 juin 2022, ce statut ne confère pas la qualité d'État membre de l'UE, car la Moldavie doit remplir une série de conditions d'adhésion, ainsi qu'appliquer la législation européenne dans tous les domaines. Les experts dans le domaine des relations internationales et de l'intégration européenne soulignent que le chemin européen de la République de Moldavie est difficile et que, dans le contexte des défis auxquels sont confrontés l'UE, ainsi que les pays ayant le statut de candidat à l'adhésion, il peut durer une période indéterminée. Une fois qu'un pays obtient le statut de pays candidat à l'adhésion à l'UE, les tâches des dirigeants sont multiples, mais inévitablement ou par ignorance, certaines responsabilités majeures peuvent être omises, ou simplement considérées comme non essentielles, ce qui serait une erreur majeure. Nous ne ferons pas ici référence à d'autres omissions qui semblent, à première vue, insignifiantes parce qu'elles ne sont pas expressément énoncées dans les engagements fermes que la République de Moldavie assume dans ce contexte. Le pays risque ainsi de rester prisonnier du statut de candidat à l'intégration pendant 30 à 50 ans. L'UE a accordé ce statut pour deux raisons: l'existence d'un gouvernement pro-européen - PAS et la présence dans la région de la guerre en Ukraine comme antidote politique contre l'agression russe dans l'État voisin (*Conțu*).

Un moment unique dans l'histoire du pays et une reconnaissance des efforts collectifs réalisés au cours des deux dernières années et des valeurs communes partagées par la République de Moldavie est le lancement officiel des négociations d'adhésion de la République de Moldavie à l'Union européenne le 25 juin 2024, à Bruxelles (*ibidem*). Cet événement fait suite à la décision du Conseil européen des 14 et 15 décembre 2023 d'ouvrir des négociations d'adhésion avec la République de Moldavie et à l'approbation par le Conseil, le 21 juin, du cadre de négociation pour les négociations avec la République de Moldavie, conformément à la méthodologie d'élargissement révisée. L'ouverture des négociations d'adhésion, deux ans seulement après l'obtention du statut de pays candidat, prouve que la République de Moldavie est déterminée à mettre en œuvre le programme de réformes de l'UE. L'UE a ainsi réitéré sa ferme condamnation de la guerre d'agression menée par la Russie contre l'Ukraine et a affirmé sa volonté de continuer à fournir tout le soutien nécessaire à la République de Moldavie et à son peuple pour relever les défis liés à la guerre et pour renforcer la résilience, la sécurité et la stabilité du pays face aux actions hybrides de la Russie.

L'UE a également souligné que la République de Moldavie est déjà un partenaire proche de son pays. L'Accord d'association de la République de Moldavie avec l'UE, qui comprend également une zone de libre-échange approfondie et complète à grande échelle, est entré en vigueur en 2016 et est appliqué à titre provisoire depuis 2014. Il constitue la base d'une vaste coopération entre l'UE et la République de Moldavie dans un large éventail de domaines. Le 21 mai 2024, la République de Moldavie a signé un partenariat de sécurité et de défense avec l'UE, le premier du genre jamais conclu avec un pays partenaire. L'UE a désormais invité la Commission à continuer d'évaluer l'état de préparation de la République de Moldavie à ouvrir des négociations dans des domaines spécifiques et à identifier les questions susceptibles de surgir au cours des négociations, en commençant par le groupe thématique d'éléments fondamentaux qui, conformément au cadre de négociation, seront ouverts en premier. En tant que futur État membre, la

République de Moldavie est censée continuer à adhérer aux valeurs visées à l'article 2 du Traité sur l'Union européenne, à savoir le respect de la dignité humaine, de la liberté, de la démocratie, de l'égalité et de l'État de droit, ainsi que le respect des droits de l'homme, y compris les droits des personnes appartenant à des minorités (*UE deschide negocieri de aderare cu Republica* Moldova). Le processus d'intégration de la République de Moldavie à l'UE a débuté en 2014, avec la signature de l'Accord d'association RM-UE, et a traversé plusieurs étapes importantes. La durée des négociations dépend de la vitesse de mise en œuvre des réformes, après quoi un certain nombre d'étapes restent à franchir (*Moldova începe negocierile de aderare la UE).*

L'ouverture de ces négociations est le fruit d'un accord durement gagné entre les 27 pays de l'UE, qui ont dû user d'ingéniosité pour convaincre le 27e, la Hongrie, de ne pas bloquer le processus. Le Premier ministre hongrois s'est farouchement opposé à toute négociation d'adhésion avec l'Ukraine, estimant que le pays n'était pas prêt, et a également bloqué toute aide militaire européenne à Kiev (*Da Silva, Tobelem , Olivier*). Bien qu'Orban ait quitté la table des négociations lors du Sommet des 27 dirigeants de l'UE en décembre, ses 26 homologues ont décidé d'ouvrir des négociations d'adhésion avec Kiev et Chisinau.

Après l'ouverture officielle de la conférence intergouvernementale, les négociateurs analyseront d'abord la législation des deux pays pour vérifier si elle est compatible avec celle de l'UE. Cette étape, appelée *screening* dans le jargon bruxellois, dure normalement entre un et deux ans, ont expliqué des sources diplomatiques. Mais dans le cas de l'Ukraine ou de la République de Moldavie, les choses iront plus vite car « nous avons déjà une idée assez claire » de la situation, a souligné ce diplomate européen, s'exprimant sous couvert d'anonymat. Il faudra toutefois plusieurs semaines, voire plusieurs mois, avant que les différents chapitres de négociation ne soient réellement ouverts. Et il est peu probable qu'elles soient ouvertes avant la fin de cette année : le 1er juillet, la Hongrie, peu enthousiaste à l'idée d'accueillir l'Ukraine, prend la présidence semestrielle du Conseil de l'UE, qui réunit les ministres des 27 États membres. Les chefs d'État et de gouvernement de l'Union européenne avaient ouvert la voie à de telles négociations d'adhésion à la mi-décembre 2023. Cependant, la Hongrie a jusqu'à présent reporté l'ouverture officielle des négociations avec Kiev, estimant que les conditions ne sont pas réunies. Le 7 juin, la Commission européenne a estimé que l'Ukraine et la République de Moldavie remplissaient désormais toutes les conditions préalables à l'adhésion. L'exécutif européen a appelé Kiev à prendre des mesures pour lutter contre la corruption et la détention des oligarques. La Commission a également appelé à accorder une plus grande attention aux minorités, une mesure fortement demandée par Budapest en raison de la présence d'une communauté hongroise en Ukraine. L'UE a accordé le statut de pays candidat à l'Ukraine en juin 2022, dans un geste hautement symbolique, quelques mois après le début de la guerre déclenchée par Moscou, ainsi qu'à la Moldavie voisine. L'ouverture des négociations n'est qu'une étape d'un processus d'adhésion long et ardu. L'Ukraine, pays de plus de 40 millions d'habitants et grande puissance agricole, est confrontée à une série de défis pour rejoindre l'UE, à commencer par la question de l'aide financière. De son côté, l'UE entend se réformer pour faire face à cet élargissement et améliorer sa gouvernance et son processus décisionnel, déjà souvent complexe avec 27 États membres (*Republica Moldova şi Ucraina).*

Le cas du Monténégro n'est pas moins intéressant pour l'analyse des relations de l'Union européenne avec les États aspirant à rejoindre l'espace intégrationniste européen. La perspective européenne du Monténégro a été réaffirmée par le Conseil en juin 2006, suite à la reconnaissance de l'indépendance du pays par les États membres de l'UE. Le 21 mai 2006, les Monténégrins ont voté en faveur de l'indépendance de l'ancienne République yougoslave, jusqu'alors rattachée à la Serbie, indépendance que l'Union européenne a reconnue le 12 juin 2006 (*The European Union and Montenegro*). Dans le cadre du processus d'établissement et de renforcement des relations avec l'UE, le 15 octobre 2007, un Accord de stabilisation et d'association (ASA) a été signé entre l'UE et le Monténégro (*Document 22007A1228(01).* Ce dernier est entré en vigueur le 1er mai 2010. En signant l'Accord de stabilisation et d'association, le Monténégro a formellement accepté une association avec l'Union européenne et ses États membres, acceptant ainsi la responsabilité de son avenir européen.

Le moment qui renforce les relations UE-Monténégro est le dépôt officiel, le 15 décembre 2008, par le Premier ministre Milo Đukanović, de la demande d'adhésion à l'espace intégrationniste européen. Comme la Serbie et la Macédoine du Nord, le Monténégro a obtenu le 19 décembre 2009 une libéralisation du régime des visas pour ses citoyens voyageant en Europe. En décembre 2010, les États membres ont accordé au pays le statut officiel de candidat à l'adhésion, suite à une recommandation de la Commission européenne. Les efforts du Monténégro restent toutefois nécessaires en matière de droits fondamentaux, comme la lutte contre les discriminations, la liberté d'expression ou la situation des personnes déplacées en provenance de Croatie, de Bosnie-Herzégovine ou du Kosovo.

Le 12 octobre 2011, la Commission européenne a émis un avis favorable à l'ouverture de négociations formelles d'adhésion. Après l'approbation des États membres, le 29 juin 2012, les négociations pour l'adhésion du Monténégro ont été officiellement ouvertes. Un autre moment marquant dans les relations UE-Monténégro est la position du Parlement européen, qui, le 22 janvier 2013, a salué les réformes entreprises et les progrès réalisés par l'État vers l'adhésion. Le Parlement a toutefois demandé que des mesures supplémentaires soient prises en matière de protection de la liberté de la presse, des droits des femmes et de l'égalité des sexes, ainsi que d'intensification de la lutte contre la corruption et le crime organisé. Dans ce contexte, l'avis favorable rendu en 2010 par la Commission sur la demande du Monténégro mérite d'être pris en compte. La Commission a identifié sept priorités clés que le Monténégro devrait atteindre pour pouvoir entamer des négociations. Le Conseil a également accordé au Monténégro le statut de pays candidat à l'adhésion, lançant le processus de négociations d'adhésion en décembre 2011. Ainsi, officiellement, les négociations d'adhésion du Monténégro ont débuté le 29 juin 2012. Le 6 février 2018, la Commission européenne a indiqué que l'adhésion du Monténégro pourrait devenir une réalité d'ici 2025, comme ce fut le cas pour la Serbie. « Cette perspective dépendra en définitive de l'existence d'une volonté politique forte, de la mise en œuvre de réformes efficaces et durables et de la résolution définitive des différends avec ses voisins. » La corruption et le système judiciaire restent dans le collimateur de Bruxelles. Après huit ans de négociations, les 33 chapitres examinés ont été ouverts, dont 3 sont provisoirement clos : Science et Recherche, Education et Culture, et Relations Extérieures. En 2024, le Monténégro a annoncé qu'il visait une adhésion effective d'ici 2028, ce qui, selon les déclarations de la présidente de la Commission européenne, Ursula von der Leyen, est un objectif « atteint ».

Sous son nouveau gouvernement, le Monténégro a débloqué son processus d'adhésion. Bien que le pays soit confronté à de nombreux obstacles, il représente aujourd'hui la meilleure opportunité pour l'UE de retrouver l'élan de l'élargissement aux Balkans occidentaux. En mettant en œuvre des réformes, le Monténégro démontre son engagement envers l'Union européenne. Par rapport aux autres pays candidats, le Monténégro est celui qui a le plus progressé dans ce processus. Après le processus de stagnation, le Monténégro est le premier pays à passer par ce processus d'adhésion, qui a été modifié par l'adoption de la nouvelle méthodologie au début de 2020. Cette nouvelle méthodologie a apporté de nouveaux critères et des évaluations plus rigoureuses, garantissant ainsi une évaluation plus approfondie des progrès, notamment dans les domaines liés aux chapitres 23 et 24. L'avis positif confirme que le Monténégro a réussi à satisfaire à toutes les exigences posées par l'UE, ce qui renforce encore sa pleine adhésion à l'Union européenne (*Dzanik, 2013*).

Cependant, recevoir un avis positif signifie simplement que le Monténégro doit travailler encore plus dur sur le processus de réforme et que ce n'est qu'un point sur ce chemin. C'est également le message des pays de l'UE lors de la Conférence intergouvernementale : le Monténégro doit continuer à se concentrer sur l'intégration européenne et à faire preuve du même engagement en matière de réformes que lors de la période précédente (Mirkovic). Selon le ministère des Affaires européennes du Monténégro, sur un total de 102 obligations définies dans le Programme d'adhésion du Monténégro à l'Union européenne 2024-2027, 50 ont été mises en œuvre au cours du premier semestre 2024. Au cours de la même période, un nombre important de lois et de statuts ont été adoptés (un total de 28 lois et 28 statuts, ce qui représente respectivement 61 % et 57 % du plan d'adoption du cadre législatif) (Mirkovic). Outre les lois qui constituaient une condition pour obtenir un avis positif, d'autres lois importantes pour le processus de réforme ont également été adoptées. Ces lois font référence à la réglementation de divers domaines, tels que : la sécurité de l'information, la sécurité de l'approvisionnement en dérivés pétroliers, la gestion des déchets, l'inventaire agricole... Le cadre stratégique a également été amélioré en introduisant des stratégies dans le domaine de la lutte contre la corruption, de l'emploi, de l'amélioration de la sécurité et de la santé au travail, de la propriété intellectuelle du Monténégro, de l'inclusion sociale des Roms et des Égyptiens, de l'amélioration de la qualité de vie des personnes LGBTI au Monténégro. En outre, le Monténégro a adopté un certain nombre d'autres documents visant à améliorer la situation dans le domaine de la gestion intégrée des frontières, de la prévention et de la répression du terrorisme, du blanchiment d'argent et du financement du terrorisme, du Plan d'action Schengen, ainsi que de la lutte contre le trafic de drogue. Toutes ces réformes menées par le Monténégro constituent une excellente base pour poursuivre la mise en œuvre du processus de réforme et améliorer la situation en vue de l'intégration à l'UE. Les efforts continus visant à harmoniser la législation nationale avec l'acquis de l'UE, ainsi que la volonté de respecter les normes européennes, permettent au Monténégro d'entrer dans la prochaine phase du processus d'adhésion avec plus de stabilité et de préparation. Cette base soutient non seulement les progrès futurs vers l'adhésion, mais renforce également les capacités institutionnelles du pays et sa résilience globale pour faire face aux défis futurs sur la voie de l'intégration européenne. L'adhésion du Monténégro, comme d'autres pays, revêt une importance particulière pour la stabilité de l'Europe, notamment dans des conditions de tension et d'instabilité géopolitiques. Cependant, depuis le déclenchement de la guerre en Ukraine, l'UE se concentre davantage sur la région des Balkans occidentaux, ce qui n'était pas le cas les

années précédentes. L'intensification des activités de l'UE dans le domaine de l'intégration des Balkans occidentaux est devenue particulièrement prononcée pendant la guerre en Ukraine, ce qui montre l'attention accrue de l'Union à la stabilisation et à l'intégration de cette région dans les structures européennes (ibidem). Alors que l'objectif principal du Monténégro – et un message attrayant pour certains partenaires européens – est de devenir le 28e État membre de l'UE d'ici 2028, un autre défi évident pour les perspectives du Monténégro est le manque de capacités humaines et d'expertise technique dans son administration publique. Dans certains cas, cette situation est résolue par la réembauche de fonctionnaires des gouvernements précédents du Parti démocratique des socialistes (DPS) (*Nič, Bechev, Maillard, 2024*).

Le transfert spectaculaire du pouvoir à Belgrade, qui a eu lieu en octobre 2000, a ouvert la porte à la transition politique et économique en Serbie et a ouvert la voie à un changement d'orientation de la politique étrangère de la Serbie. La coalition pro-occidentale arrivée au pouvoir après les élections présidentielles serbes a donné la plus haute priorité à l'intégration européenne de la Serbie. Les relations entre l'Union européenne et la Serbie après Milosevic ne se sont pas limitées à l'aide financière européenne à la Serbie. La transition politique en Serbie à l'automne 2000 a conduit à un changement dans les relations politiques entre Bruxelles et Belgrade. Un élément clé de la « reconfiguration » des relations entre Belgrade et Bruxelles après octobre 2000 est le lancement du processus d'adhésion de la Serbie à l'Union européenne. Cependant, l'orientation pro-européenne de l'élite politique serbe n'a pas suffi à la Serbie pour entamer son parcours européen. La décision de Bruxelles de poursuivre le processus d'élargissement et d'inclure les pays des Balkans occidentaux était une condition préalable au début de l'intégration européenne de la Serbie. En décembre 2002, le Conseil européen de Copenhague a souligné la perspective européenne des États des Balkans occidentaux, y compris la Serbie, dans les « structures européennes » et « leur éventuelle adhésion à l'Union » comme une priorité absolue de l'Union européenne. En outre, le Conseil Affaires générales et relations extérieures a déclaré à l'ordre du jour de Thessalonique le soutien de l'Union européenne aux pays de la région en poursuivant "une coopération étroite avec les pays des Balkans occidentaux pour consolider davantage la paix et promouvoir la stabilité, la démocratie, le respect de l'État de droit, des droits de l'homme et des minorités". En outre, l'ordre du jour de Thessalonique a souligné la nécessité de réformes fondamentales dans les pays de la région, telles que la lutte contre le crime organisé et la corruption, le développement d'une économie de marché moderne et l'amélioration de la coopération régionale. En juin 2003, le Conseil européen a également réaffirmé sa politique à l'égard des Balkans occidentaux, soulignant son soutien à la perspective européenne des pays de la région « dès qu'ils répondront aux critères établis ». Le Conseil européen de Thessalonique a confirmé « l'agenda de Thessalonique pour les Balkans occidentaux » et a souligné l'importance du processus de stabilisation et d'association en tant qu'instrument pour « le parcours européen des pays des Balkans occidentaux vers leur future adhésion ». L'Union européenne a également réitéré sa détermination à soutenir la voie européenne des États des Balkans occidentaux lors de la réunion entre les chefs d'État et de gouvernement des États membres de l'Union européenne et les dirigeants de l'Albanie, de la Bosnie, de la Croatie, de la Macédoine du Nord, de la Serbie et du Monténégro à Thessalonique le 21 juin 2003. Les dirigeants européens ont souligné l'importance de l'agenda de Thessalonique pour les Balkans occidentaux, décrivant ce document comme « une

nouvelle étape importante dans la relation privilégiée entre l'UE et les Balkans occidentaux » (*Dragisic, 2008*).

Après avoir obtenu l'étude de faisabilité en avril 2005, la Serbie a commencé les préparatifs des négociations. Les négociations sur l'Accord de stabilisation et d'association (ASA) ont été ouvertes dans le cadre d'un mécanisme double, après que le Monténégro a déclaré son indépendance (2006), et se sont poursuivies séparément avec deux pays souverains. Alors que le processus de négociation se poursuivait, la Serbie s'est retrouvée confrontée à un obstacle inattendu. C'est la volonté des membres occidentaux du Groupe de contact de reconnaître la province autonome serbe du Kosovo-Metohija comme un État indépendant (en tant que République du Kosovo), violant ainsi la Résolution n° 1244 du Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU. Les négociations d'association se déroulaient simultanément avec celles sur l'octroi du statut du Kosovo. Ces derniers ont été violés sans résultat (en mars 2007), et la proclamation unilatérale de l'indépendance du Kosovo a été acceptée par la majorité des États membres de l'UE. Depuis lors, les discussions de l'association se sont constamment déroulées sous l'égide de la nouvelle condition qui s'est imposée à la Serbie : la reconnaissance, d'abord de facto, puis de jure, de l'indépendance du Kosovo. Toutes les mesures prises par la Serbie depuis le printemps 2008 – signature de l'ASA (avril 2008), mise en œuvre de l'accord commercial intérimaire dans le cadre de l'ASA, obtention du statut de candidat (mars 2012) et ouverture des négociations d'adhésion (janvier 2014) – ont été conditionnées par la renonciation progressive du Kosovo-Metohija en tant que partie du pays. Toutes les étapes mentionnées ci-dessus sur la voie des négociations d'adhésion (2008-2014), ainsi que bien d'autres sur le même chemin, ont en fait été franchies principalement grâce à la volonté des différents gouvernements serbes de respecter cette condition suprême imposée par l'UE. En analysant le cas de la Serbie dans le processus d'association, on peut clairement comprendre le changement des priorités de l'UE, passant des conditions économiques, juridiques et institutionnelles aux priorités (hautement) politiques. Depuis la mi-2008, lorsque les deux parties ont signé l'ASA, les mesures prises par la Serbie pour « normaliser ses relations avec le Kosovo » sont devenues une condition cruciale (une « priorité clé » selon la formulation utilisée dans tous les rapports annuels ultérieurs de la Commission). Chaque étape supplémentaire sur le chemin de l'intégration de la Serbie était conditionnée par une étape concrète : celle de la reconnaissance du Kosovo comme nouvel État. Cela signifie qu'au lieu de fixer l'objectif de l'adhésion, le processus a été transformé en la fixation de la condition clé de la pleine reconnaissance de l'indépendance du Kosovo (*Bazić, 2019*). Ainsi, en acceptant les conditions de Bruxelles, la Serbie a renoncé à ses pouvoirs de gouvernance dans quatre municipalités (habitées par une majorité serbe) du nord du Kosovo, a accepté la législation kosovare dans son intégralité et s'est engagée à mettre pleinement en œuvre les dispositions convenues (*Samardžić, 2015*).

Tout comme la Macédoine du Nord et le Monténégro, la Serbie a obtenu, le 19 décembre 2009, une libéralisation des visas pour ses citoyens voyageant dans l'espace Schengen. Et le même jour, elle a officiellement déposé sa demande pour entamer le processus d'adhésion à l'Union européenne. Le 12 octobre 2011, la Commission européenne a donné son feu vert à l'octroi du statut de pays candidat à la Serbie, et le 1er mars 2012, les États membres ont confirmé cet avis, et la Serbie est devenue officiellement un pays candidat à l'adhésion à l'UE.

Le 19 avril 2013, après plusieurs années de blocage (lié à la présence de minorités serbes et albanaises de part et d'autre de la frontière), des négociations multilatérales entre

la Serbie et le Kosovo, supervisées par l'UE, ont abouti à la signature d'un accord ouvrant la voie à la normalisation des relations entre les deux pays. Par conséquent, le 28 juin 2013, les États membres ont approuvé la recommandation de la Commission d'ouvrir des négociations d'adhésion avec la Serbie. Ainsi, en mars 2012, la Serbie s'est vu accorder le statut de candidat à l'adhésion à l'UE. À ce jour, la Serbie a ouvert 18 chapitres de négociations. En 2012, le Conseil européen a confirmé la Serbie comme pays candidat et, un an plus tard, a approuvé la recommandation de la Commission d'ouvrir des négociations avec la Serbie. En 2013, l'accord de stabilisation et d'association UE-Serbie est entré en vigueur (*Stabilisation and association agreement*). Aujourd'hui, sur un total de 33 chapitres ouverts lors de la première phase de négociations, 22 sont en discussion. Deux ont été temporairement fermés (sciences et recherche ; éducation et culture). Pourtant, la Commission européenne a indiqué en 2018 que l'adhésion de la Serbie n'aurait pas lieu avant 2025. En effet, les accords signés en 2013 avec le Kosovo sont loin d'être tous mis en œuvre, et le dialogue a été régulièrement interrompu en raison de provocations mutuelles. Cependant, la reconnaissance du Kosovo par la Serbie est une condition sine qua non pour que ces deux pays entrent dans l'Union européenne. Dans la résolution adoptée le 6 juillet 2022, les députés européens déplorent le « recul » de la Serbie « sur des questions essentielles pour l'adhésion à l'UE ». Les parlementaires appellent le pays à « progresser en matière d'État de droit, de droits fondamentaux, de liberté d'expression, de renforcement du pluralisme des médias et de normalisation des relations avec le Kosovo ». Par ailleurs, le rapport de la Commission européenne, d'octobre 2024, mentionne que le pays doit renforcer l'indépendance du pouvoir judiciaire, la lutte contre la corruption et la liberté d'expression.

La Turquie est l'État qui, comme les autres États précédemment cités, tend à devenir membre de l'Union européenne. Devenue membre associé de la Communauté économique européenne en 1964 par un Accord d'association, la Turquie a présenté une demande d'adhésion en 1987. Bien qu'elle ait présenté sa demande, la Turquie n'a été reconnue comme « pays candidat » qu'en 1999, les négociations d'adhésion n'ayant débuté que bien plus tard (*Relațiile UE-Turcia*).

Ainsi, à l'issue de l'évaluation de 2004, la Commission européenne et le Parlement européen ont estimé que la Turquie avait finalement fait les efforts nécessaires pour satisfaire aux critères de Copenhague. Les chefs d'Etat et de gouvernement, réunis en Conseil européen, ont donc proposé d'ouvrir des négociations pour l'adhésion de la Turquie à l'UE à condition qu'Ankara adopte certaines réformes et signe le protocole d'élargissement de l'union douanière aux 10 nouveaux Etats membres de l'UE. Environ 18 ans après le dépôt de la demande, les négociations d'adhésion ont commencé le 3 octobre 2005. Seuls 16 des 35 chapitres ont été ouverts et un seul a été fermé. Après la répression lancée par le gouvernement turc, suite au coup d'État manqué du 15 juillet 2016, les négociations turco-européennes sur l'adhésion de la Turquie à l'UE ont été interrompues. En juin 2019, le Conseil de l'UE a toutefois estimé que les négociations entre l'UE et la Turquie étaient « dans l'impasse ». En 1974, la Turquie a occupé le nord de l'île de Chypre et refuse à ce jour de reconnaître le gouvernement de Nicosie, le seul reconnu par la communauté internationale. En juillet 2005, à l'occasion de la signature de l'accord visant à élargir l'Union douanière entre la Turquie et l'UE à dix nouveaux États membres, les autorités turques ont donc déclaré qu'à travers ce texte, elles ne reconnaissaient pas la République de Chypre, membre de l'UE depuis le 1er mai 2004. L'UE indique à son tour qu'Ankara sera obligée de reconnaître la partie chypriote lors des

négociations. Ainsi, en 2006, en raison du refus de la Turquie d'ouvrir ses ports et aéroports aux navires et avions en provenance de Chypre, le Conseil des Affaires étrangères décide finalement de suspendre les discussions avec Ankara sur plusieurs chapitres de négociation (*Commission adopts 2024 Enlargement Package).*

Un autre obstacle au processus de négociation turco-européen est le manque d'efforts déployés par la Turquie pour normaliser ses relations avec l'Arménie. Dans son rapport publié en octobre 2012, la Commission européenne mentionne que la Turquie ne fait pas d'efforts pour résoudre ses problèmes avec son voisin l'Arménie. Tout aussi importantes sont les suggestions de l'Exécutif européen concernant les réformes à entreprendre en matière d'application des critères politiques, de droits de l'homme et de protection des minorités en Turquie *(Oliver, 2024).*

Les préoccupations de la Commission portent notamment sur la liberté de religion, d'expression et de réunion. En réponse à la répression des manifestations par le régime de Recep Tayyip Erdoğan début 2013, les négociations ont été suspendues, pour reprendre avec des réserves en novembre de la même année. Les 28 États membres de l'UE (le Royaume-Uni de Grande-Bretagne et d'Irlande du Nord jusqu'en 2020 membre de l'UE) ont finalement décidé d'ouvrir le chapitre de la politique régionale. Mais aujourd'hui, après plus de 16 ans de négociations, seuls 16 des 35 chapitres sont ouverts, le plus récent (ouvert en juin 2016) portant sur les dispositions financières et budgétaires. Parmi ceux-ci, seul le chapitre « Science et Recherche » est provisoirement clos. Après le Sommet UE-Turquie du 29 novembre 2015 autour de la crise migratoire (un accord a été signé en 2016 sur la prise en charge des migrants), le processus d'adhésion a été relancé. Le 14 décembre s'ouvre le chapitre « Politique économique et monétaire». La Commission européenne s'est engagée à œuvrer à l'ouverture de nouveaux chapitres au cours du premier trimestre 2016 (*Commission adopts 2024 Enlargement Package).*

Après une tentative de coup d'État en Turquie en juillet 2016, l'Union européenne s'inquiète à nouveau des représailles orchestrées par le gouvernement et, en particulier, d'un éventuel rétablissement de la peine de mort (abolie en 2004). Dans le contexte des événements de 2016, avec le renforcement du régime turc, avec certains citoyens européens également victimes de répression, les relations entre l'UE et Ankara se détériorent. En octobre 2017, les Européens ont demandé à la Commission « d'envisager l'opportunité de réduire et de réorienter les fonds de préadhésion, en tenant compte de la situation du pays ». En juin 2018, le Conseil de l'UE a indiqué l'impossibilité d'ouvrir un nouveau chapitre de négociation (*ibidem*). Les nombreux problèmes entre Bruxelles et Ankara vont persister. La perspective d'une adhésion de la Turquie à l'UE s'éloigne de plus en plus. Les voix des chefs d'État et de gouvernement de l'UE sont très critiques face aux menaces que la Turquie réitère contre la Grèce et Chypre, États communautaires. La Turquie a pénétré à plusieurs reprises sur le territoire grec et chypriote avec ses propres avions et navires militaires. Elle a appelé à plusieurs reprises les autorités turques à respecter les décisions de la Cour européenne de justice en matière de droits de l'homme et, par exemple, à libérer le militant des droits de l'homme Osman Kavala. Kavala a été emprisonné en 2022, condamné à la réclusion à perpétuité, pour avoir prétendument participé aux manifestations antigouvernementales dans le parc Gezi en 2013 (*Bernd*).

Cependant, dans le rapport annuel 2019 sur la politique d'élargissement, la Commission européenne a assuré que « la Turquie reste un partenaire clé de l'Union européenne ». Après une pause de trois ans, le Conseil d'association UE-Turquie se réunira à nouveau en mars 2019. En outre, en 2019, certaines mesures ont été prises pour

relancer les relations turco-européennes. Ainsi, « il y a eu un dialogue de haut niveau sur les transports et un dialogue économique », incluant des discussions techniques pour la reconnaissance mutuelle de certaines indications géographiques de produits agricoles. L'accord UE-Turquie sur la migration de mars 2016 continue de porter ses fruits… Pourtant, malgré ces avancées, Bruxelles rappelle que les réformes d'adhésion à l'UE n'ont pas été réalisées et que « les graves préoccupations de l'UE concernant la dégradation de l'État de droit, des droits fondamentaux et du système judiciaire n'ont pas été prises en compte ». Après l'expiration de l'état d'urgence décrété dans le pays en juillet 2016, une loi a notamment été votée qui maintient « de nombreux éléments de l'état d'urgence » en Turquie. Ainsi, en juin 2019, le Conseil de l'UE a constaté « que la Turquie continue de s'éloigner de l'Union européenne » et que « les négociations d'adhésion avec la Turquie sont au point mort » (*Commission adopts 2024 Enlargement Package*).

Bien que la Turquie soit reconnue comme un partenaire clé de l'Union européenne, les négociations d'adhésion avec elle sont au point mort depuis 2018. De sérieuses inquiétudes subsistent dans le domaine des droits fondamentaux et de l'État de droit, notamment en ce qui concerne l'indépendance du pouvoir judiciaire. En octobre 2019, la Turquie a lancé une opération militaire dans le nord de la Syrie, dans le but de créer une zone tampon entre les deux pays où les réfugiés syriens vivant en Turquie pourraient être relocalisés. Cette démarche a été condamnée par les députés européens lors d'un débat organisé le 23 octobre 2019. En conséquence, le 24 octobre 2019, une résolution a été adoptée appelant à des sanctions contre la Turquie à la suite de son opération militaire (*Relațiile UE-Turcia*).

Le dialogue sur l'État de droit et les droits fondamentaux reste une partie intégrante des relations UE-Turquie. Bien que, suite à l'orientation stratégique du Conseil européen d'avril 2024, les relations avec la Turquie aient été marquées par un réengagement progressif et que des mesures concrètes aient été prises en vue d'échanges constructifs sur des questions d'intérêt commun (*Commission adopts 2024 Enlargement Package*), le dialogue turco-européen sur le début des négociations d'adhésion reste actuellement un sujet sensible.

Dans le contexte des nouvelles réalités géopolitiques présentes sur le continent européen, caractérisées notamment par la présence d'une guerre en cours, l'Ukraine devient l'État qui attire l'attention de l'ensemble de la communauté internationale. Après l'effondrement de l'URSS en 1991, le pays est resté un proche allié de la Fédération de Russie. Cependant, l'Ukraine a signé un accord de partenariat et de coopération avec l'UE en 1994, entré en vigueur en 1998. À la suite de la révolution orange et de l'arrivée au pouvoir du pro-européen Viktor Iouchtchenko en 2004, les liens entre l'UE et l'Ukraine se sont renforcés. Un autre moment qui marque le renforcement des relations entre l'Ukraine et l'Union européenne a été l'adoption en 2005 du Plan d'action conjoint UE-Ukraine, destiné à servir de cadre aux réformes qui devaient être mises en œuvre dans le pays afin de se rapprocher de l'Union. Une nouvelle étape a été franchie en 2014. La signature de l'Accord d'association, négocié depuis 2007, a été refusée par le président prorusse Viktor Ianoukovitch en 2013. Sa décision a provoqué la colère des Ukrainiens et initié le mouvement «Euromaïdan ». Cela a conduit à la révolution de février 2014, puis à l'élection du président pro-européen Petro Porochenko. À l'est du pays, les séparatistes pro-russes prennent le pouvoir dans les régions de Lougansk et de Donetsk, et la Fédération de Russie annexe la péninsule de Crimée (*ibidem*).

L'Accord d'association UE-Ukraine, finalement signé le 21 mars 2014 (*Ukraine-EU Association Agreement*) après la fuite de Viktor Ianoukovitch en Russie et entré en

vigueur en 2016, vise à renforcer les liens politiques et économiques entre l'UE et l'Ukraine. Quatre jours après le lancement de l'offensive de la Fédération de Russie en Ukraine le 24 février 2022, Kiev a déposé, le 28 février 2022, sa demande d'adhésion à l'Union européenne. Après un avis positif de la Commission européenne le 17 juin, le Conseil européen a à son tour validé la candidature ukrainienne le 23 juin. Concernant la Moldavie, la Commission européenne recommande aux États membres d'ouvrir les négociations d'adhésion avec Kiev le 8 novembre 2023. Peu de temps après, le 14 décembre, les chefs d'État et de gouvernement réunis au Conseil européen donnent le feu vert pour entamer les négociations avec l'Ukraine, et le 25 juin 2024, les négociations pour l'adhésion de l'Ukraine à l'UE commencent officiellement.

Le Kosovo est le seul pays considéré comme un « candidat potentiel » à l'adhésion à l'UE. Cela signifie que le Kosovo est reconnu par l'UE comme un État indépendant et comme sujet de droit international. Bien qu'il ne dispose pas encore du statut officiel de candidat, l'UE considère le Kosovo comme un pays éligible à l'adhésion. En 1999, à la fin de la guerre du Kosovo, le Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU a créé la Mission intérimaire des Nations Unies au Kosovo (MINUK) pour administrer le territoire. Le 17 février 2008, lors d'une session extraordinaire, le Parlement du Kosovo a proclamé unilatéralement l'indépendance de la République du Kosovo et, depuis cette année-là, la Commission européenne a reconnu le pays comme candidat potentiel. Mais si l'indépendance du Kosovo est aujourd'hui reconnue par 22 États membres de l'UE, dont la France, cinq autres ne la reconnaissent toujours pas : l'Espagne, la Grèce, la Roumanie, la Slovaquie et Chypre. En réalité, cette absence d'unanimité des vingt-sept constitue un obstacle à l'adhésion du Kosovo à l'Union européenne (*Commission adopts 2024 Enlargement Package*). La Roumanie est l'un des cinq pays européens qui ne reconnaissent pas l'indépendance du Kosovo vis-à-vis de la Serbie, les experts estimant que la raison est liée à la crainte de créer un précédent en Transnistrie (*Rubica,2023*). La raison de la non-reconnaissance de la République du Kosovo par la Roumanie a également été expliquée par l'ancien président Traian Băsescu en 2015. À l'époque, l'ancien chef de l'État avait invoqué le danger de l'indépendance autoproclamée de la Transnistrie (*ibidem*).

La signature de l'Accord de normalisation avec la Serbie en 2013 a marqué un réchauffement des relations entre les deux pays. Ce moment a également conduit à un rapprochement du Kosovo avec l'UE. L'étape qui renforce les relations entre le Kosovo et l'UE se reflète dans la signature de l'Accord de stabilisation et d'association (ASA) entre l'Union européenne et le Kosovo en 2014 et qui est entré en vigueur deux ans plus tard, en 2016 (*Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) between the European Union and Kosovo*). Ainsi, selon les dispositions de l'Accord, il reflète la relation contractuelle qui implique des droits et des obligations mutuelles et couvre une grande variété de secteurs. En signant cet accord, l'UE assume également la responsabilité de soutenir la mise en œuvre des réformes, donnant ainsi au Kosovo l'opportunité de se rapprocher de l'Europe. Mais en 2018, les relations entre le Kosovo et la Serbie se sont à nouveau refroidies. Un an plus tard, alors qu'il examine une proposition visant à libéraliser le régime des visas pour les citoyens kosovars, le Conseil de l'UE « regrette profondément » la décision du Kosovo en novembre 2018 d'imposer des augmentations unilatérales des frais de visa allant jusqu'à 100 % sur les importations en provenance de Serbie et de Bosnie-Herzégovine (*ibidem*).

Le Conseil salue l'adoption de «lois importantes» dans les domaines de l'Etat de droit et de la réforme de l'administration publique, mais exhorte également le Kosovo à

«s'attaquer résolument à la corruption et au crime organisé», tout en déplorant «la nomination à des postes officiels de personnes condamnées pour crimes de guerre», ce qui est contraire aux valeurs européennes». Le 15 décembre 2022, le pays a déposé sa demande d'adhésion à l'Union européenne. Dans la résolution adoptée le 6 juillet 2022, les députés européens saluent « la stabilité politique accrue du Kosovo et son engagement fort en faveur de sa trajectoire européenne ». Ils « appellent à nouveau les États membres à adopter sans délai un régime sans visa pour les citoyens du Kosovo », à partir du 1er janvier 2024. Par ailleurs, dans le rapport d'octobre 2024, la Commission européenne appelle Pristina à respecter ses engagements envers la Serbie. Elle estime également que « des progrès ont été réalisés dans la lutte contre le crime organisé », mais que « le Kosovo doit intensifier ses efforts pour renforcer l'État de droit [...] et pour protéger la liberté d'expression ». La Commission reste disponible pour préparer un avis sur la demande d'adhésion du Kosovo dès que le Conseil le demandera. À la suite de l'évaluation de la situation au Kosovo, la Commission estime que des progrès ont été réalisés dans le pays dans la lutte contre le crime organisé et que l'environnement des affaires s'est amélioré, et que le Kosovo doit intensifier ses efforts pour renforcer l'État de droit, l'administration publique et protéger la liberté d'expression (*ibidem*).

Conclusions

L'Albanie, la Géorgie, le Kosovo, la Moldavie, le Monténégro, la Macédoine du Nord, la Serbie, la Turquie et l'Ukraine sont les États qui ont soumis des demandes d'adhésion au bloc et se trouvent à différentes étapes du processus de candidature. La guerre en Ukraine a fait prendre conscience à l'UE qu'elle doit démontrer son engagement envers les États des Balkans occidentaux, notamment la République de Moldavie et l'Ukraine. En analysant les relations de l'UE avec les États candidats à l'adhésion à l'espace intégrationniste européen, il est important de souligner que chaque pays a ses propres particularités, y compris ses propres défis, et le processus d'intégration doit prendre en compte ces aspects individuels pour assurer le succès et la durabilité des réformes. L'analyse de ce processus d'intégration européenne montre que, malgré les efforts déployés, les pays candidats à l'adhésion, malgré les efforts déployés, sont confrontés à des défis importants sur le chemin de l'adhésion à l'UE. Les réformes dans des domaines tels que la justice, la lutte contre la corruption et le respect de l'État de droit sont essentielles pour la progression de ces États vers l'intégration européenne. En outre, le processus d'adhésion à l'UE requiert une volonté politique forte et un engagement à long terme de la part des dirigeants et des citoyens de ces États. Il est important de souligner que, même si le processus intégrationniste européen apporte des avantages considérables, il comporte également des défis et des sacrifices. Les pays candidats doivent être prêts à satisfaire aux exigences et aux normes rigoureuses de l'UE, ce qui peut nécessiter des réformes structurelles et des changements profonds dans la société et la gouvernance. Le processus intégrationniste européen est donc un chemin complexe et semé d'obstacles pour les États candidats, mais un engagement continu et des efforts persistants peuvent conduire au succès final dans la réalisation de cet objectif.

L'élargissement constitue une opportunité historique tant pour les pays adhérents que pour les États membres actuels et pour l'UE dans son ensemble. Une Union plus grande et plus forte présenterait des avantages considérables sur les plans socio-économique, politique et sécuritaire. Le processus d'élargissement continue d'être fondé sur le mérite et dépend des progrès objectifs réalisés par chacun des partenaires. Cela nécessite la détermination de mettre en œuvre des réformes irréversibles dans tous les

domaines du droit de l'UE, en mettant l'accent sur les éléments fondamentaux du processus d'élargissement. La démocratie, l'État de droit et les valeurs fondamentales continueront d'être les pierres angulaires de la politique d'élargissement de l'UE. Le nouvel élargissement de l'UE représente un investissement géopolitique qui augmentera le poids politique et économique de l'UE sur la scène mondiale. C'est aussi le premier pas de l'UE vers des réformes inévitables. L'adhésion des 9 États candidats à l'UE reste un choix stratégique qui leur apportera de nombreux avantages. Parmi ceux-ci, nous pourrions citer :

- la stabilité politique ;
- la liberté pour les citoyens de vivre, d'étudier ou de travailler n'importe où dans l'UE;
- l'intensification des échanges grâce à l'accès au marché unique ;
- accroître les financements et les investissements ;
- des normes sociales, environnementales et de protection des consommateurs plus élevées.

Dans le même temps, le nouvel élargissement et l'adhésion des 9 États candidats à l'espace intégrationniste européen apporteront certains avantages à l'UE. Parmi ceux-ci, nous pourrions citer :

- davantage de prospérité et davantage d'opportunités pour les entreprises et les citoyens européens;
- une position de poids plus importante sur la scène mondiale ;
- plus de diversité culturelle ;
- promouvoir la démocratie, l'État de droit et les droits de l'homme ;
- un investissement dans la paix et la sécurité de l'Europe.

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Annexe n° 1

Pays candidats à l'adhésion à l'Union européenne

N/o	État	Statut d'État candidat	Début des négociations
1.	Turquie	10 décembre 1999	3 octobre 2005 (à partir de 2019-arrêté)
2.	Monténégro	17 décembre 2010	29 juin 2012
3.	Serbie	1 mars 2012	21 janvier 2014
4.	Albanie	27 juin 2014	19 juillet 2022
5.	Macédoine du Nord	17 décembre 2005	19 juillet 2022
6.	Bosnie-Herzégovine	15 décembre 2022	21 mars 2024
7.	Ukraine	23 juin 2022	25 juin 2024
8.	République de Moldova	23 juin 2022	25 juin 2024
9.	Géorgie	14 décembre 2023	Statut retiré en 2024
10.	Kosovo	considéré comme un «candidat potentiel »	

Source : *basé sur les recherches de l'auteur*

WESTERN SANCTIONS ON RUSSIA AND THE EMERGENCE OF AN ANTI-WESTERN COALITION – IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GLOBAL ORDER

Radu PÂSLARI[*]
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Abstract. *The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has profoundly reshaped the international order, triggering unprecedented sanctions imposed by Western powers. This article analyzes the impact of these sanctions on Russia's internal stability and external orientation, emphasizing the emergence of an anti-Western bloc centered around Russia, Iran, and North Korea. By examining bilateral relations and strategic cooperation among these states, the study highlights how sanctions have not only attempted to constrain Russian aggression but have also catalyzed the reconfiguration of global power dynamics, accelerating the transition towards a multipolar world order.*

Keywords: *sanctions, Russia, Iran, North Korea, multipolarity, global order*

Introduction

The Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine, launched on February 24, 2022, marked a turning point in contemporary international relations, reactivating the logic of geopolitical confrontation between major powers. While the post–Cold War era was characterized by the consolidation of a unipolar world order, in which the United States and its Western allies held political, economic, and military supremacy, recent events have revealed the fragility of this system (Allison, 2022).

In this context, the concept of "world order," as defined by Henry Kissinger, is based on "a balance between power and legitimacy; when either element collapses, the system enters a phase of crisis" (Kissinger, 2014, p. 9). Thus, the Ukraine crisis has exposed fundamental imbalances within the contemporary international system.

One of the main instruments employed by Western states in response to Russia's aggression was the swift implementation of an extensive regime of economic, financial, and diplomatic sanctions—imposed at an unprecedented pace and with remarkable coordination. The European Union, the United States, Canada, Japan, Australia, and other allied countries acted in concert to isolate Russia from international markets, with the aim of weakening its economy and reducing the Kremlin's capacity to sustain its war effort (Charap & Shapiro, 2022).

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These sanctions—unparalleled in scope in recent international history—targeted strategic sectors such as banking, energy, high-tech trade, and the assets of individuals close to Vladimir Putin. Unlike the sanctions imposed after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the new measures were far more comprehensive, affecting not only political and economic elites but also the entire structure of the Russian economy (Connolly, 2022).

However, the effects of these sanctions extended beyond the economic realm. In the medium and long term, they contributed to a global geopolitical realignment, prompting Russia to strengthen its relations with states that share an anti-Western vision. In particular, Iran and North Korea have become strategic partners for Moscow, providing military resources, diplomatic support, and alternative routes for trade and financing (Fulton et al., 2023). This rapprochement has led to the crystallization of an anti-Western bloc that openly challenges international norms and institutions dominated by the West.

Within the framework of offensive realism, as articulated by John J. Mearsheimer, great powers "are always searching for opportunities to gain power over their rivals" (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 29). This theory offers a valuable framework for understanding Russia's strategic reorientation toward alternative alliances, as it seeks to counteract Western-imposed isolation and demonstrate its capacity to unite other so-called "pariah" states within the international system.

This paper aims to analyze how Western sanctions—initially designed as coercive tools—have generated unintended geopolitical effects, fostering alignment among authoritarian states and accelerating the transition toward a multipolar world order. The analysis will be structured along four main axes: the impact of sanctions on Russia, the formation of the anti-Western bloc, a case study on Russia's relations with Iran and North Korea, and the broader implications of these developments for the contemporary global order.

1. Methodology of the Study

The methodology of this study is based on a qualitative and analytical approach, aimed at highlighting the effects of Western sanctions on Russia and their implications for the global order. The research employed a combination of document analysis, comparison of international relations, and strategic analysis tools. Within the document analysis, government reports, academic publications, studies conducted by international think tanks, and specialized media articles were systematically examined to identify Russia's economic, political, and military developments following the imposition of sanctions, as well as to assess strategic relations with states such as Iran, North Korea, and China. Sources were selected and evaluated for credibility and relevance, applying academic criteria to verify the accuracy of information.

The comparative study of international relations allowed for highlighting differences between Russia's partnerships, analysing relations with Iran and North Korea in terms of duration, complexity, and strategic objectives, including military, economic, and diplomatic cooperation, thereby identifying the role of each partner in strengthening the anti-Western bloc and countering the effects of sanctions. For structuring and evaluating information, the study employed SWOT analysis for Russia's partnerships and applied scenario analysis to anticipate potential geopolitical and economic developments in the medium and long term, including the impact of sanctions on multipolarity and the fragmentation of the international order.

This methodology provides an integrated and contextualized understanding of how sanctions influence Russia's behavior and the structure of the international system, combining academic rigor with a practical strategic perspective, and offering a solid foundation for the study's conclusions.

2. Strategies of the Russian Federation to Adapt to Western Sanctions

The implementation of Western sanctions against the Russian Federation aimed at several key objectives: demonstrating that violations of international norms would not go unpunished, discouraging aggression, limiting the Kremlin's ability to finance and sustain the war in Ukraine, and isolating Russia internationally (European Council, 2025; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2022). The sanction regime stood out for its scope, rapid adoption, and remarkable coordination among the European Union, the United States, Canada, Japan, Australia, and other strategic allies (Smith, 2023).

Sanctions targeted strategic economic and political sectors, such as the banking sector through the exclusion of certain Russian banks from the SWIFT system, restrictions on oil and gas exports to the West, trade in advanced technologies, limitations in air and maritime transport, and the freezing of assets belonging to oligarchs close to Vladimir Putin (European Council, 2025). Complementary measures included diplomatic sanctions, such as Russia's exclusion from international organizations, suspension of cooperation in education, research, and culture, and sanctions against individuals supporting the regime and the invasion of Ukraine (NATO, 2022).

In the first months following the sanctions, the Russian economy suffered a significant shock. The ruble depreciated sharply, and the financial market experienced record losses. In March 2022, the MOEX stock index fell by over 30% in a single day, prompting the Central Bank of Russia to raise the key interest rate to 20% to stabilize the currency (Central Bank of Russia, 2022).

The military and technological sectors were among the most affected due to restrictions on the export of essential components. The shortage of microchips and other advanced technologies reduced Russia's capacity to produce modern military equipment, forcing the Kremlin to seek external alternatives (Economic Analysis, 2022). This situation favored closer ties with Iran and North Korea, both willing to supply equipment and ammunition in exchange for economic and technological benefits (International Report, 2022).

In the medium term, the Russian economy demonstrated unexpected resilience due to several factors, including increased energy exports to countries not participating in sanctions, such as China, India, and Turkey (World Trade Organization, 2022); the implementation of strict domestic currency and market controls (Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation, 2022); and the development of alternative trade routes through Central Asia and the Caucasus (Trade Report, 2022). This adaptability allowed Russia to avoid the economic collapse anticipated by some Western governments. However, long-term costs remain significant, particularly due to loss of access to modern technologies, reduced foreign investment, and progressive isolation from the global economy (Economic Study, 2022).

Domestically, Vladimir Putin's regime used sanctions as a propaganda tool, presenting them to the population as evidence of a Western conspiracy against Russia (International Crisis Group, 2024). This strategy strengthened support for the Kremlin, especially in the early months of the conflict, when the official narrative of the "special

military operation" was heavily promoted in state-controlled media (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Ideologists in the Kremlin played a significant role in shaping this narrative over several years; for example, Aleksandr Dugin's writings and speeches advocate the concept of a "distinct nation" that is different from the rest of the world, unable to follow pre-existing development paths or fully adopt European or Asian models, and thus destined for a "third way" (Dugin, 2009). In this context, the invasion of Ukraine, opposition to the West, and creation of a distinct identity are viewed as typical expressions of Russian imperialism embraced by both the political establishment and broad segments of the population (Lucchese, 2023). At the same time, sanctions had indirect effects on civil society, further restricting space for opposition and dissent. Numerous NGOs, independent journalists, and activists were subjected to repression under the pretext of collaboration with "foreign agents" (Amnesty International, 2024). Rather than weakening the regime, sanctions contributed to the consolidation of authoritarianism, giving Putin a pretext to eliminate critical voices (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Externally, Russia's diplomatic isolation was partial. Although the West significantly reduced contacts with Moscow, several emerging powers—including China, India, Brazil, and South Africa—adopted a neutral stance or even supported Russia in certain contexts (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). This situation highlighted the limits of Western coercive power and created opportunities for Moscow to build alternative alliances outside the Euro-Atlantic sphere of influence (Pew Research Center, 2024).

To counter the effects of sanctions, the Kremlin implemented several adaptation strategies designed to maintain both the regime and the war effort (JPMorgan Chase & Co., 2025; Chatham House, 2025).

De-dollarization of the economy – Russia reduced its dependence on the U.S. dollar, promoting trade in national currencies with partner states, particularly China and India. This strategy aims to create a parallel financial system independent of Western infrastructure (JPMorgan Chase & Co., 2025; Gis Reports Online, 2025).

Import substitution – The Russian government encouraged the development of domestic industry to compensate for the lack of Western products. However, success has been limited, as many advanced technologies cannot be easily replicated in Russia (Chatham House, 2025).

Pivot to the East – Moscow accelerated economic and political relations with Asian and Eastern states, strengthening cooperation with Iran and North Korea. This orientation was not only an economic necessity but also a geopolitical strategy to create a common front against the West (Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 2025a; CSIS, 2025b).

External military support – In the military sphere, sanctions affected Russia's capacity to produce modern weaponry. In this context, Iran and North Korea became essential suppliers of drones, ammunition, and other equipment, deepening bilateral relations between these states (Chatham House, 2025; CSIS, 2025b).

3. Russia and the Core of the Anti-Western Bloc: Strategic Cooperation with Iran and North Korea

As Western sanctions intensified, Russia was pushed toward an informal alliance with states that challenge the liberal international order. This alliance, referred to as the

"anti-Western bloc," does not have a formal institutional structure but is based on converging interests and a shared discourse against Western hegemony (Chatham House, 2025).

Russia, Iran, and North Korea constitute the core of this bloc, united by opposition to NATO expansion and Western influence, authoritarian regimes led by charismatic leaders, shared experience with international sanctions, and the desire to create alternative trade and financing routes outside the Western system (CSIS, 2025; Lucchese, 2023).

Russia plays a central role due to its energy resources, military capabilities, and position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. The invasion of Ukraine has reinforced Moscow's status as a declared adversary of the West, forcing a redefinition of its foreign policy (Pew Research Center, 2024).

Putin promotes the idea of an anti-Western "Global South," using forums such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to support a multipolar agenda. Sanctions have provided a narrative that the liberal international order is discriminatory and unfair (Gis Reports Online, 2025).

Iran's experience in managing sanctions became valuable for Russia after 2022, facilitating the circumvention of EU and U.S. restrictions. Russian-Iranian cooperation spans military, economic, and diplomatic spheres, including the provision of Iranian drones for attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure and Russian support for Iran's nuclear program and air defense modernization. This interdependent relationship allows both states to withstand Western pressure (CSIS, 2025).

North Korea supplies conventional ammunition and weapons for the war in Ukraine, and Pyongyang symbolizes resistance to Western hegemony, demonstrating political survival despite international isolation. Kim Jong-un's visits to Russia and the diplomatic support provided to Moscow at the UN underscore the consolidation of the alliance and its relevance to global security (Amnesty International, 2024).

The invasion of Ukraine and the stringent sanctions imposed by the West compelled the Russian Federation to seek new strategic partnerships. Moscow turned to states that are themselves in conflict with the West and have experience avoiding international isolation (Chatham House, 2025). In this context, Iran and North Korea emerged as essential allies, providing Russia with material support, diplomatic legitimacy, trade alternatives, and access to military resources (CSIS, 2025).

Relations with these states are not a recent development but are grounded in a consolidated historical and geopolitical foundation. Nevertheless, the war in Ukraine has accelerated cooperation in an unprecedented manner. Both Iran and North Korea have become key elements in Russia's efforts to counter the effects of Western sanctions and promote a multipolar world order that challenges U.S. hegemony (Lucchese, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2024).

3.1. Russia and Iran: A Strategic Alliance Facing International Isolation

The relations between Russia and Iran have historically been complex, oscillating between cooperation and mutual suspicion. After 2022, however, the geopolitical context transformed their relationship into a deep strategic partnership based on shared objectives. Both states face economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation, aim to limit U.S. influence in their regions, and seek to establish alternative trade and security networks (Chatham House, 2025). A central element of this cooperation is the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a project designed to connect

Russia to the Indian Ocean through Iran and India, reducing Moscow's dependence on Western-controlled maritime routes (Gis Reports Online, 2025).

In terms of military cooperation, a key aspect of the Russia–Iran rapprochement, the relationship intensified starting in summer 2022, when Russia began deploying Iranian Shahed-136 and Mohajer-6 drones in Ukraine. These drones proved effective and relatively inexpensive, allowing Russia to compensate for the lack of Western components and target Ukraine's energy and logistics infrastructure. In return, Moscow provided Iran with advanced technology to modernize air defense systems and develop its space program, reinforcing interdependence between the two states (CSIS, 2025).

This collaboration has raised concerns among Middle Eastern countries, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia, which perceive the Moscow–Tehran alliance as a direct threat to regional security (Amnesty International, 2024).

Economically, Iran has become a vital hub for Russian trade, providing access to Persian Gulf ports and facilitating commercial exchanges with Asian countries. The INSTC project offers Moscow a strategic export route, particularly after losing access to European ports. The energy companies of both countries have begun collaborating in gas field exploitation and oil production, creating a deep economic interdependence (Pew Research Center, 2024).

Evaluating the partnership between the two states through these lenses, a SWOT analysis can be applied to highlight strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, providing a structured framework for understanding the strategic value and limitations of the Russia–Iran alliance.

Tab.1. SWOT analysis for the Russia–Iran partnership

Strengths	**Weaknesses**
- Strategic and long-term alliance based on converging interests. - Mutual experience in managing Western sanctions. - Strong military cooperation (e.g., drones, air defense technology). - Economic interdependence, including energy and trade projects (INSTC corridor, gas and oil collaboration). - Enhances Russia's access to alternative trade routes and ports.	- Risk of involvement in regional conflicts (Middle East tensions). - Dependence on Iran for specific military technologies. - Potential exposure to secondary sanctions by Western states. - Coordination challenges due to differences in political priorities and internal dynamics.
Opportunities	**Threats**
-Development of alternative trade and finance networks independent of the West. - Strengthening multipolarity and reducing reliance on Western infrastructure. - Expansion of joint military-industrial projects. - Diplomatic leverage in international forums (BRICS, SCO).	-Escalation of tensions with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other regional actors. - Western countermeasures could target joint projects. - Potential misalignment of strategic goals between Moscow and Tehran. - Volatility in global energy markets affecting joint economic ventures.

Thus, the Russia–Iran partnership emerges as a long-term strategic alliance, based on converging interests and the necessity of survival in the face of Western

pressure. The success of this relationship, however, depends on the ability of both states to avoid direct involvement in regional conflicts and to maintain geopolitical coordination in an increasingly multipolar world.

3.2. Russia and North Korea – a Pragmatic and Military Partnership

Unlike the relationship with Iran, the partnership between Russia and North Korea is predominantly pragmatic. North Korea is one of the most isolated countries in the world, under a strict regime of international sanctions due to its nuclear program. This situation has led Pyongyang to seek alliances that provide diplomatic protection and access to resources. At the same time, the war in Ukraine has offered Russia a crucial supplier of ammunition and armaments, essential for sustaining the front (CSIS, 2025). Military cooperation between the two states forms the core of their bilateral relationship. The North Korean defense industry, although modest technologically, is specialized in mass production, allowing the rapid provision of shells, rockets, and other conventional equipment needed by the Russian army. In return, Moscow provides Pyongyang with technological support for its ballistic and space programs — an exchange that undermines the international non-proliferation regime and strains relations with the United States and its allies (Reuters, 2024).

Diplomatically, the partnership gained significant visibility with the visit of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to Russia in September 2023. His meeting with Vladimir Putin at the Vostochny Cosmodrome sent a clear signal to the international community: both states are willing to defy sanctions and Western pressures (BBC, 2023). Within the UN Security Council, Russia used its veto power to block the adoption of new resolutions against North Korea, consolidating bilateral political support (Chatham House, 2024).

A SWOT analysis was also conducted in this case to highlight the interests between the two states.

Tab.2. SWOT analyses Russia – North Korea relationship

Strengths	**Weaknesses**
-Russia gains rapid access to munitions and conventional equipment necessary for the war in Ukraine. - North Korea provides diplomatic support and limited legitimacy, especially in international forums. - Possibility of technological exchange (support for North Korea's ballistic and space programs). - The relationship is pragmatic and adaptable to Russia's immediate needs.	-North Korea cannot support long-term projects or major investments. - Pyongyang's industrial and technological capacity is limited. - The relationship depends on specific conflict contexts (war in Ukraine). - Potential reputational risk for Russia in the international community.
Opportunities	**Threats**
-Consolidation of an anti-Western front through pragmatic partnerships. - Possibility to discreetly expand military and technological cooperation.	-Dependence on a highly isolated and sanctioned state with potential internal instability. - Potential conflict between international sanctions and the need for military support.

- Creation of alternative channels for supplying armaments and strategic resources.	- Tensions with major states (USA, Japan, South Korea) that may respond to this cooperation. - Vulnerability to detection and blocking of arms shipments through external sanctions.

3.3. Comparing the Two Partnerships

Although Russia cooperates with both Iran and North Korea, the nature of these relationships differs fundamentally. Iran constitutes a long-term strategic partner, capable of contributing to the development of complex projects in the energy, trade, and military sectors, designed to reduce Moscow's dependence on Western infrastructure and strengthen its global position (Katz, 2023). In contrast, North Korea plays a predominantly tactical and limited role, providing Russia with ammunition, conventional equipment, and diplomatic support at a critical moment in the Ukraine conflict, without possessing the resources necessary to sustain a long-term partnership (CSIS, 2025; Reuters, 2024).

Thus, cooperation with Iran offers Russia strategic stability and economic prospects, while the relationship with North Korea represents a temporary solution dictated by wartime needs. Overall, these two partnerships illustrate the Kremlin's pragmatic approach in the face of international isolation: combining long-term alliances with opportunistic ones to counter Western pressure and maintain great power status (BBC, 2023).

Together, these relationships contribute to consolidating the anti-Western bloc, providing Russia with vital alternatives for political, military, and economic support. This combination of strategic and tactical alliances allows Moscow to navigate a fragmented international system, continuing to promote a multipolar order and a position as a relevant global actor, despite sanctions and diplomatic isolation (Chatham House, 2024).

4. The Impact of Sanctions on the World Order

Western sanctions against Russia were initially designed as instruments of coercion, aimed at limiting Moscow's ability to continue its aggression against Ukraine. However, their effects have gone beyond the immediate goal, generating profound consequences for the global balance of power. Instead of completely isolating Russia, the sanctions have accelerated the fragmentation of the international order and stimulated the emergence of alternative alliances, consolidating opposition to Western hegemony (Allison, 2023; Chatham House, 2024).

In the post-Cold War period, the international order was dominated by a unipolar system, in which the United States and its allies dictated the rules of global political and economic engagement. Institutions such as the UN, IMF, World Bank, and NATO were pillars of this order, based on the principles of liberal democracy, market economies, and respect for human rights (Ikenberry, 2018). The invasion of Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia have highlighted the limits of the West's ability to control geopolitical dynamics. Numerous states in the "Global South" have refused to join the sanctions regime, preferring neutrality or economic cooperation with Moscow. Platforms such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization have emerged as alternatives to the US-dominated system (Lissovolik, 2023).

Russia has exploited this context to promote an anti-Western narrative, presenting sanctions as evidence of the discriminatory nature of the liberal order. This

narrative has resonated among states marginalized by the current system, fueling the idea of a multipolar order based on mutual respect and national sovereignty.

Although the sanctions aimed to isolate Russia, they have had the opposite effect: they have encouraged closer ties between Moscow and other states in conflict with the West, such as Iran and North Korea. This has created an informal anti-Western bloc, lacking formal institutionalization but reinforced by common interests—resisting sanctions, mutual support, and developing alternative trade routes. The military component is the most visible: Iran provides drones and military technology, while North Korea delivers ammunition and conventional weapons. Meanwhile, China supports Russia indirectly through economic cooperation and the promotion of a parallel financial system based on the yuan (CSIS, 2025). Alliances such as BRICS are transforming into platforms for coordinating non-Western economic policies, amplifying the global geopolitical reconfiguration.

China has adopted a strategic balancing position: it has neither condemned the Russian invasion nor provided military support, preferring to intensify economic cooperation (Brookings, 2023). Beijing has become Russia's main trading partner, with exchanges exceeding $200 billion in 2023, and payments in yuan have reduced Moscow's dependence on the dollar and euro. Simultaneously, China promotes dedollarization and the expansion of the yuan in international transactions (PBOC, 2024), supporting a multipolar order and consolidating its role as a leader within BRICS and the SCO. However, China avoids forming an explicit anti-Western alliance, opting instead for a gradual strategy of global power reconfiguration (Allison, 2023).

An unexpected effect of the sanctions has been the acceleration of the multipolarization of the international system. Russia has demonstrated that total isolation is impossible in a globalized world, and sanctioned states have created parallel commercial and financial networks, such as the North–South Transport Corridor linking Russia, Iran, and India (WTO, 2024). Increasingly, transactions between Russia, China, India, and other states are conducted in local currencies, reducing the influence of the dollar and limiting the effectiveness of sanctions as a foreign policy tool (IMF, 2024).

Although the sanctions have severely affected the Russian economy and restricted Moscow's access to technological resources, the long-term geopolitical effects are ambivalent. On one hand, Russia becomes more dependent on non-Western partners, which may create internal vulnerabilities; on the other hand, these relationships strengthen an alternative global system, reducing the effectiveness of future sanctions. There is also a risk of expanding the anti-Western bloc to states in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, which could transform the world into a bipolar or multipolar system, diminish traditional international institutions, and make geopolitical conflicts more difficult to manage (Carnegie, 2024).

Conclusions

The analysis highlights that Western sanctions against Russia, while effective in the short term in limiting Moscow's economic and military resources, have produced unintended effects with a profound impact on the global order. Rather than isolating Russia, the sanctions have strengthened its relationships with states such as Iran and North Korea, laying the groundwork for the formation of an anti-Western bloc. The relationship between Russia and Iran emerges as a long-term strategic alliance, based on military, economic, and diplomatic cooperation, enabling the development of alternative trade routes, access to energy and technological resources, and the consolidation of

diplomatic legitimacy on the international stage. In contrast, the partnership with North Korea is primarily pragmatic and limited, providing Moscow with vital military resources and diplomatic support at a critical moment, but lacking the potential to sustain long-term strategic objectives. Together, these two relationships allow Russia to withstand Western pressures and promote an alternative narrative to the liberal global order.

In the long term, sanctions risk accelerating the process of multipolarization, prompting non-Western states to establish independent commercial and financial networks, conduct international transactions in local currencies, and develop alternative structures for economic and political cooperation. This trend may lead to the fragmentation of the international system and the emergence of alternative centers of power, with unpredictable effects on global stability.

The study demonstrates that sanctions, although designed as tools of deterrence and coercion, can have complex strategic consequences, reshaping the global balance of power. In an increasingly interdependent world, the complete isolation of a major actor such as Russia becomes impossible, and Western policies must be calibrated to account for these geopolitical realities and the capacity of sanctioned states to build alternative alliances and systems independent of Western influence.

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MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY AS A PROMOTER OF DEMOCRACY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE: CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

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Abstract. *Multilateral diplomacy conducted through intergovernmental organizations, forums, and international structures based on treaties and international law, functions as a mechanism for promoting universal values, enhancing democratic culture, and facilitating progress in socio-economic development, while also supporting the implementation of democratic reforms aimed to align national development policies with international standards.*

The present article explores prominent scholarly works in the field, primarily addressing the conceptualizations and explanations of the evolution, forms, and functions of multilateral diplomacy. In this context, it underlines the role of international organizations in promoting sustainability, democratic principles, political culture, and the impact of external assistance on democratic development policies and good governance. Drawing on the frameworks of the UN system and the European Union, the authors highlight the normative and regulatory dimensions related to regional strategies and the global agenda for development and democracy promotion.

Keywords: *multilateral diplomacy, international organizations, democratic values, good governance, democracy promotion, external assistance*

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, diplomacy in the context of world politics can be characterized in two ways. Firstly, diplomacy has become actually global, transcending the East-West ideological divisions that previously excluded many states from classical diplomatic relations during the Cold War. In that period, developing countries garnered the attention of major powers only as they could be aligned with one of them, while issues such as poverty and development were effectively sidelined from the diplomatic agenda. However, following the end of the Cold War, the concerns of

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development diplomacy have gained significant prominence within the broader framework of multilateral diplomacy.

Secondly, contemporary diplomacy is marked by its complexity and fragmentation. The analytical categories employed in research on multilateral diplomacy refers to the emergence of multiple actors engaged in complex, multilateral processes that often intersect with bilateral dimension. In essence, multilateral diplomacy now addresses a broader and more diverse agenda than ever before. Moreover, modern multilateral diplomacy demands the strengthening of the capacities of all stakeholders involved in monitoring and evaluating outcomes. This necessity stems not only from the increasing complexity and diversity of multilateral negotiations, encompassing a wide array of issues, but also from transformative shifts in the interconnectedness and interdependence of societies in today's international landscape, redefining diplomacy both as a process and a tool.

A comprehensive analysis of democratic processes at global and regional levels, as well as democratic reforms of states, cannot overlook the dimension of multilateralism. Multilateral cooperation and partnerships among international organizations are grounded in a shared commitment to a coherent approach that aligns domestic policies with the integration and support of democratic values in developing countries. Thus, building on the premise that democracy represents a global aspiration and that multilateral diplomacy functions as a mechanism for advancing democratic reforms and achieving development objectives, this study examines the conceptual and methodological perspectives regarding multilateral diplomacy as a promoter of democracy and good governance.

Conceptual framework

The concept of multilateral diplomacy, while emerging predominantly in the latter half of the 20th century and early 21st century, has historical roots that should not be overlooked. Certain foundational elements and forms of multilateral diplomacy can be traced back to antiquity, evolving alongside the progressively global character of international relations. Studies in political thought emphasize that the Amphictyonic Council served as an early mechanism for mediating conflicts among Greek city-states. Scholars note that efforts to address political, territorial, and economic conflicts, which have challenged European nations since antiquity, significantly contributed to the development of the ideal of European unity. The Peace of Westphalia is regarded as one of the earliest European diplomatic assemblies to establish the principles of political balance and paved the way for a new international order based on respect for state sovereignty. Following the Westphalian system, the emerging multilateral diplomacy gradually developed through international conferences convened in the aftermath of wars.

The principle of balance has always been interpreted in both a dynamic sense, wherein restoring a disrupted balance of power necessitated the convening of multilateral diplomatic forums aimed at negotiating means of achieving equilibrium, and a static dimension, wherein the focus shifts to the maintenance of balance. The latter typically held a military-political character. Addressing an existing or potential threat from a state or group of states was a direct task of various forms of multilateral diplomacy. The Yalta-Potsdam system led to the creation of the United Nations, recognized as an achievement in global inter-state relations and an effective mechanism for managing international relations. As the primary and universal mechanism of modern multilateral diplomacy,

UN operates alongside other international organizations, which, in close alignment with its founding principles, facilitate multilateral meetings, global and regional conferences, and other collective diplomatic events today.

The distinction between bilateral and multilateral diplomacy emerged with the establishment of the United Nations and its first decade. The term "multilateral diplomacy" is often defined in contrast to bilateral diplomacy, drawing an analogy between the two. Scholars highlight two key aspects of multilateral diplomacy. First, it involves actions carried out by multiple participants or actors within conferences, negotiations, or multilateral forums and structures. Second, it refers to a state's efforts to advance its interests within international organizations, conferences, and multilateral negotiations, a dimension often referred to as a state's multilateral diplomacy.

The emergence of new and influential actors on the international stage - international organizations - has intensified the phenomenon of interconnectedness and interdependence across various domains. I.M. Anghel et al., argue that international collaboration aimed at the fair and equitable resolution of problems remains an imperative without alternative. The authors explore the role of contemporary diplomatic relations as part of a state's broader foreign policy framework. They emphasize that, given the expansion of multilateral diplomacy through international conferences and organizations, no state can afford to ignore multilateral forums, where vital decisions affecting their own interests are made. Similarly, no state can afford to remain outside the United Nations or neglect collaboration with at least one of its specialized institutions. States that act otherwise isolate themselves, as cannot function outside the international community (Anghel et al, 2015).

M. Hardy in *Modern Diplomatic Law* referred to "a new diplomacy" that became multilateral in form and collective in aspirations. This type of diplomacy is based on a series of agreements that confer a largely independent status to the international organization (Hardy, 1986). According to V. Israelian, multilateral diplomacy involves the collaborative examination of an international issue of common interest by multiple states, aiming to find a mutually acceptable solution through joint efforts (Israelian,1990). In the *Dictionary of Diplomacy*, authors G.R. Berridge and A. James define multilateral diplomacy as diplomacy conducted through conferences, emphasizing interstate cooperation and distinguishing it from bilateral diplomacy. (Berridge and James, 2003). N. Scott argues that multilateral diplomacy requires the full independence of states and a diversity of opinions as essential conditions (Scott, 2001). Similarly, V. Popov notes that modern diplomacy is often characterized by conference or multilateral diplomacy, emphasizing the need for the participation of most or all states in addressing global challenges (Popov, 2010).

The international conferences are traditional framework for multilateral diplomacy, facilitating consensus-building, peaceful resolution of external relations between subjects of international law, serving as a source of legitimacy. The conferences' documents can be treaties, declarations, resolutions, recommendations, etc. In this regard, the specific role of multilateral diplomacy is to represent the international community, bring competing issues to discussions, and engage in international political processes. The dissemination of knowledge, early warning of global issues, and monitoring are interconnected elements of the international agenda, stemming from the functions of multilateral diplomacy. These functions include informing public opinion, influencing policies at both the global and local levels, and integrating social and economic strategies across international and local spheres. It is important to note that declarations and action

plans adopted at multilateral conferences are more projections than practical programs with immediate and tangible applications. However, their recommendations have a significant impact, contributing to the adaptation of priorities, the reformulation of policies, and the establishment of departments and specialized structures within states entities and international organizations.

As the international development agenda has expanded, diplomacy has evolved to meet the need for alignment with modern realities, introducing new forms of coordinated responses and enabling the participation of emerging actors. These conditions led alongside the diversification of alternative concepts, to the multiplication of means of action. In the specialized literature, the term "multilateral diplomacy" is the broadest concept used to explain diplomatic practice within the multilateral system. In this context, it is important to note that terms like parliamentary diplomacy, collective diplomacy, summit diplomacy, and regional diplomacy are commonly used to define multilateral diplomacy. Similarly, Mario Damen, in his detailed analysis *Multilateralism and Democracy: A European Parliament Perspective*, points out that that together, all types of multilateral meetings and cooperation formats are currently referred to as multilateralism (Damen, 2022).

Multilateralism is generally considered to include certain qualitative elements or principles that shape the character of an agreement or institution. These principles relate to an indivisibility of interests among participants, a commitment to diffuse reciprocity, and a dispute resolution system designed to impose a certain mode of behavior (Scott, 2015). In other words, participating countries will act as a group with common interests, prepared to relinquish own advantages in pursuit of compromises that will be later enforced.

According to R. Cox (1992) and O. Fernández (2013), the evolution of the historical structure of international society could be characterized by *coexistence, cooperation, and solidarity*. Therefore, the evolution of multilateral diplomacy must be understood in relation to the transformations of international society, the structure of power, the nature of the State, the relationship between state and society, and the prevailing values. All formats the multilateral diplomacy has adopted constitute a distinct type of international society, with each phase characterized by the accumulation of a successive layer of rules.

Literature Review

Multilateral diplomacy functions as an essential mechanism for promoting effective collaboration. Over time, it has evolved as a fundamental organizing principle of the global order, grounded in the core idea of multilateralism and driven by the rising demand for enhanced cooperation in contemporary international relations. In their studies, authors J. Kaufmann (1996), P. Muldoon (2005), P. Kerr and G. Wiseman (2012), P. Sharp (2019) argue that modern diplomacy is defined by its adaptability, diversity, and its evolving role in addressing the complexities of the 21st century. Factors such as interdependence, globalization, regionalization, use of force, and potential shifts in global power dynamics underscore the necessity of multilateral diplomacy, positioning it as the most effective means of resolving disputes between political entities, whether state or non-state actors. According to James Der Derian (1991), the continuous evolution of diplomatic practices challenges the concept that diplomacy has reached or is close to achieving its ideal form.

Scholars R.O. Keohane (1990), R. Cox (1992), J.G. Ruggie (1993), R. Cohen (1999), J.A. Caporaso (2009), who conceptualized the multilateralism, assert there seems little doubt that multilateral norms and institutions have helped to stabilizing the most significant geopolitical shift of the postwar era, and perhaps of the entire twentieth century, in terms of international consequences. Indeed, these norms and institutions appear to play a significant role in the management of a broad array of regional and global changes in the world system today.

International factors have, until recently, been little incorporated into statistical models evaluating the prospects for democratization. These factors have generally been treated as secondary or auxiliary variables rather than as central components of research on democracy promotion. Nonetheless, as Geddes (2013:12) observes, many scholars suggest that international forces, such as the dissemination of democratic values and pressures from international institutions, may have a much more substantive impact on democratic transitions than has been identified so far, especially when it comes to the democratization processes that have occurred since the 1980s.

The analysis of the role of international institutions in democratization processes of states raises a fundamental question in the theoretical discourse on international relations: to what extent do these institutions shape state behavior on issues in the international agenda? This remains a central debate in the theoretical development of international relations. For instance, Stephen Krasner provides a definition of international regimes and explores the theoretical perspectives that examine their influence in international politics. He conceptualizes regimes as sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations align within a specific domain of international relations. In *Democracy-Enhancing Multilateralism*, R.O. Keohane et al. (2009), argue that participation in multilateral institutions—broadly defined to include international organizations, regimes, and networks governed by formal international agreements—can improve the quality of domestic democracy.

Scholars studying the impact of international organizations (Ios) on domestic democratization processes highlight that states undergoing democratic transitions have a strong incentive to join IOs. Membership in these organizations serves as a credible signal to both domestic and international audiences, demonstrating the commitment to political reform (Mansfield, Pevehouse, 2006:162). Empirical evidence suggests that democratizing states are more likely to join IOs than other countries and tend to affiliate with organizations predominantly composed of democracies, forming what the authors describe as "clubs of democracies." The argument that international institutions impact the processes of domestic democratization has also been expanded to other dimensions. Greenhill (2010) underline the capacity for democratic socialization associated with IOs, noting that they have “a surprisingly powerful influence” not only on democracy promotion, but on the diffusion of human rights norms.

In regional integration processes, supranational and intergovernmental international institutions have become key platforms for the exchange of knowledge, ideas, proposals, and policies that can influence decision-making within national states (Stone, 1999). Held (2004: 366-367) observed that the growing complexity of issues, coupled with increased interaction and interconnection between states and societies, has led to the expansion of the competencies of global and regional institutions, necessitating new international regulatory frameworks. According to Held, these frameworks involve multiple actors, diverse political processes, and various levels of coordination, with civil

society organizations engaging with local and national governments as well as international institutions.

The research of Whitehead (2020), Schmitter (2010), Burnell (2008) emphasize the pivotal role of multilateral diplomacy in advancing good governance as a key attribute of democracy, highlighting its correlation with global solidarity and partnership. The catalytic role of multilateral diplomacy is intrinsically linked to the essence of universal values, which good governance seeks to embody at both national and global levels.

In the Republic of Moldova, scholars extensively studied multilateral diplomacy, focusing on aspects such as socio-political transformations in the post-communist space influenced by global, regional, and local factors (Saca, Rusnac, 2017); role of international dimensions on the country democratic transition (Vasilescu, Grosu, 2009) and its socio-political modernization within a broader framework of European integration (Modernizarea social-politică a Republicii Moldova în contextul extinderii procesului integraționist european, 2019). Studies underline the active participation of the Republic of Moldova in multilateral cooperation through membership in international governmental organizations, reflecting a wide range of objectives, including its recognition as an independent state and subject of international law, as well as fostering the development of specific sectors aligned with the structural and functional characteristics of the institutions to which it belongs (Juc, Cojocaru, 2015).

Theoretical and methodological perspectives

The functionalist theory of integration, associated with K. Deutsch and D. Mitrany (Pfaltzgraff, 2020; Navari, 1995), emphasizes the cooperation according to technical needs of complex societies over political considerations. This perspective supports the creation of international organizations focused on scientific, humanitarian, social, and economic issues, among others. Mitrany characterizes this approach as pragmatic functionalism, emphasizing its role on encouraging the emergence of numerous functionally specialized international organizations, such as the specialized agencies of the United Nations. The neofunctionalist theory asserts that economic integration serves as a catalyst for political integration. E. Haas (2004) conducted the first systematic analysis of based on the logic underpinning regional integration. The neofunctionalist approach played a dominant role in the creation of the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM).

The contemporary evolution of functionalism and neofunctionalism is represented by neoliberal institutionalism. The theory of complex interdependence, initially formulated by R. Keohane and J. Nye (2012), is built on several key arguments: (a) the increase in interdependence generates cooperation at global and regional levels, thereby strengthening international institutions; (b) international organizations play a crucial role by exerting direct or indirect influence on state policies and shaping how states define their interests; (c) as multilateral platforms, they facilitate information sharing, promote transparency, monitor and evaluate converging expectations, and enhance the efficiency of strategies.

The theory of democratic peace, a significant strand of liberal thought that emerged in the 1990s and continues to influence contemporary policies, emphasizes the importance of global democratization. Adopted by Western powers and international organizations, the approach highlights principles such as open diplomacy, the promotion of peace through the expansion of democratic institutions, adherence to the rule of law,

and the belief that an international system of democratic states can eliminate conflict and war.

J. Wolff and I. Wurm (2011) argue that the concept of “antinomies” related to democratic peace and contextual causal mechanisms provides compelling reasons for applying democratic peace studies to investigate the potential motives behind democracy promotion. M.G. Hermann and C.W. Kegley Jr. (1995) highlight that the democratic peace hypothesis is often regarded in the literature as the closest approximation to an "iron law" in international relations theory. However, Schraeder (2002) notes that this hypothesis holds primarily in the case of coercive forms of intervention. When it comes to direct military intervention by one democracy against another, the empirical robustness of the hypothesis diminishes as one moves down the spectrum of tools available to democratic states.

Academic research has increasingly aligned with the expansion of foreign and development policies explicitly aimed at the international promotion and protection of democratic regimes. However, a largely underexplored area remains the theoretical understanding of ‘democracy promotion’ as both a goal and a strategy within democratic foreign policies. In other words, there is a need to situate empirical research on democracy promotion within theoretical frameworks of international relations. Hazel Smith (2000: 1) argues that "international democratic theory," in terms of explaining and understanding the interrelationship between democracy, democratization, and the international system, remains absent. More specifically, Burnell and Calvert (2005: 436) contend that "a closely informed analysis of what could be called the ‘high politics’ of international democracy promotion seems to have lagged behind," referencing, among other things, the "role of democracy promotion in the foreign-policy processes of Western governments" (Youngs, 2006: 8–9).

Despite this gap, there have been explicit efforts to theorize democracy promotion. Studies addressing democracy promotion as one of several international dimensions of democratization often focus on ‘recipient’ countries, specifically examining the impact of democracy-promotion policies. These studies draw on theories of democratic transition and consolidation to conceptualize the various causal mechanisms through which external actors influence domestic political change. Scholars in international relations who have systematically analyzed democracy promotion tend to share this emphasis on impact and causal mechanisms. As such, within the discipline of international relations, democracy promotion is predominantly analyzed through the paradigms of ‘compliance’ and ‘international socialization’ (Cowles et al., 2001; Schimmelfennig et al., 2006). Again, theoretical attention is given to the mechanisms by which democracy-promotion policies affect domestic political change. Studies comparing democracy-promotion strategies rely on an ‘analytical framework’ that centers entirely on these mechanisms—the ‘logics,’ ‘targets,’ and ‘pathways’ of influence—rather than offering a theoretical explanation that might predict, explain, or help understand the variances and commonalities of strategies across time and place. Research on the actors involved in external democracy promotion policies largely remains descriptive, and even when causal claims are made, they are often presented without a clear theoretical framework.

Based on democratization theories, external assistance can contribute to democratization processes indirectly through development aid aimed at improving socio-economic conditions. In contrast, targeted democracy assistance instruments are designed to empower domestic actors such as civil society and democratic institutions.

Additionally, democracy assistance can facilitate democratic reforms by easing the financial constraints faced by recipients and providing them with the necessary tools and resources to implement democratic reforms (Gafuri, 2022). It is this direct investment mechanism that makes democracy assistance likely to impact democratic institutions. The effectiveness of democracy assistance may be further increased when donors combine it with additional tools. As a key donor, the European Union utilizes a range of mechanisms to strengthen democracy in recipient countries.

Democracy lies at the core of the European Union's internal and external policies. Although the EU's democracy promotion is a multifaceted approach, scholars typically describe it through models of leverage, linkage, and governance. In practice, the EU not only provides financial aid but also engages extensively through parallel projects, assistance packages, monitoring bodies, and conditionality measures, all designed to incentivize recipient countries to pursue democratic reforms. The EU employs a broad spectrum of instruments and political conditionality mechanisms, and it has one of the largest networks of foreign delegation offices among Western donors (Lavenex S., Schimmelfennig F. 2011). Based on the literature review, key mechanisms of multilateral diplomacy, such as the political conditionality and the offering of incentives, are essential in driving the success of democracy assistance-led reforms.

This framework operates on the assumption of "the logic of consequences," which posits that states are rational actors that assess costs and benefits in their bilateral interactions. Empirical evidence suggests that when international organizations such as the EU, the World Bank, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the Council of Europe offer incentives—such as membership in organizations, trade agreements, closer institutional ties, economic cooperation, military protection, and financial aid—recipient states are more inclined to implement democratic reforms (Dimitrova A., Pridham G. 2004). These donors differ in their approaches, strategies, incentives and thus their effectiveness in encouraging democracy abroad. The European Union differs from other donors through its more vigorous use of the accession conditionality instrument, the implementation of robust gatekeeping mechanisms, and the provision of substantial tangible incentives.

Multilateral diplomacy: support for democracy and good governance

In academic literature, the investigated subject is framed in the hypotheses on general models of democracy promotion. Analysis of the interaction between how decision-makers define national interest and their perceptions of a "democratic environment" has highlighted key considerations as critical "starting points" in the democratic transitions of developing countries. Prioritizing security interests and ensuring both domestic and international stability has fostered an approach that emphasizes political liberalization. This perspective includes promoting regularized political processes, such as free and fair elections, and fostering the development of robust state institutions, particularly in the legislative and judicial sectors. An emphasis on economic interests, including the pursuit of national economic growth and a thriving global economic system, has advanced a model that aligns democratic promotion with economic liberalization. Advocates of this approach argue that fostering democracy should prioritize good governance, which inherently supports political liberalization. Furthermore, an ideological focus on humanitarian concerns, such as the protection of human rights, has inspired a democratization strategy centered on social liberalization. This approach has traditionally prioritized strengthening civil society while incorporating

social welfare initiatives aimed at mitigating socio-economic disparities, thereby positioning them as fundamental to democratic promotion.

A key component of democratization has become the active involvement of a broad range of intergovernmental organizations. The United Nations has progressively sought to codify democratic values and expand opportunities for democratic governance worldwide. Consequently, international law has gradually transformed in favor of recognizing democracy as a "right" that must be defended and promoted (Franck, 1992).

The discourse on good governance in international relations, as articulated by J. Rosenau, begins with the concept of "governance" and refers to the use of political authority and the exercise of control in relation to managing resources for economic and social development. The theorist directly links the concept to the context of the UN system, associating it with "order, stability, and monitoring" (Rosenau, 1995).

Generally, the notion of *good governance* is extensively analyzed in the literature, although, a comprehensive definition or delineation of its objectives that would constitute a universal acceptance is elusive. For example, early research and expert studies on development policies initially supported a narrow understanding, limited to the efficient functioning of the state, strictly associated with management, administrative performance, and the regulatory framework of the state, based on principles such as: effectiveness, predictability, transparency, accountability, combating corruption, or efficient financial management (Andrews, 2013); while in the field of democratization, many scholars and practitioners refer to a more expansive meaning (Robinson, Hout, 2015). Depending on the context and purpose, good governance involves respecting human rights, ensuring the rule of law, participation, partnership, legitimacy, access to knowledge, guaranteeing information and education, equity, sustainable development, and accountability. There is, however, significant consensus that the concept can be analyzed through three dimensions: technical, social, and political (Șaptefrați, 2015).

The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank were the first international organizations to incorporate the discourse on good governance within the framework of structural adjustment policies during the 1980s. Initially, the World Bank adhered to a relatively apolitical notion of the concept, as it was not tasked with exerting pressure for democratic reforms in the target countries for its cooperation programs, but rather aimed to improve public administration efficiency in "undemocratic circumstances" (Smouts, 1998). Gradually, the World Bank has attributed a more political dimension to the concept, emphasizing the improvement of policymaking processes and the protection of constitutionally enshrined rights. This shift has blurred the distinction between support for good governance and the promotion of democracy. Currently, the quality of governance is assessed using the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI), which are derived from a variety of sources to evaluate governance quality across six dimensions: voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence/terrorism, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption.

The legal instruments of the United Nations (the Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) serve as fundamental pillars for all international organizations committed to promoting democracy. At the same time, the UN has never sought to export or promote any specific national or regional model of democracy.

Given the major changes on the international stage and the aspirations of peoples for an international order based on the principles enshrined in the UN Charter, the organization has adopted several important documents defining peace, democracy, justice, the rule of law, pluralism, development, welfare, and solidarity. In 1996, through the position paper *An Agenda for Democratization*, UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali stated that Democratization is a process leading to a more open and participatory society; it requires a comprehensive approach that aims not only at organizing free and fair elections, but also at building a democratic political culture; it must aim to strike a balance between state institutions and civil society institutions. Within states, democratization must be supported by a process of democratization between the state and the entire international system. An essential role in establishing a coherent and comprehensive strategic approach to the United Nations' commitment to promoting democratic reforms was played by three guidance notes issued in 2008 and 2009: The United Nations Approach to Rule of Law Assistance, United Nations Assistance in Constitution-Making Processes, and Democracy.

According to the UN system, good governance refers to political and institutional processes and outcomes that ensure the achievement of development objectives. The true test of "good" governance lies in the extent to which it fulfills its promise regarding human rights: civil, cultural, economic, political, and social rights. At the 2012 "Rio+20" conference, based on the Millennium Development Goals, were decided at the global level the Sustainable Development Goals. Adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development offers a comprehensive framework for fostering peace and prosperity for both people and the planet, addressing present needs while ensuring sustainability for future generations. At the core of this agenda are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which constitute an urgent appeal for collective action by all countries - both developed and developing - through a global partnership. Along with natural resources, sustainable consumption and production now it includes justice, strong institutions; sustainable and inclusive economic growth; inclusive and equitable social development.

The United Nations has established a network of governance programs worldwide, particularly in developing countries. These programs are managed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which acts as the primary agency for supporting the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. While the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are globally adopted, they are customized to the specific context of each country with UN support (nationalized). The targets of the SDGs are aligned with national policy priorities and government reform agendas.

Moreover, important resolutions were adopted, including A/RES/54/36, Support for the efforts of governments to promote and consolidate new or restored democracies, through which the UN General Assembly recognizes the organization's significant role in providing adequate and coherent support to governments in their efforts to achieve development and democratization goals. Resolution A/HRC/RES/19/36, Human Rights, Democracy, and the Rule of Law, reaffirms the link between democracy and the rule of law and reiterates the intrinsic connection between promoting democracy and respecting human rights, the importance of social cohesion in democratization processes, and the involvement of subregional, regional, and international organizations in promoting the rule of law and building a democratic society.

In the European Union's view, democratic structures are seen as key components of good governance (Hackenesch, 2016). For many years, the trend was to suggest

through its foreign policy documents that good governance and democracy go hand in hand. Thus, in accordance with the concept of good governance influenced by development policy, the EU can support governance reforms by promoting transparent decision-making processes, fighting corruption, strengthening public financial management, reforms in public and administrative services; it supports reforms to strengthen governmental institutional capacities to improve administration. In line with the definition of the concept involving political aspects derived from democratization, the EU emphasizes a stronger normative dimension regarding the respect for human rights and democracy (Santiso, 2003). In this sense, the EU can support democratic reforms by promoting competitive democratic policies, political and civil rights, the rule of law, and both horizontal and vertical accountability.

The European Union, through Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union, stipulates that the EU's actions on the international stage are guided by the principles that have inspired its own creation, development, and expansion: the promotion of democracy and the rule of law, the protection of fundamental human rights and freedoms, and the respect for the principles of the UN Charter and international law.

The Neighborhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – Global Europe encompasses a thematic pillar focused on human rights and democracy, civil society organizations, stability and peace, as well as global challenges through programs with global reach. This financial instrument is structured around three main pillars. In addition to the aforementioned pillar, it includes a geographical pillar, which covers programs for countries in the European neighborhood (Eastern and Southern), Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and the Pacific, the Americas, and the Caribbean. These programs concentrate on areas of cooperation such as good governance, poverty eradication, migration, the environment and climate change, economic growth and employment, security and peace, among other cross-cutting issues. The rapid response pillar aims to align humanitarian efforts with development goals, enhance the resilience of countries affected by crises, or address priorities in foreign policy. NDICI – Global Europe streamlines the EU's external financing architecture by merging previous programs, including the Development Cooperation Instrument, the European Neighborhood Instrument, the Partnership Instrument, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, the European Development Fund, and the European Peace Instrument.

The Council of Europe promotes *democratic good governance* by supporting democratic reforms aimed at the judicial system and specialized anti-corruption institutions, gender equality, freedom and media pluralism, information security, prison and probation system reform, electoral system reform, education for human rights, and democratic citizenship. The evaluation criteria adopted by the Council of Europe are based on 12 principles: free and fair elections; responsiveness; effectiveness; openness and transparency; respect for the rule of law; ethical conduct; competence and capacity; sustainability; good financial management; human rights, cultural diversity, and social cohesion; and accountability.

Although levels of democracy cannot easily be compared between states and are complex to assess, there are ways to evaluate the quality of democracy in a state at a given time. The intergovernmental organization International IDEA, which works to support and strengthen democratic institutions and processes worldwide, has developed the "State of Democracy" evaluation framework. According to this framework, two fundamental principles of democracy are essential: 1) popular control over decisions and

decision-makers; 2) equal respect and voice among citizens in exercising that control. The realization of these two principles is possible through seven values: participation, authorization, representation, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, and solidarity. Additionally, it proposes the following explanations. Strengthening democracy refers to creating the conditions necessary for the implementation of democratic principles. To be effective, these efforts must be driven from within a country, though they can also be supported externally. Democracy does not develop in a vacuum: international relations and the actions of external actors can affect national and local realities, influencing the maturity of democratic institutions and society. Democratization is a long-term, essentially endless process aimed at strengthening democratic culture, institutional capacities, and implementing democratic reforms. At the same time, the international community uses the concept of democratization to describe actions that provide assistance and supporting countries moving toward a "dynamic state" of democracy.

In commonly accepted conceptualization, external assistance refers to the voluntary transfer of resources—such as goods, expertise (including technologies, methodologies, and techniques), as well as grants and loans—from a donor to a recipient country. This transfer is intended to support the recipient's socio-economic development, promote democracy, and strengthen the rule of law.

In the legislative context of the Republic of Moldova, external assistance is defined as "external financial and technical assistance received by the Republic of Moldova from international organizations and donor countries to address critical situations, support socio-economic development, and foster the democratization of society."

While the official term used is Official Development Assistance (ODA), the literature also employs terms like democracy assistance and assistance for democratic development. The delineation of terminology in development assistance remains a relevant subject of study. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which coordinates the aid policies of its member states for developing countries, addresses this issue with particular focus. Likewise, the UN, IMF, World Bank, EU, and other multilateral organizations are actively engaged in clarifying the conceptual framework of external development assistance.

Referring to the advantage of external assistance provided by multilateral donors, as compared to bilateral support, is that the funds pooled by multilateral organizations enable the implementation of large-scale programs and facilitate coordination among donors at both regional and global levels.

Conclusions

The concept of multilateral diplomacy remains central within international relations theory, yet it continues to be difficult to understand and relatively underexplored, due to its inherently multifaceted nature. As the international system has evolved, diplomacy has adapted by embracing new forms of coordinated action, facilitating the involvement of diverse actors and introducing new methods of engagement. A review of definitions highlights that multilateral diplomacy pertains to modern diplomatic practices, international negotiations, and multilateral cooperation frameworks. In contemporary understanding, the concept refers to diplomacy through conferences, international organizations, and multilateralism. Terms such as parliamentary diplomacy, collective diplomacy, summit diplomacy, and regional

diplomacy are used to describe different facets of multilateral diplomacy. According to international law doctrine, multilateral diplomacy encompasses diplomatic practices and methods applied by international organizations. The post-Cold War transformation of the international system significantly increased the role of international organizations in global politics, marking a pivotal moment in their recognition as primary actors in promoting democratic norms.

The concept of multilateral diplomacy as a promoter of democracy and good governance involves facilitating direct cooperation with emerging actors and states in regions where, under different circumstances, a country's diplomacy may have limited impact or be absent. It also entails coordinating initiatives based on thematic frameworks endorsed by the international community, such as good governance and sustainable development. Additionally, multilateral diplomacy expands the agenda to encompass dimensions that allow states to cultivate horizontal niches, such as democracy and democratization, reconstruction, and the responsibility to protect. Furthermore, it provides multilateral platforms for advancing initiatives at the global, regional, and local levels.

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III. CULTURE, IDENTITY AND ISSUES OF NATIONAL MINORITIES

Simona Camelia FER ⇔ *European Institutions Concerns for Fostering Moral Values through Education and Training*

Dorin-Mircea DOBRA ⇔ *An Analysis of the Autochthonist-Sovereigntist Political Language. Obsolescing Concepts and Twisting Ideals*

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EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS CONCERNS FOR FOSTERING MORAL VALUES THROUGH EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Simona Camelia FER*

Abstract. *Today's crisis of orientation and identity is a concern for citizens and for politicians as well, about how to implement moral education as a delicate mission to which family and then the institutionalized environments are called to share with supported efforts. The moral principles that guide a globalized Europe are deeply interconnected with its history, diversity and shared aspirations, these principles being shaped by the challenges and opportunities of globalization and the need for a cohesive yet pluralistic framework that accommodates varying cultural, social and economic dynamics. Europe has a strong commitment to protecting fundamental human rights, as enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights and other charters and this attitude emphasizes the inherent worth of every individual, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, gender or socio-economic status. Moral principles emphasize mutual respect, intercultural dialogue and the preservation of cultural heritage while fostering integration and social cohesion. Moreover, Europe's experience with conflict has fostered a strong moral commitment to peace building and international cooperation and the European Union, as a continental economic and political union involves in prioritizing diplomatic solutions, conflict prevention and partnerships that promote global and moral stability.*

Keywords: *moral values and principles, social values, cultural values, responsibility*

1. Introduction

Moral values have been considered as foundational to the fabric of society, building individuals' behavior, decision-making, but also broader social dynamics. Within the context of Europe, where diversity and unity coexist, the role of education and training in fostering these values has gained increasing attention. European institutions, such as the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Council of the European Union, and also others involved in this concern are at the forefront of efforts to cultivate a moral and ethical framework through educational initiatives and policies. Their attitude reflects not only the commitment to promoting democratic ideals, but also to fostering social cohesion across a diverse and complex continent.

This article explores the concerns and strategies of European institutions in promoting moral values through education and training, examining the effectiveness of these initiatives in addressing contemporary challenges and by focusing on most

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important policy documents, institutional actions and case studies, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these institutions approach the integration of moral education within the broader European educational landscape.

2. Methodological approach

In order to explore this complex issue, a qualitative research technique approach was employed, including a detailed content analysis of relevant policy documents, reports and frameworks issued by European institutions. Additionally, there were presented researchers'views in the field of moral education, conducted to gain insights into the practical implementation of these policies. Data from various European countries were analyzed to assess the impact of educational programs aimed at fostering moral values, and this allowed a holistic and empirical examination of the concerns and strategies of European institutions in this vital area. In order to ground the discussion on moral values in a robust conceptual framework, this article draws upon classical philosophical thought, particularly the works of **Plato, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant**, **Friedrich Nietzsche** and others, because these thinkers provide foundational perspectives on ethics, virtue, duty, autonomy and moral development, concepts that continue to influence contemporary educational philosophy.

These theoretical contributions were not used in isolation, but served as a **philosophical basis** against which the concerns and strategies of European institutions were analyzed. By juxtaposing classical ethical frameworks with contemporary policy discourse, this article seeks to illuminate both the continuities and tensions in the way moral values are fostered through education and training in the European context. The article also draws extensively on **official online documents and communications** published by the **European Commission** and the **European Parliament**, which serve as primary sources for understanding institutional perspectives and policy frameworks. Documents, such as resolutions, strategic plans, recommendations and policy briefings offer direct insight into the ways in which European institutions support and implement moral and civic values through education and training initiatives.

3. A review on moral virtues

Moral virtues refer to the character traits or qualities that enable individuals to act ethically and to contribute positively to the well-being of others and society. Rooted in both philosophical traditions and cultural norms, moral virtues have been considered fundamental to personal development and social harmony. A moral value is a principle or standard that guides people's behavior and decisions, shaping their understanding of right and wrong, good and bad and reflects what individuals or societies consider important for leading a virtuous life. Morality acts as the guiding principle for a functioning societyand without moral values, we would either live in a state of anarchy or a society where we are kept in line only by threats of punishment from a governing figure.

Some of such values can be defined as: honesty, respect, compassion, responsibility, fairness, integrity, kindness, generosity, tolerance, courage and among many others. They can vary across cultures and societies but often share universal themes that emphasize mutual respect and human well-being. Moral values come from different sources, including our own personal experiences, but all societies and cultures try to pass-on moral values from one generation to another through a range of institutions such as: family, religion, education and political institutions. Moral values indicate who we are,

differing from other types of values, such as social, cultural and organizational values. However, all different types of values overlap to help us develop a set of coherent beliefs that will characterize our actions, behaviors and approach to life (Podolsky O., 2008). Educational systems, mainly within European institutions, are increasingly tasked with integrating moral virtues into curricula, seeking to develop not only skilled individuals but also ethically aware and socially responsible citizens.

4. Thinkers and their contributions to the moral values integration

Important theoreticians throughout history have written about **moral values**, each from different philosophical, religious or cultural perspectives. One of them is Plato, who argued that moral values are objective and rooted in eternal forms or ideas, the form of the Good being the highest and most fundamental reality. Plato places the **form of the good** at the top of all forms, describing it as **the source of all other forms and of all knowledge and truth.** Just as the sun allows us to see physical things, the Form of the Good enables the **soul to see or understand moral truths** (Plato, 2002). Aristotle, in his turn, developed virtue ethics, believed moral values arise from cultivating virtues like courage, temperance to achieve eudaimonia or flourishing, happiness or living well. Eudaimonia is **not a passing emotion**, but a lifelong condition, a **state of being** that reflects a fully realized human life. Aristotle begins his major ethical work, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, by asking: *What is the highest good for humans? And* his answer is **"The good for man is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue in a complete life. Honour, pleasure, intellect and every virtue we do indeed choose for themselves (since we would choose each of them even if they had no good effects), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, on the assumption that through them we shall live a life of happiness; whereas happiness no one chooses for the sake of any of these nor indeed for the sake of anything else" (Aristotle, 2000).** Besides Plato's and Aristotle's philosophy I would also mention **St. Augustine** who saw moral values as grounded in the divine will of God stating that humans must align their will with God's eternal law. In the same way of religious perspective, **St. Thomas Aquinas** integrated Christian theology with Aristotelian ethics considering that moral values are part of the natural law, discoverable through reason. **The Islamic philosopher Al-Ghazali** wrote extensively on ethics within an Islamic framework, integrating reason with divine command.

The Enlightenment and Modern Philosophers such as Immanuel Kant argued that moral values are derived from reason and autonomy and he also introduced the *categorical imperative*, act only according to maxims that can be universalized. Kant characterized the *categorical imperative* as an objective, rationally necessary and unconditional principle that we must follow despite any natural desires we may have to the contrary. All specific moral requirements, according to Kant, are justified by this principle, which means that all immoral actions are irrational because they violate the *categorical imperative* (Kant, 2007). Other philosophers, such as Hobbes, Locke and Aquinas, had also argued that moral requirements are based on standards of rationality. However, these standards were either instrumental principles of rationality for satisfying one's desires, as in Hobbes, or external rational principles that are discoverable by reason, as in Locke and Aquinas (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2022).

In relation to the 19th and early 20th century, Friedrich Nietzsche critiqued traditional morality as life-denying and introduced the concept of *master-slave morality* and called for the creation of new values. Master morality is characteristic of the strong

and powerful, valuing traits like strength, nobility and courage, while slave morality emerges from the oppressed and weak, valuing traits like humility, compassion and obedience (Nietzsche, 2002). John Rawls and Alasdair MacIntyre are two influential philosophers who approached morality and moral values from distinct perspectives, with their ideas highlighting contemporary ethical thought. Argued for justice as fairness; moral values must be agreed upon behind a "veil of ignorance" to ensure impartiality. JOHN RAWLS, IN HIS BOOK *A Theory of Justice* (1971) focuses on creating a moral framework for a just society that must ensure fairness and equality for all citizens. He introduced the idea of the **original position** and the **veil of ignorance** as tools for determining the principles of justice. The **original position** is a hypothetical situation where individuals come together to create the basic rules of society, but they do so behind a **veil of ignorance**, unaware of their own personal characteristics such as wealth, gender, race or intelligence and this ensures that the principles chosen are fair because no one can design them to benefit themselves unfairly (Rawls, 1999).

MacIntyre argues that **modern moral philosophy**, mainly following the Enlightenment has led to a fragmented and incoherent understanding of ethics. He criticizes the idea that morality can be based solely on abstract, universal principles, such as those of Kant or Rawls, or utilitarian calculations. Morality, according to MacIntyre, is **grounded in the pursuit of human** virtues like courage, honesty and temperance. He also state that individuals grow in virtue by participating in a social community with a shared history, language, and practices. Moral values are learned through **dialogue** within these communities (MacIntyre, 2007).

The modern world offers human beings a lot of different contradictory moral values and orientations. This issue is particularly important for adolescents' moral development, which is the time when they determine their own values depending on their developing world outlook. This period of personal growth, which complexity is governed by emotional, cognitive and social perspectives, is crucial for moral development (Kohlberg L., 1982).

The development of moral values begins in early childhood, but the age at which a person can meaningfully discuss and reflect on moral values varies depending on cognitive development and life experiences. In this respect we may draw a general overview of age levels when moral values are gradually developed and acknowledged. So, at the ages of 2-7 years children begin to express a sense of right and wrong, largely based on rules and expectations set by caregivers. At this stage, their understanding of morality is largely influenced by rewards and punishments (pre-conventional morality, as described by Kohlberg's stages of moral development). They might say things like "It's not nice to hit" because they've learned that hitting leads to consequences. Kohlberg grouped these stages into three broad categories of moral reasoning, pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional, each level being associated with increasingly complex stages of moral development. He suggested that people move through these stages in a fixed order and that moral understanding is linked to cognitive development (McLeod S., 2024).

We have already mentioned the first stage, and we will further refer to the second one which is middle childhood (ages 7–13, the conventional stage) when children begin to understand fairness, justice, and empathy. They are better able to consider the perspectives of others and make judgments about fairness and rules, emerging moral reasoning, and they can also begin to have simple conversations about moral values, like honesty or kindness, often tied to concrete examples. The third age situated between 12-

18 years is named post-conventional and teenagers develop more abstract moral reasoning, beginning to think about ethical principles, societal norms and the concept of justice beyond personal experiences. In this period of their lives adolescents can engage in more nuanced discussions about moral dilemmas, conflicting values, and broader ethical issues. Adults have the capacity for reflective and critical thinking about morality, influenced by culture, education and personal experiences and moral values may become deeply integrated into their identity.

Developmental science is in the middle of a context revolution, evidenced in part by recent special issues centering how culture, ethnicity and race shape young people's lives and their developmental trajectories (Cooper S., 2022). In today's most countries, adolescents rarely reach adulthood acquering only one culture and this is because they increasingly have interactions with people from diverse cultures, either firsthand or indirectly through media. Although the flow of products, people and ideas across cultures is not new, the global scope and complexity of this flow is unprecedented historically (McKenzie & Jensen, 2024). Starting from the idea that man had planted in his being, since creation, the natural moral law, the propagation of moral values should be respected and applied in all aspects. Moral values such as decency, discretion, delicacy, tenderness are almost ridiculed, by replacing them with the cult of money, of the winner, of cynical individualism and aggression, and the evolution of evil, translated as subculture, violence and rudeness is perceived as a normal phenomenon, mainly among young people alienated from religion and faith (Pruteanu G., 2007). According to many experts in the field, the educational process that occurs during enrollment in student affairs graduate preparation programs should include more elements of spiritual development, and the development of such a proficiency should occur within these programs (Chickering, Dalton, Stamm, 2006). We should know from our own experiences that moral values play a crucial role in promoting social harmony, fostering trust and enabling individuals to coexist peacefully. Of course, moral values can evolve over time. As we gain more experiences or become exposed to new cultures, mentors and philosophies, our morality will evolve. Even cultures have evolving moralities, as each successive generation is impacted by a range of new factors that shape their belief systems.

EU institutions, while respecting the autonomy of member states, promote the integration of moral values into education by fostering cooperation, providing funding and encouraging dialogue on shared European principles.

5. European Union institutional initiatives for implementing moral values support

Several European institutions and organizations focus on integrating moral values into educational systems and these institutions play fundamental roles in shaping policies, providing guidelines and promoting ethical education across Europe. The European Union has several institutions and bodies that, while not directly controlling educational systems, as education policy largely remains the competence of individual member states, influence the integration of moral values and related principles in education through policy guidance, funding and collaboration. These institutions address topics such as human rights, social inclusion and citizenship, all of which overlap with moral values. The integration process involves a reform of political and administrative institutions, a profound transformation aimed at increasing efficiency, transparency and accountability (Goudenhooft, 2024).

The European Commission plays a central role in proposing and supporting initiatives related to education and moral values and oversees programs like Erasmus+, which promote citizenship, tolerance and understanding across cultures. The Comission also develops frameworks such as the *European Education Area* (aiming to foster shared values like democracy and respect for human rights) and publishes recommendations and reports on topics such as inclusive education and the prevention of radicalization. The EEA initiative structures and fosters collaboration between Member States and stakeholders to build more resilient and inclusive national education and training systems. Education is the foundation for personal fulfilment, employability and active, responsible citizenship. It is essential to the vitality of European societies and economies. Access to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning is a right for all citizens, as enshrined within the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 2025).

The integration of moral values and spirituality into higher education may assist in the personal and educational development of both undergraduate and graduate students. John Call Dalton, an American physiologist and the first full-time professor for physiology in the United States, claims that "spirituality is especially important in the learning and experiences of college students because late adolescence is a time of heightened sensitivity about personal identity, relationships, ideology, and decisions about the future" (Dalton J., 2001).

Within the EEA working groups promote voluntary European cooperation in education and training. They offer a forum to exchange experiences and practices on addressing common challenges while respecting the principle of subsidiarity and the diversity of EU Member States. Experts work together to share information about reforms of national education and training systems policies to inspire positive change throughout the EU.

The Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme was launched by the European Comission in 2021 and will run for seven years until 2027. It was created along with the 2021-2027 Justice programme under the Justice, Rights and Values Fund. The CERV programme seeks to support and develop open, rights-based, democratic, equal and inclusive societies based on the rule of law. That includes a vibrant and empowered civil society, encouraging people's democratic, civic and social participation and cultivating the rich diversity of European society, based on our common values, history and memory.

In addition to all policy initiatives supported in the CERV Work Programme which include initiatives to build a Union of Equality (European Commission, 2025), the actions for 2025 support the recently adopted 'Defence of Democracy package', the EU Citizenship Package (European Commission, 2025), the Joint Communication on "No Place for Hate: a Europe united against hatred" (European Commission, 2025), the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence (European Commission, 2025) and the Recommendation on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems in the best interests of the child (European Commission, 2025).

The European Parliament does not directly engage in programs aimed at instilling moral values in individual citizens, but it promotes ethical principles and values through legislation, policies, and initiatives that encourage member states to foster a shared commitment to fundamental values. The EP upholds the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which emphasizes dignity, freedom, equality, solidarity and citizens' rights, document which underpins EU legislation and serves as a moral and legal guide for member states. Through educational and awareness campaigns the EP supports

initiatives aimed at educating citizens about democratic values, human rights and ethical principles, often in partnership with schools, universities, and NGOs. Programs such as Erasmus+ a flagship EU program that supports education, training, youth, and sport, through mobility opportunities, cultural exchanges and collaborative projects, Erasmus+ fostering understanding, tolerance, and respect for diversity. The Charter also states that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes freedom to change religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance (European Commission, 2025). Through initiatives like the European Youth Event (EYE), the Parliament engages directly with young people to discuss moral and social issues because these events encourage dialogue, ethical reflection and the development of solutions to societal challenges. Every two years, the EYE (European Youth Event) brings together thousands of young people from across the European Union and beyond, right at the heart of European democracy. The EYE is a unique opportunity for 16- to 30-year-olds to inspire and get inspired, to debate directly with Members of the European Parliament and other European decision-makers and to exchange views with experts, activists and content creators (European Parliament, 2025).

The Parliament addresses the challenges of the digital age by promoting media literacy and digital ethics, and in the same context educational campaigns emphasize responsible online behavior, critical thinking and combating misinformation. The European institution fosters intercultural understanding through collaborative projects between schools and organizations across member states and programs like eTwinning allow students and teachers to work on shared projects that promote mutual respect and shared moral values. The Parliament also encourages member states to adhere to its resolutions on education and training, calling for the promotion of education about climate change, gender equality and the rule of law, all of which align with broader moral imperatives.

It promotes intercultural understanding and shared values among young Europeans and at the same time the EP advocates for policies that promote equality, inclusion, and non-discrimination, addressing issues such as gender equality and the rights of minority groups. Through legislative action, it also promotes fairness in social, economic and environmental contexts.

The EP encourages active participation in democratic processes, such as voting in elections and engaging in dialogue with representatives which fosters a sense of responsibility and ethical engagement among citizens. We also know that laws passed by the EP often reflect broader moral values, such as environmental stewardship, corporate responsibility, and fair trade practices, and by setting ethical standards in areas like data privacy, labor rights, and animal welfare, the EP shapes societal norms supporting organizations as well, that work to instill ethical values, combat radicalization and promote tolerance and dialogue within communities. Instilling ethical values in teenagers is an essential part of education since it helps them develop their personalities, behaviours, and decision-making abilities. Without a question, our level of life has increased in the current materialistic society. However, it is questionable if the value of life is taken into account. Mankind has begun to travel in the wrong direction due to the explosion of the population, the explosion of knowledge (science and technology), and the development of materials (Annam, R., 2024). We conclude stating that by promoting strong principles for adolescents at an institutional level, the European Parliament influences how member states and citizens engage with moral and ethical issues in

society and seeks to cultivate a society where moral values are reflected in personal and collective actions, ensuring the long-term prosperity and cohesion of the EU.

The Council of the European Union plays a pivotal role in shaping the moral and ethical framework that guides the European Union and by encouriging cooperation among member states, the Council ensures that shared values, such as human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, are upheld and promoted across the EU. The Council works to uphold fundamental human rights within the EU and in its external relations. It supports policies that promote inclusion, diversity, and protection of minority groups and through its adoption of common positions, the Council ensures that EU member states align their actions with international human rights standards.

The Council plays a role in the adoption of directives and regulations aimed at reducing social inequalities, combating poverty and ensuring equal opportunities and policies on social inclusion, gender equality and workers' rights reflect the EU's commitment to ethical governance emphasising on environmental protection and sustainability showcases a moral commitment to future generations. By providing initiatives like the *European Green Deal*, it advocates for responsible stewardship of natural resources and ensures that EU policies reflect ethical responsibility on the global stage, such as advocating for climate action, equitable trade practices, and humanitarian aid. The European Green Deal is the EU's growth strategy. Launched in 2019, it consists of a package of policy initiatives, which set the EU on the path to a green transition, with the ultimate goal of reaching climate neutrality by 2050 (Melih D., 2024)**.** The Green Deal supports the transformation of the EU into a fair and prosperous society with a modern and competitive economy. Under the Green Deal, the Council, together with the European Parliament as co-legislators have adopted legislation which has turned the strategy's vision into laws and rules which are applied in all EU member states.

The Council's collective decision-making process, involving representatives from all member states, ensures a balanced approach to integrating moral values into policy and by embedding these values into the EU's legislative and diplomatic actions, the Council of the European Union significantly contributes to fostering a more ethical and equitable society both within Europe and globally.

Conclusions

After the devastation of World War II, Europe was compelled to confront not only the material destruction it had suffered, but also its profound moral failures. This reckoning gave rise to a renewed commitment to human dignity and democratic values which have since become central to the mission of European institutions. In this context, education and training emerged as vital tools for cultivating a shared moral foundation across diverse societies which led to stronger commitments to peace and reconciliation. The European Union, founded partly on moral ideals of cooperation and shared values, seeks to uphold democracy, rule of law. Europe's moral landscape is increasingly diverse due to immigration and globalization and balancing universal values with respect for cultural differences is a key challenge. During times Europe has played a multifaceted role in the evolution of moral values, from ancient philosophy and religious traditions to modern human rights and ethical frameworks which is an ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity and highlights the dynamic nature of moral development. Influence of diversity and globalization is obvious in Europe's moral landscape and a critical challenge lies in balancing universal values with respect for cultural differences.

The interplay between tradition and modernity underscores Europe's evolving moral dialogue and this analysis highlights Europe's role as a beacon of moral development while recognizing its challenges in navigating diversity and maintaining its foundational moral principles.

In light of the above, while European institutions face ongoing challenges in addressing cultural diversity, political polarization and evolving societal norms, their sustained emphasis on moral education reflects a recognition that democracy and peace cannot endure without a strong ethical foundation, and education remains a crucial space for transmitting not only knowledge, but also the values that consolidate a just and cohesive European society.

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE AUTOCHTHONIST-SOVEREIGNTIST POLITICAL LANGUAGE OBSOLESCING CONCEPTS AND TWISTING IDEALS

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Abstract. *In contemporary politics, the concepts used seem identical to those of the great moments in the history of mankind. The entire nationalist and autochthonous narrative uses the terms sovereignty, nation, freedom as fundamental concepts. However, we will demonstrate that their meanings are different today, they are distorted and used with rather negative connotations unlike the humanist ideals they announced.*

Keywords: *Humanist ideals, manipulation, twisted meanings, sovereignty, nation, autochthonousness.*

Introduction

No matter how novel or percussive the reality of current political narratives, Romanian or European, may seem, we will still have to point out their history, a history that shows us that eventually the narrators, the vehicles or the political contexts are new, the narratives are not. It is no surprise for an informed reader that for almost a century (1848-1947) the Romanian debate focused between the two poles of the "national specificity – traditionalist – authentic" and "the European model – liberalism – modernism". "The examples offered by magazines such as "Ideea Europeană", which evolves from pre-war popularism to pro-Europeanism between the two world wars, or "Gândirea" which at first adopts a balanced tone with accents of Romanianism and reaches orthodoxy and mysticism in the thirties, are just two hypostases of the specific developments of the period." (Dobra, 2012: 32). We quote the opinion of one of the leaders of the autochthonous movement represented by the magazine Gândirea: "Between the Romanian politics of the nineteenth century and the National Church there was an antagonism that continues to this day. An antagonism in which the policy of Westernization at any cost has the side of aggressive action, and the church part of impotent passivity." (Crainic, 1923: 78).

At the European level, given the in-depth debate, things were no different, the poles were the same (traditionalism – revolutionism). "The ideological chaos, in present-day France, is due to the confusion between the different meanings that the opposition between left and right borrows (...). in France, the conflict between the Old Regime and the Revolution is as current as that between liberalism and laborism." (Aron, 2007: 40), wrote Raymond Aron in 1955.

From the perspective of the present work, the interest presents the traditionalist, archaic, conservative dimension, which in the meantime has become autochthonous, nationalist, sovereignist as an option against what Europe represents today as a

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civilizational model. As we said, however, nothing is new, not even the contemporary sovereignist attitude, which has known the transfiguration from the moment of its appearance, as a movement against the imperial powers and their representative administrations and reaching the contemporary attitude against the acquis communautaire and the European Union as its vehicle. "After 1989, with the Nicolo ordinance of the Council of State, the supremacy of European law over French law was affirmed. But has anyone stopped to calculate to what extent this principle contradicts all the ideas that structure the Republic? If there is a law superior to that of the republic, what remains of it? (...) Has anyone noticed that European courts, especially the Council of Europe, have systematically promoted the hijab? We will therefore have to choose between Europeanist idolatry and 'republican values'." (Bonnamy, 2025: 70). All this means that in fact not even the subject of the opposition is changed, what was previously identified as the "superior model of European civilization" is today easier to label and stigmatize under the name of "EU legislation".

A study at the level of the names of the parties that convey these orientations would probably demonstrate that the names of the autochthonous parties have changed profoundly, abandoning the abbreviations of "conservative, national, traditional" and promoting modern names with direct references to the historical identity baggage: "Sons of Italy", "German National Right", etc. From the very name mentioned, the sovereignist-autochthonous tendencies obviously derive, as does the reference to national identities. Because this is where we wanted to arrive, at the precise way in which identity preservation, a populist discourse from the proposed ideal, becomes a political framework, a political vehicle and a political brand. The reactivation of eighteenth-century narratives even, under the banner of other ideals at first glance, occupies the European political scene today at high percentages, promoting the idea that authenticity, specificity and the national vein must occupy the central place in state concerns.

From Romantic Patriotism – Positive to Autochthonous Anti-Capitalist Sovereignty – Negative

As shocking as it may seem, the processuality of the transition from romantic ideals (nation, nation, spirit, race, self-determination) to nationalist, autochthonous and sovereignist passions are demonstrable in the historical course and provide countless proofs among the great writers of humanity. The historical evolution, however, which began with the French Republic in collaboration with Romanticism at the end of the eighteenth century, (with its civic and republican ideals) has, in Julien Benda's opinion, a precise moment and place of appearance regarding the term "patriotism": "We cannot emphasize enough what an absolute novelty in history this form of patriotism represents. It is obviously also linked to the assumption of this passion by the popular masses and seems to have been inaugurated, in 1813, in Germany, which is probably the true teacher of humanity in a democratic patriotism, if we understand by this word the will of a people to take a stand against others in the name of its fundamental characters." (Benda, 2017: 21-22). The negative notes of the noble feeling of patriotism are already suggested, the author explaining them below: "(...) What surplus of violence this solemnization of its desires brings to the national passion is clearly evident if we look at the result of this feeling in the Germans who claim to be the successors of the Holy German Empire and in the Italians, since they have counted their ambitions as reincarnations of those of the time of the Roman Empire." (Benda, 2017: 24).

For the necessary historical touch, we recall that the author published the cited volume in 1927, the subsequent abominable events only reconfirming the author's suggestions. Going back, if we can date the consecration of the appearance of patriotism to 1813, we have to frame its connection with romanticism and the French Revolution and their ideals, aesthetic or political.

The Entrance of Romanticism

As inappropriate as it may seem to place romanticism between the currents that have originated today's sovereignist concepts, we will do so by referring to a few perspectives. First we will point out its almost perfect overlap with the French Revolution, an overlap that caused one of the German romantics to exclaim: "Oh, that I were French now!" Coming back, we reproduce the already institutionalized periodization, regarding romanticism. "In general, German Romanticism is divided into three great periods. First of all , the incipient romanticism, which originated in Berlin and Jena, (...) covers the period between 1970, (...) and 1805 (...). Secondly, the young Romanticism, with its main center in Heidelberg, manifests itself until 1815, when the Romantic spirit shows signs of exhaustion. Thirdly, late Romanticism, characterized by a conventionalization of forms of expression, represents the period of decline of German Romanticism. Around 1835 the romantic school practically ceased to exist" (Râmbu, 2001:14).

For the ideology of our article, this overlap with the French Revolution means a lot; concepts, ideals and visions of the two currents will intertwine, as we will try to show. Moreover, the romantic influence on the first half of the nineteenth century will outline positions assumed by the Revolution of 1848, an aspect that is again fundamental for our work. "Although the period of maximum flowering of Romanticism is between 1799 and 1804, in the middle of the nineteenth century the traces of the Romantic spirit can still be clearly distinguished. The Romantic movement placed axiological consciousness and the irrational above theoretical and rational reason in general."(Râmbu, 2001: 14). We draw attention, as an example, to the potential link between fraternity and patriotism.

We make, on the occasion offered by the author, the second clarification regarding Romanticism: it is an anti-rationalist current, therefore also anti-Enlightenment, precisely by rejecting the excessive rationalization of the post-Descartian world, accusing rationalism of a certain mutilation of the idyllic beauty of existence. Hence, the famous tendency of the Romantics to idealize and mythologize human existence, with exaggerated tendencies to reject reason in favor of myth and imagination.

The third underline refers to the idealization of history, from the perspective of combating the present with which they are not satisfied and of plunging into an idealized, dreamlike and often mythologized past. It is somehow a combination of their predisposition for the irrational and the tendency to mythologize history, the distance to mystical exaggerations being considerably reduced.

Hence, another necessary emphasis: the romantics are revolutionaries, they do not accept and fight contemporary reality. "Like any movement that claims its descent from a program from which it is inspired, Romanticism lives with the feeling of the beginning of a new spiritual age in the history of humanity. This new spiritual age presents itself in a revolutionary way as the result of a radical rupture of a fracture, which divides the continuity of the historical life of humanity in two. The feeling of passing from an old century to a new one, which is romanticism itself." (Musca, 2010:18-19).

And one last reference to romanticism, essential from the perspective of our work: by idealizing history, as we have pointed out, basing the historical perspective in

the culture of humanity, romanticism also reaches mysticism. Idealizations of the past, ancient or medieval, the taking of myths into the themes of romantic poetry, the glorification of heroes and events, were all part of the romantic arsenal of evaluating history in a mystical light. "In the romantic conception certain religious and mystical representations are inevitably included. For example, not only does the past appear better than the present, but the present lives off the past. Contemporaries consume the cultural capital produced by the ancients. (...) For romantics, the past has value simply because it is a negation of the present, a way of escaping from the given reality. (Muscă, 2010: 25).

Enough references, we believe, to be able to sketch the ideological landmarks of romanticism, its instincts and concerns. They all seem essential to us in the effort to point out some of the tendencies of today's sovereignist currents, also characterized by mysticism, revolutionarism and anti-rationalism. Starting from the temporal overlap with the moment 1789, which also created trends, concepts and ideals, we will try further to emphasize their interpenetration and, necessarily, their product, namely the European moment of 1848.

French Revolutionism and the Concepts Promoted

Unlike the Romantics, the French revolutionaries did not renounce the Enlightenment and its entire conception of humanity and social construction. A result of another period masterfully defined by Paul Hazard as the period of "crisis of European conscience" (the period 1680-1715), it knows and promotes the enlightened minds who take a stand against the obsolete dogmas, the crude traditions and the state establishment of that period. "In the depths of consciences, history has failed; the very feeling of historicity tends to disappear. The past was abandoned because it seemed inconsistent, imperceptible and always false (...). Something like a great collapse occurred, after which nothing was felt as a certainty, except only the present, and all mirages had to pour into the future" (Hazard, 2007: 38).

In their turn, the well-known French philosophers take over this entire ideological ensemble, propose and implement (even if fleetingly and idealistically) projects and configurations subsumed under the slogan "liberty, equality, fraternity". However, the road, from the Enlightenment, passed through the Hazard crisis, spiced with the idealism of romanticism, to the French Revolution, deserves the full attention of the world, on this path establishing the certainty that one will never again be able to legitimately affirm "The State is I".

The concept of sovereignty, for example, automatically presupposes that of republic, that of nation, that of democracy, which, in turn, expresses the ideal of equality, of "general will", which becomes obligatory to be respected, therefore sovereign. Here, then, is how ideas become projects and ideals become realities. "It should be noted in Rousseau, 'sovereign' does not mean the monarch or the government, but the community in its collective and legislative hypostasis (...). This act of association creates a moral and collective body, called a 'state' when it is passive, 'sovereign' when it is active, and 'power' in relation to other bodies like it." (Russell, 2005: 11).

We note for the moment the "active" dimension of sovereignty, emphasizing the great success of the French Revolution. "The French Revolution brings proof that practical reason – the one that commands the act, since it is not enough to 'think' – can make the sun rise of a new world. Through it, law replaces force, authority imposed from outside, as well as the darkness of ignorance. The light of reason, which is freedom, translates into a constitution by which sovereignty is bound to be based on its own will.

Man has a new perspective: he knows himself to be the bearer of the score, of the teachings, of the history, intimately connected to freedom and equality." (Ruby, 2003:70). Obvious links with romantic historicism, but essential seem to us to be the legitimization of the sovereignty of the people as an expression of the general will, the result of practical reason.

For us, at this moment it is demonstrated how the concept of sovereignty, which has become today a nationalist-sovereignist current under the name of sovereignism, served the simple imposition of the general will, through freedom, democracy and constitutionalism – but, as we have already suggested, it is not the only ideal instrumentalized today, almost 200 years later, in a populist-propagandistic way.

The nation, another term coined and disseminated by the French Revolution, will play an essential role in all history after this masterful moment of humanity. "Nation, since the eighteenth century, the totality of citizens who, by their own consent, wish to live together. The nation differs from the state (governing and administrative body): the nation is the totality of individuals, from all social classes, who exercise their suffrage in the case of referendums or legislative elections, etc. The nation represents the entire social body (...)" (Larousse, 1999: 227-228).

The foundations of this concept, however, lead us to others, such as race, ethnicity, differentiation, identity, history and national culture. We will deal with them below, specifying, however, that the appearance of the concept neither predicted future configurations, nor did it intend anti-Semitism. The concerns concerned the right of peoples constituted in nations to decide their own fate, according to their own will, not so much in relation to other nations, but at that time with the leadership and organization of their own statehoods and the renunciation of the hegemonic rights until then. "The nature of the nation, as it has been defined by European history, incites the will to group. In fact, only the confusion of the nation with the political leadership allows it to fulfill its destiny." (Larousse, 1996: 188). The great thoughts of the Revolution are being put into practice today. And yet the prospects do not seem ideal...

From ideals to identities. The role of the generation of 1848

There is an interesting and somewhat explicable transition from the great French revolutionary ideals of the late eighteenth century to the national and patriotic ideals. We want to draw attention to them especially because later, as we will show, they allow additional and essential clarifications and nuances in deciphering the proposed purpose of our work. The demarcations to which we are only referring at this point concern the terms of brotherhood within a people, of patriotism within a nation, of nationalism within a homeland.

Starting from the attempt to identify exactly how ideals end up being transformed into programs and later into dogmas, we emphasize Cornelia Bodea's eloquent text dedicated to Bălcescu (a Romanian leader of the Generation of 1848). "But the bourgeois democratic and social reforms generally envisaged in the unitary national states, such as France, where these theses were mainly formulated, constituted an incomplete revolutionary program for the peoples whose historical destiny unfolded in fragments, compartmentalized between unnatural state walls, imposed by foreign dominations. (...). In the situation existing in the Romanian countries, of transition between the old and the new, between the past on the verge of destruction and the future that was beginning to shine, and when most, as Bălcescu says, did not know where to turn, he launched the threefold slogan – of the national, political and social regeneration of all Romanians –

Fatherland, brotherhood, freedom!" (Bodea, 1970: 23). We do not pass without emphasizing the reference to the French ideal in relation to which "equality" is replaced by "Fatherland" exactly in the note proposed by the quoted author.

We are therefore talking about the beginning of the nineteenth century, known as the "century of nations", a movement to which, obviously, Romania also joins. Through the "national intelligentsia", namely the sons of the boyars, of the aristocracy in general (the only ones who could have financially supported the education of their own children abroad), the debate in the three Romanian provinces is connected to the international debates, especially the Parisian ones. "If judgment is allowed to substitute exact data if necessary, to continue history by logic, and to conclude from effect to cause, it could be said that the education of the emigrants spread among the sons of the great boyars exactly the same things that the events of the Revolution suggested to their fathers. Revolutionaries and emigrants of all kinds contributed to the "franchising" of the country, preparing it for French readings, awakening its taste for everything French. Then, no matter how royalist most of the emigrants were, they were full of the philosophical ideas of the eighteenth century." (Eliade, 2006: 213-216).

And the essential touch must be underlined here: Romanians, the Principalities, Transylvania, Bessarabia, all aligned themselves with the double revolution underlined by Cornelia Bode, as we have already shown and Nicolae Bălcescu underlined: "The creation of this nationality, a social reform of the Romanians, based on the holy principles of justice and equality, must be aimed at all our sciences. Romanianism is our flag, under it we must call all Romanians" (Bălcescu, 1970: 107).

The ideal was therefore the united nation, and its vector was Romanianism, through the revolutionary mechanisms of 1789 and later from 1848, ... Somehow the Generation of 1848 shows political genius: in the fight for equality, fraternity, democracy, it also adds to the problem of the nation. But we know, the idea was generally distributed as long as the whole of Europe was under the hegemony of a few empires. The idea of national sovereignty, of self-determination on ethnic bases was making its way into the future of the continent. Identities were exclusively national and the fight for them seemed to accept anything...!

What exactly happened?; nothing that was not already announced!

We have tried, within the limits of a dedicated article, to outline the long and wonderful path of the famous ideals of humanity, some statues of enlightenment, rationalism, others inherited from Greek antiquity itself and reinforced by romanticism, for example. Democracy, nation, sovereignty, equality, dignity, brotherhood, are all certain data of contemporary European society today. And yet..., we are witnessing today a rhetoric that is at least threatening, of eminently nationalist origin, which manages to pervert ideals such as a sovereign nation into racist nationalism, national culture into autarchic autochthonousness, national specificity into anti-Europeanism.

Paradoxically, although the current elections in Europe demonstrate that autochthonous, anti-integrationist political movements are approaching overwhelming figures, there is no concern to clarify the meanings of some concepts, which today are totally overturned, perverted, twisted, with the aim of manipulating the masses, especially since, since ancient times, these dangers have been signaled. The term nation together with that of patriotism (as we have already shown) opens up innumerable valences, some of them unfortunate since its affirmation: "(...)The nation is considered to be a descent from the same ancestors and having in common a kind of "blood consciousness" (...). The

freedom of nations came to be regarded, not only by Mazzini, but also by relatively lucid statesmen, as an absolute value, which in practice made international cooperation impossible." (Russell, 2005: 198). Words that refer us to today's sovereignist and autochthonous tendencies, written in the first half of the twentieth century. "Belief in race and blood is naturally associated with anti-Semitism." (Bălcescu, 1970: 107). And the example is belated, the fascist phenomenon being already consummated. "In order to see what philosophy can become when it falls into the hands of mediocre or worthless people, let us briefly follow the destiny of Friedrich Nietzsche's work during the period of fascism and beyond. The idea I want to convey, paraphrasing a famous saying, is the following*: from romanticism to fascism is only one step"* (Râmbu, 2001: 138).

How exactly generous concepts end up being twisted in the true sense of the word, acquiring meanings contrary to their meaning, this seems a matter of much more in-depth and mandatory study generated from semiotic perspectives and public manipulation. What is certain, however, is that the social sciences, through their tools, have sounded the alarm. Part of the explanation of the term "nation" in the Larousse Dictionary of Sociology makes exactly the references mentioned: "It follows that the emergence of nations, first in Europe, then in the whole world, has caused innumerable disturbances. Some result from the desire to bring together in a single political organization the dispersed members of a nation. On the other hand, others are determined by the will for independence of citizens, real or potential, incorporated into empires". (Larousse, 1996: 180).

And for the sake of completeness, from the same source we appeal to the notion of "nationalism": "A product of the French Revolution, nationalism was first and foremost an accidental, left-wing current of thought. From 1789 onwards, he expressed the revolutionary will to transfer the subjection of the individual to the king, the absolute monarch, to an abstract collectivity, pursuing sovereignty" (Bălcescu, 1970: 187).

Nation – nationalism – sovereignty: this is one of the equations of contemporaneity, in which the original concepts have led to a completely different dimension. In the third millennium, nationalism proposes a kind of autarchism. In the twentieth century he had proposed anti-Semitism, in the nineteenth century with 1848 Revolution it was still an ideal.

Case study

Călin Georgescu's presidential program –" Food, water, energy". (https://calingeorgescu.ro/program/).

We chose, for our case study, the electoral offer of the independent candidate Călin Georgescu for two reasons: first, it would be the obvious global popularization and media coverage recorded by him following the cancellation of the presidential elections in Romania in 2024 precisely because of him; the second, on the grounds that the lack of analyses of the type we tried is also the big mistake of the national authorities in trying to stop such candidacies in the future. The accusations of autochthony, Russophilia, sovereignty, falsified campaign, nationalism, ethnocentrism or anti-Europeanism deserve dedicated attention from researchers precisely in an attempt to prove the aforementioned accusations.

I. On the logical line of our article, we will first identify the examples of references to the revolutionary ideas studied, their origins and the distortions suffered throughout the presidential program:

Chapter Specific Objectives; P. 3. An economy of freedom and the common good, through the sovereignist-distributist model. In our opinion, the entire phrase refers to the model imagined for the First French Republic after 1879 with the ideals of freedom, the common good, the sovereignty of the people in a social, therefore redistributive, republic.

Chapter Strategic, national objective of the programme:

Paragraph 3: Romanians will have good reasons to love their country and their nation and to be proud of their past, present and future. The reference to the romantic orientation towards national history, and from here to the identity aspects is obvious.

Chapter Precise measures and directions of action of the programme

Para. Return to the roots: through the spirit of love, the saints, the heroes of the nation, the great cultural personalities become "living icons", they open the superior qualitative space of true freedom. The mythification of national history acquires dreamlike and religious dimensions specific to romanticism.

Chapter The major objective of the program – (...) the re-sovereignty of the person

Paragraph 2: The current state (servile and unrepresentative for the people) will be replaced by the sovereign state, where meetings between citizens, specialists and the state will take place at the table of Truth, Freedom and Reconstruction, for the benefit of all Romanians. The theme of sovereignty, taken from the rhetoric of the 1879 Revolution, returns consistently, in relation to the citizen or the state.

Precise measures and directions of action of the program: Establishing the strategy of common interest through national consensus, a historic step towards restoring a sovereign economy, beyond political confrontations and electoral cycles. Starting from the ideals of the French Revolution, the phrase reaches a terminology that can present threatening openings; "The restoration of a sovereign economy" in which sovereignty obviously implies the independence of the local economy from Western capaitalism, the suggested model being the one indicated by the term Restoration, which refers to another mythologized stage in national history – Communism.

Chapter Sovereignism – concise and clear distributism: in Romania the transition to participatory democracy and market economy in a sovereignist-distributist system marks the beginning of the Great National Renaissance – the theme is one specific to the Revolution of 1848 when the Romanian nation followed the ideal of statehood.

Subchap. A true sovereignty acts out of love for the good of those around us:

The good you want for your country, such as national sovereignty or control over the natural and cultural heritage, must also be the good that other nations also benefit from. From this position we must understand the relations between states and nations. It is not by chance that we chose the two phrases, they express the quintessence of the project studied. Starting from the concept of "national sovereignty", not that of the sovereignty of the people as it was claimed in 1789, the first sentence refers to the "control over heritage and culture", a reference to the criticism of their current foreign control. In the second sentence, "relations between nation states" suggest in the future a Europe in which states become sovereign again to the detriment of the model promoted by the European Union.

II. The quantitative analysis of the text (1700 words, 6-7 pages classic Word format) shows us the following statistics:

- The word "sovereign" and its derivatives appear 75 times
- the word "nation" appears 5 times

- the word "people" is used 12 times
- the term "autochton" is used only once
- the term "freedom" appears 12 times

III. From a qualitative perspective, some conclusions can be drawn:

- the 75th times use of the term "sovereign" and its derivatives abundantly show the autochthonous orientation of the text
- the use of the terms "freedom", "dignity", "equality" demonstrates the "revolutionary" orientation of the text
- the appearance of the word "people" 12 times is perfectly explainable in a political program to which we add the concept of "nation" 5 times, resulting in a predominantly ethno-centric orientation
- At a holistic evaluation of the message of the text, we resume the thesis of the use of terms in an autochthonous, sovereignist and almost isolationist dimension, far from the ideals expressed during the periods of consecration of these concepts
- As a final touch, we evaluate the entire text as representative of contemporary nationalist-autochthonous political orientations, with a note with anti-European, anti-globalist and, inherently, ethno-centric (anti-multiculturalist) accents.

Conclusions

We are at the point where we can make some substance assessments. We have tried, one by one, to show what were the main conceptual contributions of the great European ideological moments of the late eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century, precisely to show that the narratives of that period are also present in today's political discourse, especially in the vocabulary of autochthonous, sovereignist, anti-European parties.

In our opinion, the relevance for the essay in this article presents, from the perspective of Romanticism, the inclination towards revolutionism (as a negation of social settlements) and the mystification of history (through idealistic symbolism) from the perspective of the French Revolution of fraternity (within a people) and sovereignty of the people (in the face of any other order – absolute monarchy in that case), and finally, from the perspective of the Revolutions of 1848, the term nation (which leads to the ethnicization of state constructions) and the struggle against any oppressive imperialist order (the imperialisms of the time with the inherent injustices due to the differentiations between the imperial center and the provinces).

Upon careful evaluation, we will notice how, especially in the cases presented (but the study can be generalized to the entire narrative of European anti-European parties), absolutely all the concepts and orientations highlighted are present in contemporary political offers. The mystification of history and historical characters, as well as the call for the necessary revolution, specific to romanticism, are easily observable. The return to a brotherhood among the peoples, as well as their mandatory sovereignty in the face of any leadership, specific to the French Revolution, the settlement. And as a crowning achievement, the domestic struggle against the foreign leadership (in this case the establishment of the European Union) with the aim of liberating nations and their manifestations, specific to passportism, are orientations that obtain higher and higher scores in the elections on the territory of the EU.

Enough observations to reach the conclusion of our work: although recovered from European ideological history, sometimes declared, most of the time even unconscious, the concepts and orientations mentioned are today far from their initial

objectives (romantic, enlightenment or papist). We refer in particular to the negative note (exclusivist, autochthonous, ethno-centric) of their contemporary use:

- Sovereignism not at the will of the people, but against an integrative European vision;
- Nation not as a common history and as fraternity, but as superiority over others;
- Revolution not so much against some ordinances, but against some socio-professional classes anathematized as guilty for transitory situations;
-Autochthonisms not as a valorization of originality, but as resistance to inter and multiculturalism).

We identify this new orientation, of using the great ideals of humanity in derailed senses with profoundly negative connotations, as the main danger to the European construction. It has also been signaled, even in time, sectorally or holistically. "Heir to a very long and brilliant past – brilliant through inspirations and efforts – the new vulgar was pampered by the surrounding world (...). These spoiled beings, however, are sufficiently unintelligent to believe in the material and social organization placed at their disposal, like air, has the same origin as air, since, in appearance, it is not lacking either, and is almost as perfect as the natural one." (Ortega y Gasset, 1994: 84-85).

A plethora of established writers, such as Raimond Aron, Julien Benda, Ortega y Gasset, have made it an intellectual duty to point out the dangers of the new society. With the effort available, we do it too, saying with all conviction: contemporary dangers lie in narratives that obsolete, distort and devalue concepts that are great and that have accompanied us for more than 200 years. Nothing seems new, although, in reality, nothing holds the greatness of the old.

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MULTILINGUAL AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION IN MOLDOVA - POLICIES, PRACTICES AND PATHWAYS TO INCLUSION

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Abstract. *This article examines the development of language education policies in the Republic of Moldova within the broader context of European integration, multilingualism, and multiculturalism. The aim is to highlight how recent amendments to the Education Code, institutional initiatives, and pedagogical strategies support the creation of an inclusive and equitable education system. The methodology involves document analysis, case-based examples from minority regions, and examples of good practice in teacher training and classroom instruction. The findings indicate a growing alignment with European multilingual education standards, though implementation challenges remain. The article recommends continued investment in teacher development and support for minority languages.*

Keywords: *multilingual education, minority languages, inclusion, intercultural competence, CLIL, Moldova.*

1. Introduction

In today's interconnected world, multiculturalism and multilingualism have become core aspects of everyday life. Increased global movement, migration, and the long-standing coexistence of different ethnic groups, along with international communication, have transformed many societies into rich tapestries of languages and cultures. Schools are a clear reflection of this reality-they mirror the ethnic diversity and cultural interdependence of the communities they serve and highlight the growing need for inclusive practices that uphold language rights while encouraging social unity. The language policy and pedagogical approaches are central to this transformation. Institutional efforts, legislative reforms, and classroom strategies increasingly reflect a commitment to multilingualism as both an educational goal and a democratic value. In this context, the study sets out to examine how Moldova's education system operationalizes multilingual education in policy and practice.

The objectives of this article lies in the description of Moldova's recent reforms in language education policy; trying to highlight institutional efforts supporting multilingual and inclusive teaching; to illustrate effective classroom strategies for Romanian, minority, and foreign language instruction; to identify challenges in

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implementing multilingual education, especially in minority regions; and to align Moldova's educational practices with European multilingual standards.

The article is based on policy document analysis, institutional reports, and examples of pedagogical practice in multilingual classrooms. It investigates how these elements interact to support linguistic integration, inclusion, and quality education for all learners.

The central hypothesis of the study is that: If Moldova's language education policies and teaching practices are aligned with European multilingual and inclusive education frameworks, then the integration of Romanian, minority, and international languages in schools will lead to more equitable access to education, stronger intercultural competence among learners, and greater social cohesion across linguistic communities.

In this light, multicultural education and multilingual policies are no longer fringe concepts or progressive extras; they are fundamental to building democratic and fair societies (Horner & Weber, 2017; Richard, 2015).

Moldova, in particular, offers a compelling example of this complexity. Its linguistic and cultural makeup has been shaped by shifting political borders, diverse ethnic populations, and evolving national identities. As a former Soviet republic, Moldova inherited a system of institutional bilingualism in which Russian served as the dominant lingua franca, while Romanian was pushed to the margins, especially in education and public life (Ciscel, 2008: 23-28).

Following its independence in 1991, Moldova began efforts to restore Romanian's official status. However, tensions around language have remained, especially among minority communities such as the Gagauz, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, and Russian speakers (King, 2000; Laitin, 1998).

The war in Ukraine, which began in 2022, significantly altered Moldova's demographic and social landscape. A large influx of Ukrainian refugees further highlighted the urgent need for inclusive language education and prompted reforms to better integrate these populations at the school level (UNHCR, 2023).

In a major policy shift in 2023, Moldova officially replaced the term "Moldovan language" with "Romanian language" in its constitution and education laws. This move strengthened Moldova's alignment with European language standards and demonstrated its intent to move closer to European Union integration (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2023).

These changes reflect a broader transition-from a Soviet-era model of bilingualism to a European framework of multilingual education. Today, fluency in Romanian and at least one international language, such as English, is increasingly seen as essential for educational achievement and upward mobility.

Despite these reforms, Moldova still faces the challenge of ensuring language rights for its ethnic minorities. International agreements like the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities provide key benchmarks (Council of Europe, 1992; 1995). A central dilemma in Moldova's education policy is balancing the use of language as a symbol of national identity with its recognition as a basic human right.

In this evolving context, schools play a pivotal role. They are not just centers of learning but also platforms for promoting multilingualism, intercultural respect, and social unity.

This article explores how effectively Moldova's multicultural and multilingual education policies address the linguistic needs of minorities while also supporting the country's integration into the European educational space. It also investigates how Romanian is being taught as the official state language and how English is introduced as a foreign language. Drawing on both theoretical analysis and a small case study from a Moldovan school, this work is grounded in Language Policy, Minority Studies, Intercultural Education, and Applied Linguistics.

2. Theoretical framework

Multiculturalism is both a societal fact and an educational philosophy built on recognizing cultural diversity and promoting fairness in diverse societies. As Banks (2019) puts it, multiculturalism is "a process that seeks to reform educational institutions so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups experience equal opportunities to learn." It goes beyond simply celebrating differences—true multiculturalism demands changes in curriculum design, teaching methods, and institutional representation to ensure equity.

From a political standpoint, Kymlicka (1995) sees multiculturalism as a framework that legitimizes distinct rights for national minorities and ethnic groups, enabling them to maintain their language and culture while participating fully in the public life of the state. This approach aims to balance national unity with cultural diversity, supporting minority rights without fracturing social cohesion.

Similarly, Parekh (2006) views multiculturalism as the peaceful coexistence of different cultural groups within a society, supported by policies that guarantee equal respect and inclusion. This perspective stresses that multiculturalism isn't just about who lives in a society, it's a deliberate moral and political commitment to equality.

In the context of education, Gollnick and Chinn (2024) define multiculturalism as a philosophy that integrates students' cultural identities and experiences into the institutional framework of schools. They argue that schools must actively work to eliminate cultural bias and treat all learners fairly.

Multicultural education sees cultural and linguistic diversity not as barriers, but as assets that enrich the classroom experience (Grant, 2014; Hytten, 2017). According to UNESCO (2017), education systems must adapt to students' identities and languages to avoid marginalization. This requires culturally responsive curricula, teacher training in intercultural competence, and an understanding that education shapes values such as tolerance and mutual respect in diverse societies.

3. Multiculturalism in Moldova

In the Republic of Moldova, multiculturalism has historically been presented as a natural condition of society. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2024), ethnic Moldovans/Romanians coexist with Ukrainian-4.9%, Russian-3.2%, Gagauz-4.2%, Bulgarian1.6%, Roma-0.4% and Polish communities.

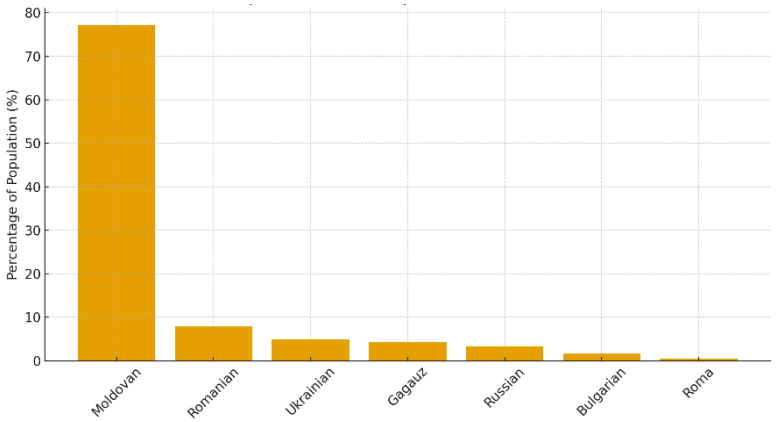

Figure 1. Ethnic composition of Moldova (NBS, 2024)
https://statistica.gov.md/ro

The Conception of National Policy of the Republic of Moldova (2003) affirms that Moldova is a multicultural and multiethnic state and emphasizes cultural pluralism as an element of national identity. However, while multiculturalism is recognized in official policy documents, it is often symbolic rather than practical, as the implementation of multicultural education in schools lacks systematic teacher training and supporting resources.

Language is central to cultural identity. Skutnabb-Kangas (2017) conceptualizes linguistic human rights as the right of individuals and groups to maintain and develop their mother tongue. Denying education in one's native language is considered a form of linguistic assimilation that can lead to linguistic genocide when minority languages are systematically excluded from schools. Language plays a vital role in shaping cultural identity and upholding linguistic human rights. It functions not only as a means of communication but also as a vessel of cultural memory, shared values, and a sense of belonging within a community. The denial of the right to use and develop one's mother tongue can lead to more than just educational disadvantage-it can result in cultural marginalization and the erosion of personal and collective identity (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2017: 80-102). Consequently, safeguarding linguistic rights within educational systems is essential for ensuring equitable access to learning and for maintaining cultural diversity in multilingual societies.

At the international level, instruments such as the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* (Council of Europe, 1992) and *the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic*, *Religious and Linguistic Minorities* (1992) affirm the rights of minority groups to express themselves in their native languages and to access education in those languages. Although the Republic of Moldova has ratified several international conventions that promote linguistic rights, the practical implementation of these provisions, particularly concerning minority language education, remains limited.

Despite a strong global emphasis on linguistic human rights and the preservation of native languages (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2017:95), Moldova presents a complex and somewhat contradictory linguistic landscape. Many members of ethnic minority communities no longer actively use or pass down their heritage languages, instead shifting toward Russian as the preferred language for both education and everyday

communication (Pavlenko, 2013; Spataru, 2022; Ciobotaru, 2025). Recent sociolinguistic research indicates that a significant majority-between 80% and 90%-of Ukrainians, Bulgarians, and Gagauz in Moldova primarily use Russian in daily interactions. In contrast, their ancestral languages are often limited to symbolic expressions of identity rather than functional tools of communication.

Educational data from the 2022–2023 academic year further highlights the marginal status of minority languages in Moldovan schools. Currently, only one school in the entire country offers instruction in Ukrainian, and there are no schools providing subject instruction in Gagauz, despite the language's official recognition. Notably, when local authorities in the autonomous region of Gagauzia proposed opening schools that would teach in the Gagauz language, many parents opted against enrolling their children, favoring Russian-language education instead, likely viewing it as a pathway to greater social and economic mobility.

A more recent national survey (2024) reveals a continued trend of linguistic assimilation into Russian rather than the active preservation of minority languages. For instance, 81% of Ukrainians and 90% of Bulgarians report using Russian regularly in daily life, while only a minority continue to use their native languages (20% for Ukrainian; 12% for Bulgarian). The Gagauz community shows a similar pattern: although 83% of respondents report knowledge of the Gagauz language, only 13% use it actively, with 87% relying on Russian for everyday communication. Among the Roma population, language shift is also evident-48% use Russian as their primary language, compared to just 40% who use Romani.

This linguistic behaviour reveals two significant tendencies in Moldova:

-Russian continues to function as the dominant lingua franca across ethnic groups, maintaining social and economic value in the post-Soviet space.

-Heritage language erosion is evident, as minority languages are increasingly replaced by Russian in public and educational domains.

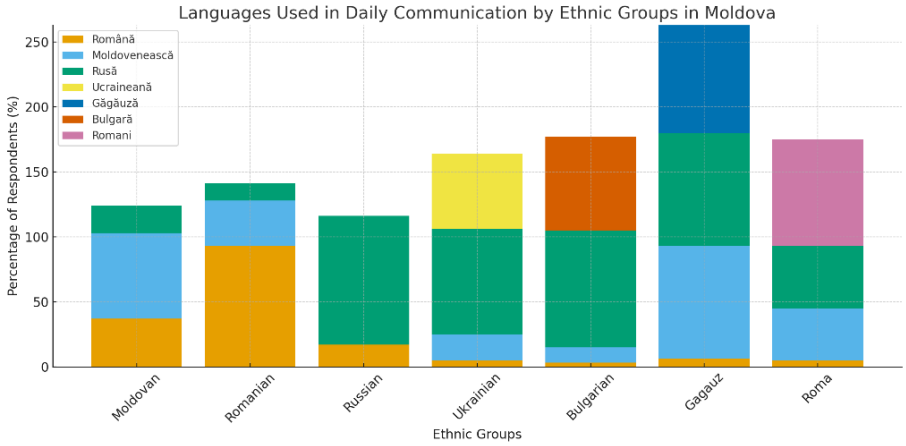

Figure 2. The linguistic behaviour of ethnic groups in Moldova (2024) https://statistica.gov.md/ro

These findings support sociolinguistic reports by the OSCE (2020) and the Council of Europe (2023), which note that minority groups in Moldova tend to prioritize Russian over their native languages due to pragmatic reasons such as access to media, employment, and regional communication. The phenomenon is not enforced by state

policy but reflects language shift, driven by the influence of Russian propaganda and political aims. This raises critical questions regarding linguistic loyalty, power dynamics in language policy, and the erosion of minority languages, which contradicts European values of linguistic diversity preservation.

4. Theoretical perspectives on the language policy and Moldova's case

Language is more than just a tool for communication, it's closely tied to culture, identity, and belonging. As such, language policy plays a crucial role in shaping how multilingual societies function, how people interact, and whose voices are heard. It influences not only which languages are taught or used officially, but also how communities perceive themselves and one another.

According to Spolsky (2004), language policy involves the beliefs and practices around language use, supported by three key components: *status planning* (deciding which languages are used in official or public roles), *corpus planning* (developing and standardizing languages), and *acquisition planning* (how languages are taught and learned). But language policy isn't just what's written into law. As Shohamy (2006) points out, policies also exist in more subtle forms in school exams, textbooks, media, and even everyday conversations. These hidden dimensions often shape language practices just as much, if not more, than official legislation. In this way, language policy becomes a powerful force that can either foster inclusion or deepen inequality.

Moldova offers a particularly interesting case when thinking about language policy in transition. During the Soviet era, Russian held a privileged position as the language of power, used in administration, education, and urban life. Meanwhile, Romanian, then officially referred to as Moldovan, was mainly used in rural areas and cultural contexts, with limited official influence (Necula, 2016: 35).

This dynamic began to shift after Moldova gained independence. The *Law on the Functioning of Languages* (1989) declared **Romanian**, written in the Latin script, the official state language, while Russian was given the status of a language for interethnic communication. This move reflected an early attempt to reclaim national identity through language.

In recent years, particularly as Moldova moves closer to the European Union and responds to regional geopolitical pressures such as the war in Ukraine, language policy has taken a more decisive turn. A significant milestone came in 2023, when the Moldovan Parliament officially replaced the term "Moldovan language" with "Romanian language" in all legal and constitutional documents. This change signaled a clearer national identity and alignment with European values. At the same time, English has gained increasing importance, especially in schools and universities, as a language of international opportunity and modern education.

Even as Moldova strengthens the role of Romanian and promotes English, there are growing concerns about how well the country is protecting the linguistic rights of minority groups. International frameworks like the *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities* (Council of Europe, 1995) emphasize the importance of promoting integration while also preserving linguistic and cultural diversity. This is where Moldova faces a real challenge.

Languages like Gagauz, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, and Russian continue to be spoken by large segments of the population. However, they often receive little support in education or public life. Promoting Romanian as a unifying national language is

understandable and even necessary for building social cohesion, but it must be done in a way that doesn't leave minority communities behind.

Too often, language policies focus on symbolic recognition without providing practical support, such as teacher training, curriculum development, or educational resources in minority languages. Yet, without these efforts, true multilingualism remains out of reach. For Moldova to support meaningful language education for all students, it needs to create space for both integration and identity preservation.

Multilingualism isn't just a policy choice in Europe-it's a core value. The European Union's motto, "United in Diversity," highlights the belief that cultural and linguistic diversity is something to be celebrated, not feared (European Commission, 2008). Within this framework, language differences aren't seen as barriers to national unity but as strengths that enrich democratic life.

For Moldova, aligning with this vision means going beyond declarations. It requires building a language policy that reflects the lived realities of its people-one that supports Romanian as the state language, values English as a global skill, and protects minority languages as an essential part of the country's heritage.

Moldova stands at a linguistic crossroads. Its history, its future aspirations, and its social makeup all point to the need for a thoughtful, balanced language policy. As the country continues to navigate between its Soviet legacy and European future, the choices it makes around language will shape not just its institutions but also its sense of identity and belonging.

Effective language policy must be about more than regulation it should recognize people's real-life experiences with language, support their right to use and pass on their mother tongue, and ensure that no community is excluded from the conversation. Moldova has an opportunity to lead by example, crafting a multilingual education system that is both inclusive and forward-looking, that sees language not as a dividing line, but as a bridge.

One of the most influential tools supporting language education policy across Europe is the Common *European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR),* developed by the Council of Europe. Widely implemented in EU Member States, the CEFR offers a shared basis for developing curricula, assessing language proficiency, and issuing language certifications. Its structured scale-from A1 (beginner) to C2 (mastery)-provides a clear framework for setting learning goals and measuring progress.

The CEFR took a significant step forward with the release of the *CEFR Companion Volume in 2020*, which broadened its scope to include *plurilingual and pluricultural competence*. This newer perspective recognizes that language learners do not function in isolated linguistic systems; rather, they draw on their full range of linguistic and cultural knowledge in communication. This shift moves beyond the traditional monolingual model of language proficiency, promoting a more holistic understanding of how people navigate multilingual environments. It also aligns closely with current research in sociolinguistics and intercultural education, which emphasizes communicative competence across cultures over native-like mastery (Byram, 1997; Coste, 2009).

From the perspective of linguistic rights, key legal instruments such as the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* (Council of Europe, 1992) and the *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities* (Council of Europe, 1995) lay the groundwork for promoting and safeguarding linguistic diversity across Europe. These frameworks require signatory states to create conditions that support the

use and teaching of minority languages-not only in education, but also in public administration and cultural life. Crucially, these instruments affirm that while learning the state language is vital for national cohesion, it should not be pursued at the expense of heritage languages or individual identity.

This philosophy is reflected in the EU's support for *additive bilingualism*-an approach that encourages the acquisition of additional languages, such as the national language and global languages like English, without displacing the learner's mother tongue. In this way, multilingual education becomes a strategy for inclusion rather than assimilation.

Over the past decade, multilingualism has gained fresh momentum within the *European Education Area (EEA) 2030* strategy, which positions language education as a cornerstone of equity and inclusion in education systems. The EEA promotes early language learning and innovative teaching approaches such as *Content and Language Integrated Learning* (CLIL), where subjects are taught through a second language. It also calls for stronger investment in teacher training focused on multilingual pedagogy, the use of CEFR-based assessments, and language support programs tailored to the needs of migrant and minority students.

Importantly, the EEA stresses the need for *inclusive language education,* one that recognizes the linguistic assets of all learners and supports their successful integration into school and society. Initiatives such as bridging programs, targeted language support, and culturally responsive teaching practices are increasingly seen as essential for meeting the educational needs of diverse student populations.

For the Republic of Moldova, which has been granted EU candidate status, the EU multilingualism policy offers a strategic roadmap for language-in-education reform. Moldova's alignment with the CEFR in Romanian and English curricula, the reform of national assessments, and the growing emphasis on English for mobility reflect clear steps toward European standards. However, Moldova also faces a unique challenge: unlike other multilingual European contexts, many minority groups in Moldova prioritize Russian as their dominant language instead of their heritage languages, which contradicts European priorities of heritage language maintenance. Therefore, Moldova must adapt EU multilingual strategies to its post-Soviet linguistic reality by promoting Romanian as a language of integration, English as a language of modernization and global access, and minority languages as cultural heritage, while managing the role of Russian in a politically sensitive but educationally pragmatic way.

5. Reforms to the Education Code in Moldova and multilingualism alignment

In recent years, the Republic of Moldova has undertaken significant legislative and regulatory reform of its education system, in part to better align with European Union multilingualism principles and the broader agenda of European integration. A key milestone occurred in March 2023, when Parliament adopted a law replacing the term "Moldovan language" with "Romanian language" in all normative acts, including the Constitution. This change, though symbolic, underscores the country's alignment with European norms on language and identity.

As Moldova continues aligning its education system with European standards, recent amendments to its *Education Code*, introduced as part of the *2023 reform package*, signal a more concrete commitment to linking language education with broader goals of

equity, inclusion, and mobility. These changes reflect a strategic response to the EU's emphasis on linguistic diversity and the educational value of multilingual competence.

According to the *Eurydice overview*, the reforms adopted through *Government Decision*s in 2023 introduced a provision exempting students from final semester exams in foreign languages if they hold international language proficiency certificates at the *B2 level or higher*, as defined by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR). This policy not only incentivizes language learning at a high level, but also strengthens the value of multilingualism as a concrete asset for academic and professional advancement.

Beyond assessment, the reform package also *targets teacher training*, particularly in schools offering "extended programs" that include second and foreign language instruction. Professional development for teachers has been prioritized in these contexts, ensuring that educators are better equipped to implement multilingual curricula. Simultaneously, *financial support mechanisms* have been introduced to aid both students and teachers in *small and rural schools*, improving access for learners from remote or minority communities.

These efforts mirror the European Union's vision of multilingual education as a pillar of social inclusion and individual mobility. The reforms align with the *European Commission's (2008)* policy objectives, which emphasize early and sustained access to multiple languages and support for disadvantaged learners. Moldova's exemption policy for certified language learners also reflects CEFR-aligned progression pathways, encouraging students to reach proficiency levels that are both internationally recognized and locally meaningful.

Importantly, the reforms also seek to address regional disparities. Schools in *autonomous or ethnically diverse regions*, such as *Gagauzia*, are encouraged to implement *multilingual curricula* that combine the *state language (Romanian*), *English*, and *students' heritage languages*. While this model offers a promising vision for inclusive and culturally responsive education, its implementation remains uneven across the country. Many schools still face structural, financial, or logistical barriers to delivering multilingual instruction in practice.

Moreover, despite these legislative advances, significant challenges persist—particularly concerning *the continued dominance of Russian* as the preferred language of communication and instruction among many minority communities. Although the reforms support the principles of additive bilingualism and multilingual inclusivity, they have yet to fully address the *voluntary language shift* observed in groups such as the Gagauz, Ukrainian, and Bulgarian populations, where Russian often replaces heritage languages in both education and daily life.

This reality makes it difficult the expand instruction in minority languages. While there have been initiatives to open schools offering full instruction in Gagauz, Ukrainian, or Bulgarian, some of these proposals have been met with parental resistance, reflecting social and economic perceptions about the utility of Russian versus heritage languages. This underscores a crucial tension: legal alignment with European multilingualism norms does not automatically translate into meaningful implementation on the ground.

Nonetheless, the 2023 amendments mark an important step toward building a more equitable and multilingual education system. By creating opportunities for language certification, investing in teacher training, and supporting rural schools, Moldova has taken tangible steps toward realizing the goals set by the *European Education Area 2030*, particularly in promoting access and reducing disparities.

At the same time, the reforms highlight the ongoing complexity of minority language education in Moldova, a context shaped not only by legislation but also by long-standing social dynamics, linguistic preferences, and regional variations. Moving forward, sustained efforts in monitoring, community engagement, and capacity-building will be essential to bridging the gap between policy and practice. Realizing a fully multilingual and inclusive education system will require not just formal reforms, but a deeper commitment to cultural recognition, linguistic equity, and the educational rights of all learners.

6. Strategies for teaching Romanian and English as second languages in multicultural contexts

Effective language education policies must be supported by pedagogical strategies able to address linguistic diversity in classrooms. Another important dimension in the promotion of multilingualism and intercultural education in the Republic of Moldova is the involvement of higher education institutions in research, training, and dissemination activities aligned with European educational values. In recent years, the Ministry of Education and Research has encouraged universities to develop institutional projects that respond to national linguistic needs and to support the integration of multilingual practices into teacher education. In this direction, the "Ion Creangă" State Pedagogical University of Chișinău plays a leading role through both research initiatives and academic events dedicated to multilingual and intercultural education.

One of the most significant recent institutional efforts supporting multilingual education in Moldova is the university-led project *"Development of Teachers through Multilingual Communication in an Intercultural Context."* Monitored by the Ministry of Education and Research, this project is focused on modernizing both initial and ongoing teacher training programs. It promotes teaching methodologies tailored to multilingual classroom environments, with particular emphasis on the *Romanian language as the state language* and on strengthening teachers' competencies in *international languages* such as *English and French*.

Importantly, the project does not overlook Moldova's internal linguistic diversity. In line with European recommendations on linguistic rights and educational inclusion, the initiative also encourages the preservation and pedagogical valorization of minority languages including Gagauz, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, and Romani. This approach supports a more balanced and inclusive language policy in education-one that fosters integration without marginalizing cultural identity.

Academic events also play a key role in advancing the goals of multilingual and intercultural education. In this regard, the scientific conferences organized by *"Ion Creangă" State Pedagogical University (SPU)* serve as important platforms for academic exchange and professional collaboration. Conferences such as *"Multicultural Education -a Formative Space for Values Education,"* held from 2023 to 2025, have brought together education specialists and researchers from *Moldova, Romania, Ukraine, Georgia*, and other European countries.

These events provided space for dialogue on a wide range of critical topics: integrating cultural and linguistic diversity in classrooms, fostering students' intercultural competence, developing inclusive school policies, and strengthening teacher training for plurilingual education. Through interactive workshops, thematic panels, and networking sessions, the conferences have helped build a regional community of practice, fostered

new institutional partnerships, and contributed to Moldova's broader effort to align with European Union multilingualism policies.

In partnership with the Ministry of Education and Research, *"Ion Creangă" SPU* also offers *continuous professional development (CPD)* for educators across the country. These accredited training programs introduce innovative pedagogical methods such as *CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), scaffolding strategies* for Romanian as a second language (RSL) learners, culturally responsive teaching, and early bilingual literacy. Designed with regional needs in mind, these programs directly support teachers working in kindergartens and schools where minority languages are used in daily communication and where inclusive, bilingual teaching approaches are needed.

Moreover, *"Ion Creangă" SPU* specialists play a direct role in curriculum development, producing teaching materials and assessment tools specifically designed for the instruction of Romanian in minority-language settings. These resources are developed in accordance with the strategic goals of the European Education Area (EEA 2030), particularly its focus on educational inclusion, language equity, and professional mobility.

Together, these institutional initiatives reflect Moldova's growing commitment to a multilingual and inclusive education system, one that values linguistic diversity as a resource rather than a barrier. By *strengthening teacher training, promoting intercultural understanding*, and *aligning national practices with European frameworks*, Moldova is laying important groundwork for the development of a more equitable and culturally responsive education landscape. A clear example of multilingual education in practice can be seen in the collaboration between Comrat State University and the Ministry of Education and Research in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia. In June 2025, the university launched a professional development program targeting 74 educators across 56 preschools, with the specific aim of strengthening the Gagauz language while supporting Romanian language development. Backed by a government investment of approximately 290,000 Moldovan lei, the initiative included both teacher training and the distribution of methodological toolkits to aid instruction in multilingual settings.

Earlier that year, in January 2025, a parallel effort supported by the Ministry of Education and the OSCE resulted in the distribution of over 1,400 Romanian-language textbooks and 2,800 work-notebooks to kindergartens across Gagauzia. These materials were part of a bilingual education program promoting early exposure to both Romanian and Gagauz. Together, these coordinated efforts—teacher training, curriculum development, and resource provision—demonstrate how higher education institutions and policymakers can work hand-in-hand to translate multilingualism into everyday educational practice, especially within minority-language communities.

In Moldova, where many ethnic minority children begin school with limited proficiency in Romanian, the state language, and where English is increasingly vital for international mobility, language education must be both inclusive and integrative. Multicultural approach to teaching-learning process contributes to the increase of learning outcomes (Burea, 2024). More than this, current thinking in language education emphasizes the importance of communicative competence, learner agency, and multilingual approaches that value students' existing linguistic knowledge rather than treating it as a deficit (Cummins, 2014; García & Wei, 2014). This perspective aligns with Moldova's broader educational goal: to build an equitable, multilingual environment where diverse linguistic backgrounds are seen as assets in the classroom.

One approach particularly suited to this context is CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), a dual-purpose methodology where students learn academic content through a second or foreign language (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010). CLIL helps students develop both subject knowledge and language skills, creating authentic opportunities for language acquisition in meaningful contexts.

In Moldova, CLIL can be effectively used to support Romanian as a second language (L2), particularly in schools serving minority communities. For instance, subjects like History, Geography, or Environmental Studies can be taught through Romanian, with scaffolded instruction that ensures comprehension and participation.

A Geography lesson in a school in Gagauzia might focus on Moldova's river systems. The teacher uses visual maps, bilingual vocabulary lists (Romanian–Gagauz or Romanian–Russian), and structured sentence frames such as "Rîul Nistru se află în..." Students work in mixed-ability groups to describe geographical features, combining language outcomes (e.g., use of descriptive phrases in Romanian) with content outcomes (e.g., identifying and locating major rivers and mountains in Moldova). This method not only builds Romanian proficiency but does so in a way that supports content learning and cooperative classroom interaction.

CLIL can also enhance English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction. For example, science experiments, timeline projects, or cultural presentations can be integrated into English lessons to create purposeful, engaging communication opportunities. These activities allow learners to use English in authentic, task-based scenarios, aligning with European standards for multilingual education and moving beyond textbook exercises.

Together, these initiatives and classroom practices reflect a growing coherence between Moldova's education reforms, institutional collaborations, and European multilingualism standards. Whether through teacher training, early childhood programs, or CLIL-based classroom strategies, Moldova is taking steps to bridge the gap between policy and practice ensuring that students from all backgrounds are given the tools to thrive in a multilingual, intercultural society.

Translanguaging, developed by García (2009; 2017), is an approach that allows students to use their full linguistic collection-Romanian, Russian, Gagauz, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, Romani, or English-during learning. Instead of forcing strict separation of languages, translanguaging encourages strategic language use to support comprehension, participation, and critical thinking (Cenoz, 2017).

In Moldova, teachers in multilingual classrooms can use translanguaging to bridge meaning and reduce linguistic exclusion. For example, classroom discussions may begin in students' home language (e.g. Russian or Gagauz) to build understanding, while final outputs are produced in Romanian. This maintains academic consistency while recognizing linguistic diversity. Example classroom technique:

-Preview a text about "Moldova's traditions" in Romanian.

-Students first discuss the topic in small groups using any language they prefer.

-The teacher builds a Romanian vocabulary board from students' ideas.

-Students write a short paragraph in Romanian using the created vocabulary.

This approach respects minority identities while supporting Romanian language acquisition-key for integration.

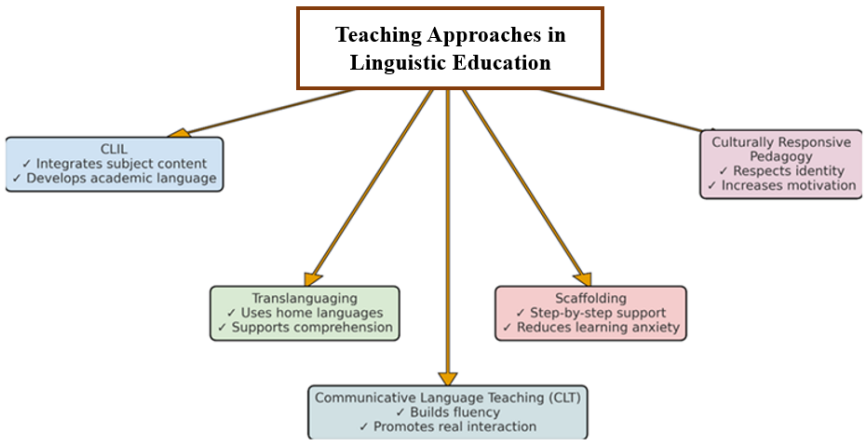

Figure 3. Approaches for teaching languages in the multicultural contexts of Moldova

Scaffolding is rooted in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory, where teachers provide temporary support to help learners perform tasks they could not accomplish independently (Glassman, 2001). In Romanian or English language learning, scaffolding includes: sentence starters, visual organizers, model texts, bilingual glossaries, peer interaction. These supports are gradually removed as proficiency increases. For example, beginner students learning Romanian may first describe family using a template: "Aceasta este familia mea. Mama mea se numește __ și ea este __. Tatăl meu lucrează ca __."

This structured guidance builds confidence and reduces language anxiety-particularly important for minority students transitioning to Romanian-only examinations.

As Geneva Gay (2018) argues, culturally responsive pedagogy acknowledges that students' cultural and linguistic identities are not peripheral but central to effective learning. By integrating students' heritage backgrounds into the learning process, educators can create more inclusive and engaging classroom environments. In Moldova, this approach is particularly relevant, as many ethnic minority students—including Gagauz, Ukrainian, Russian, Bulgarian, and Roma learners—often report feeling detached from Romanian-language textbooks and curricula that do not reflect their lived experiences or cultural traditions.

Culturally responsive teaching addresses this disconnect by embedding elements of minority cultures into language instruction. For example, during a Romanian writing lesson on "winter traditions," students might be encouraged to compare colindele românești (Romanian carols) with Gagauz şarlama, Bulgarian survakane, or Ukrainian koliadka. This activity not only strengthens students' ability to use comparative language structures in Romanian, but also validates their cultural backgrounds and promotes intercultural understanding within the classroom. Such strategies help make language learning more meaningful, inclusive, and motivating.

In parallel, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) offers another powerful approach for enhancing language proficiency, particularly in English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction. As Richards and Rodgers (2014) emphasize, CLT shifts the focus from memorizing grammar rules to developing communicative competence-the ability to use language effectively in real-life situations. In Moldova, many students

demonstrate strong knowledge of English grammar but struggle with fluency and confidence in speaking.

CLT addresses this gap by emphasizing interactive and task-based activities such as role plays, pair work, and information-gap tasks, where students must collaborate and communicate to complete meaningful tasks. These methods foster not only language accuracy but also authentic language use, helping learners build confidence and practical skills in speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

Together, culturally responsive pedagogy and CLT provide complementary strategies for promoting equity and effectiveness in language education. They help transform classrooms into spaces where all students-regardless of linguistic background, participate, feel represented, and succeed.

In conclusion, Moldova's evolving language education policy reflects a growing commitment to multilingualism, inclusion, and alignment with European standards. Through legislative reforms, teacher training, culturally responsive pedagogy, and innovative approaches like CLIL and CLT, the country is working to create a more equitable educational environment for all learners. Initiatives supporting minority languages, alongside Romanian and English, demonstrate how multilingualism can foster both national cohesion and cultural diversity. However, challenges remain in implementation, particularly in minority communities. Continued investment, community engagement, and inclusive practices will be essential to fully realize Moldova's vision for a multilingual and interculturally competent education system.

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RELIGION AND IDENTITY IN THE ROMANIAN DIASPORA. A CASE STUDY ON THE FORMATION AND SOCIO-CULTURAL ROLE OF THE ROMANIAN PENTECOSTAL CHURCH IN AUSTRIA

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Abstract. *This study examines the relationship between religion and identity in the context of contemporary Romanian migration, focusing on the formation and socio-cultural functions of the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria. The analysis highlights the ways in which this religious institution contributes to identity reconstruction, community cohesion, and the social integration of Romanians settled in the diaspora. The historical evolution of the community, the territorial expansion of the church network, and the diversification of its functions reflect a continuous adaptation to the demographic, economic, and cultural conditions of Austrian society. The church not only preserves religious values and practices but also provides tangible educational and social resources within a transnational framework in which new generations simultaneously negotiate cultural belonging and local integration. By analysing this case, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of religion's role as an institutional and identity-shaping vector within the Romanian community in Austria.*

Keywords: *religion, identity, Romanian Pentecostal Church, integration, transnationalism, migration.*

Introduction

In a global context marked by the intensification of international mobility and the diversification of migratory flows, religion emerges as a key element in the articulation of diasporic identities. Beyond its spiritual dimension, the religious space becomes a framework for social cohesion, a source of tangible support for migrant integration, and a means of preserving cultural values within host societies. The Romanian community in Austria reflects this complexity, particularly through the activity of neo-Protestant denominations, which have developed consolidated institutional forms and effective mechanisms of community support. This article analyses the ways in which the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria (Pfingstkirche Gemeinde Gottes in Österreich) has contributed to the formation and cohesion of the Romanian diaspora, fulfilling a role that transcends the strictly liturgical sphere. Through support networks, educational activities, and an infrastructure adapted to local realities, the church operates as a social, cultural, and identity-shaping actor. The applied methodology combines qualitative data (interviews with religious leaders), the analysis of internal documents, and demographic data on community distribution. Therefore, the study provides a transnational perspective

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on religion as a resource for integration, community support, and identity maintenance within the contemporary Romanian diaspora.

1. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Religion plays a fundamental role in the process of identity reconstruction among migrants, especially in diasporic contexts where forms of belonging are constantly renegotiated. This study focuses on the ways in which the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria functions as a social actor in shaping the collective identity of the Romanian community. It is examined not only as a religious institution in the traditional sense but also as a space of cohesion, cultural continuity, and support for social integration. To grasp the complexity of these processes, the research relies on a theoretical framework that combines a transnational approach with a constructivist perspective. The former highlights how migrants' social, cultural, and institutional networks develop simultaneously across multiple geographical areas without severing ties to the country of origin. The latter emphasizes that identity is socially constructed, shaped by norms, interactions, and institutions that give meaning to belonging in a context of mobility. In this way, religion becomes a mechanism through which not only individual beliefs, but also collective values and community capital are articulated within a transnational space in constant transformation.

1.1 Religion in a Transnational Context

Transnationalism provides a solid conceptual framework for the analysis of Romanian migration, as it highlights the ways in which migrants maintain stable relationships with both their places of origin and destination. According to Thomas Faist (2006), these relationships develop within "transnational social spaces," complex networks of symbolic, social, and institutional ties that transcend state borders. Within these spaces, religion holds a central place. Faist emphasizes that the paradigmatic form of transnational communities is made up of religious groups and cross-border churches such as Christian, Islamic, Jewish, or Hindu communities which function as agents of solidarity and cohesion beyond the national framework. These religious institutions predate the emergence of modern states and continue to sustain diasporic collective identities through symbolic and organizational networks that connect members located in different regions of the world (Faist 2006: p. 5).

This approach is reinforced by the research of Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc, who introduced the concept of "transmigrants," individuals who actively maintain familial, economic, social, and religious relationships across countries, asserting that "transmigrants develop multiple relationships that cross borders" (N.G. Schiller, L. Basch, and C.S. Blanc,1995: pp. 48–50). Within this framework, religious networks facilitate interaction and solidarity among geographically dispersed communities, providing a platform for cohesion and collective action.

Peggy Levitt (2002) makes a significant theoretical contribution by focusing on the institutional dimension of religion in the context of transnational migration. She shows that the structure and organization of religious institutions directly influence the direction and intensity of migrants' engagements. Some institutional configurations encourage a strong orientation toward the community of origin, while others facilitate involvement in globally spanning networks. In this sense, religion not only mediates symbolic continuity but also guides migrants' participation in multiple social spaces

(local, national, and transnational), thereby reshaping forms of belonging and identity (Levitt, 2002: p. 2).

Steven Vertovec (2009) deepens this approach by emphasizing that religion in the diaspora is manifested through institutional networks and rituals that operate simultaneously across multiple social spaces. These religious structures contribute to maintaining symbolic cohesion, reproducing identities, and generating transnational social fields where norms and meanings are shared among community members regardless of their geographic location (Vertovec, 2009: pp. 146–147). Migration, diaspora, and transnationalism thus become interconnected analytical frameworks within which religion plays an active role in shaping behaviour, norms, and belonging.

1.2 Religious Identity and the Constructivist Approach

In the context of migration, identity becomes a process of continuous reconstruction, shaped by the tension between adapting to the host society and preserving one's own values. Religion plays a central role in this equation, functioning not only as a spiritual space but also as a mechanism of cohesion and as a stable point of reference for collective belonging.

Constructivist approaches argue that identity is the result of social and symbolic processes, shaped through interactions and norms internalized in multiple contexts (Wendt, 1992: p. 397). In the diaspora, this construction of identity becomes more complex, and religion takes on an amplified role: that of maintaining the symbolic coherence of the group and articulating continuity with the place of origin. In this regard, José Casanova's (1994) theory provides a relevant interpretative framework. His analysis of the "return of religion in the public sphere" shows that in late modernity religion is no longer excluded from social life but is rearticulated as an active public actor, with enhanced identity and civic functions (Casanova, 1994: p. 5). This phenomenon is also visible in the diaspora, where religion becomes a form of asserting collective identity in pluralist contexts. This approach is compatible with the constructivist perspective on identity, which views identity not as an essential, fixed trait, but as a social construction shaped through interactions, norms, and processes of socialization.

At the empirical level, Romanian research confirms this identity-forming function of religion within the diaspora. More than a simple spiritual reference point, religion emerges as a key pillar of cultural identity. Although the norms and traditions of the host society are respected by migrants, they are not fully internalized as part of their own cultural repertoire. Religion thus becomes the element of continuity that provides stability in the process of identity reconfiguration (Cormoş, 2011: p. 196). By preserving traditions, religion acts as an anchor of cultural memory and as a mechanism of resistance to assimilation pressures. This function is further reinforced by the intergenerational dimension of religion in the diaspora. In Romanian families, the first generations consciously invest in preserving religion, considering it essential for transmitting cultural identity to younger generations (Ducu, 2018: pp. 71–72). Even in contexts marked by secularization or religious pluralism, religion remains an active marker of identity. Participation in religious rituals within Romanian communities abroad represents a public reaffirmation of belonging to a collective identity.

Therefore, applying a constructivist perspective to religious identity makes it possible to understand how diasporic communities articulate symbolic coherence in pluralist contexts. In the case of the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria, religious identity is not simply preserved but is reinterpreted and adapted according to the

requirements of the host environment. The institution thus becomes a space of identity negotiation, where elements of Romanian tradition are combined with forms of religious expression adapted to the pluralism and norms of Austrian society.

1.3 Religion and Integration

The integration of migrants into host societies cannot be reduced to a simple individual adaptation to dominant norms but entails a complex process of identity negotiation, the affirmation of belonging, and active participation in public life. In this context, religion emerges as a key pillar supporting the connection between the preservation of original cultural values and adaptation to the new socio-cultural environment.

Religious institutions function not only as spaces for preserving the traditions and cultural values of migrant communities but also as active actors in facilitating their integration. According to a study conducted by Vigneri (2022), religious institutions in Europe act as trusted intermediaries between migrants and administrative structures, facilitating access to housing, employment, legal guidance, and emotional stability (Vigneri, 2022: pp. 4–6). They thus serve as resources for everyday integration, particularly for newly arrived migrants, for whom these networks often represent the first point of contact with the host society.

Martikainen (2006) shows that for migrants, participation in a religious community provides "opportunities for building social capital, finding employment and a partner, as well as a framework that offers comfort in an initially foreign environment" (Martikainen, 2006: p. 8). In this regard, religion functions as a mechanism for reducing social vulnerability, offering practical guidance, emotional support, and symbolic mediation in a context marked by uncertainty and change. Religious communities thus become spaces of integration, where individuals develop social and relational skills relevant to the host society. These observations support the idea that religion can make a pragmatic contribution, complementary to institutional interventions, within the broader process of migrants' social inclusion.

From a comparative perspective, Connor (2014) highlights the ways in which religious participation contributes positively to migrant integration, particularly for those belonging to religious minorities. Regular participation in religious activities is associated with higher rates of citizenship acquisition in the United States and with more active electoral participation among religious minorities in Europe (Connor, 2014: p. 90). In Canada, frequent religious participation appears to facilitate interaction between Christian immigrants and individuals from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. From both psychological and social perspectives, religion supports integration by reducing emotional stress and providing symbolic and relational support in an initially foreign environment. Thus, religion facilitates the building of bridges between the individual and the host community. Connor summarizes these effects by stating that, in such contexts, "immigrant religion is an integrated faith".

In light of these contributions, the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria represents a compelling example of a religious institution with multiple functions within the Romanian community. It not only ensures the continuity of Romanian religious values but also provides tangible support in the integration process: language mediation, administrative assistance, spiritual counselling, moral guidance, and collaboration with Austrian institutions. Thus, the church becomes both a platform of community solidarity

and a relevant institutional actor in the social inclusion of Romanian migrants, encompassing identity, civic, and pragmatic dimensions alike.

2. Confessional Diversity in the Romanian Diaspora in Austria

The confessional landscape of the Romanian diaspora in Austria is remarkable for both its density and diversity, faithfully reflecting the religious structure of Romania as well as the processes of reconfiguration generated by migration. The main historical and Neo-Protestant denominations from the country of origin are represented through well-organized local networks with national territorial coverage and roles that go beyond the religious sphere, functioning simultaneously as places of worship, community centres, and significant social actors in the integration of migrants.

The Romanian Orthodox Church is the oldest form of Romanian religious organization in Austria, documented as early as 1902, when General Alexandru Lupu brought together the Romanian community in Vienna and established a chapel in the Dietrichstein Palace. Today, the Romanian Orthodox Church has 34 parishes under the jurisdiction of the Romanian Orthodox Metropolitanate of Germany and Central Europe, with vicariate status since 1998, which grants it administrative coherence and institutional visibility (Cutoi, 2025: p. 197).

The Romanian Pentecostal Church (Pfingstkirche Gemeinde Gottes in Österreich) was founded in 1984 in Vienna and expanded rapidly after 1989 (Andreiescu, 2012: p. 545). With 51 locations and 19,336 members at the end of 2024 (Pădurețu, 2025), it represents one of the most dynamic Romanian Neo-Protestant structures in Austria. The religious organization combines liturgical activity with educational programs (Sunday schools, Romanian language courses, etc.) and intercultural projects aimed both at Romanians and at the Austrian majority community.

The Romanian Greek-Catholic Church operates under the Ordinariate for the Faithful of the Eastern Catholic Churches and is present in seven parishes located in key cities such as Vienna, Linz, and Graz. Its activity was revitalized in the postwar period through the involvement of missionary priests of the exile, and after 1993 it was institutionally reorganized by Fr. Vasile Luțai (Cutoi, 2025: p. 198). The Romanian Baptist Church was founded in 1986 with the support of the Austrian Baptist community and expanded considerably after 1990. At present, it comprises eight locations, offering religious services in the Romanian language as well as support for migrant integration (Cutoi, 2025: p. 199).

The Seventh-day Adventist Church was established in 1986 with the support of the Austrian Adventist community, and in 1988 it began offering services in the Romanian language under the leadership of Pastor Eugen Bostan. It currently has two locations in Vienna and maintains close collaboration with Austrian structures (Cutoi, 2025: p. 199).

The Free Christian Community – Romanian Branch is part of Die Freie Christengemeinde – Pfingstgemeinde in Österreich (FCGÖ), officially recognized in 2013. The branch includes 21 locations and emerged in the 1990s through the integration of Romanian communities into the structure of an already recognized religious denomination (Cutoi, 2025: p. 200). The Christian Evangelical Church is present in two locations in Vienna (districts 10 and 13), with a pastoral mission focused on providing spiritual and social support to newly arrived Romanians (Cutoi, 2025: p. 200).

Through their extensive presence and confessional diversity, Romanian churches in Austria constitute a central element of community life. They ensure identity continuity

by preserving traditions, function as support networks in the process of integration, and promote intercultural dialogue within Austria's pluralist context.

3. The Evolution of the Romanian Pentecostal Church (1984–2024)

The Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria represents a relevant case study for understanding the mechanisms of formation, development, and adaptation of confessional structures within the diaspora. Between 1984 and 2024, its trajectory was shaped by the interaction between the dynamics of Romanian migration and the European politico-economic context, illustrating the ways in which macro-structural factors drive institutional transformations. The evolution of this community can be analysed in three main stages: the formative period of 1984–1989, associated with asylum migration; the phase of accelerated expansion (1990–2006), generated by post-communist openness and the accompanying migratory flows; and the stage of consolidation and diversification (2007–2024), determined by Romania's integration into the European Union and economic migration. This trajectory reflects not only numerical growth and geographical expansion, but also the social, cultural, and identity functions that the church fulfils within the Romanian community in Austria, confirming its role as a central actor in the life of the diaspora (Cutoi, 2025: p. 185).

Context of Formation (1984–1989)

The origins of the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria can be traced to the refugee reception camp in Traiskirchen and the accommodation centers where asylum seekers were redistributed. In 1984, the first community was founded: the "Elim" Pentecostal Church in Vienna, with 12 members (Valeriu Andreiescu, 2012, p. 545). At this stage, the community was composed almost exclusively of individuals with asylum status. By 1989, membership had increased to around 150, and the network expanded through the establishment of churches in Hartberg (approximately 50 members) and Linz (around 25 members). Also in 1989, the church submitted the documents for official recognition to the Federal Ministry of the Interior, being registered on May 31 under the name Verein zur Unterstützung der Gemeinde Gottes in Österreich, and from August 8 under the name Verein der Gemeinde Gottes in Österreich (Cutoi, 2025: p. 181).

Accelerated Expansion (1990–2006)

Between 1990 and 1995, immediately after the regime change in Romania, the opening of borders and the possibility of obtaining refugee status in Austria generated a significant migratory flow, which led to an unprecedented growth of the Romanian Pentecostal community. Membership increased by over 650%, reaching 2,291 individuals, and the network expanded through the establishment of 14 churches in the following locations: Vienna (Emanuel and Betel), Kapfenberg (Maranatha), Braunau, Feldkirchen, Graz, Amstetten, Krems, Wolfsegg, and Waldhausen. Between 1995 and 2001, in a context marked by Austria's accession to the European Union (1995), which strengthened political and economic stability and created a more predictable framework for migrant integration, the Romanian Pentecostal community in Austria gained an additional 1,931 members, representing 29.4% of all Romanian emigrants who settled permanently in the country during this period. This growth was accompanied by significant institutional expansion, with the founding of six new churches in Wiener Neustadt, Vienna, Linz, Gleisdorf, Salzburg, and Bruck an der Leitha, reflecting the community's capacity to respond to the growing demand for religious services and social

support among newcomers (Cutoi, 2025: p.181). A key moment of this stage was the official recognition, on October 13, 2001, as Pfingstkirche Gemeinde Gottes, a religious community with legal personality. The period 2002–2006 was shaped by the effects of the elimination of visas for Romanian citizens in 2001, a measure that granted them the right to free movement within the European Union and stimulated transnational mobility. Although the pace of numerical growth slowed to 14.2% (2.8% annually), the church network continued to expand through the establishment of three new congregations in Wels, Oberwart, and Klagenfurt, reflecting institutional maturity and geographical expansion into areas with emerging Romanian communities (Cutoi, 2025: pp.181–184).

Consolidation and Diversification (2007–2024)

Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007 marked the beginning of a new stage of growth for the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria, facilitated by freedom of movement and broader access to economic opportunities within the EU. Between 2007 and 2013, membership increased by 71.6%, corresponding to an average annual growth rate of 10.24%. Although significant, this growth was approximately half the general pace of the Romanian community in Austria, suggesting the influence of internal factors of organization and integration. During the period 2014–2024, the gradual removal of labour market restrictions for Romanian citizens consolidated this trend, bringing an additional 8,309 members, equivalent to a total growth of 75.3% and an average annual rate of 5.8%. In the same period, the territorial network expanded from 38 to 51 congregations (Ion Pădureț u, 2025), reflecting both the institution's capacity to integrate newcomers and its strengthened role as a pole of spiritual and social cohesion within the Romanian diaspora in Austria.

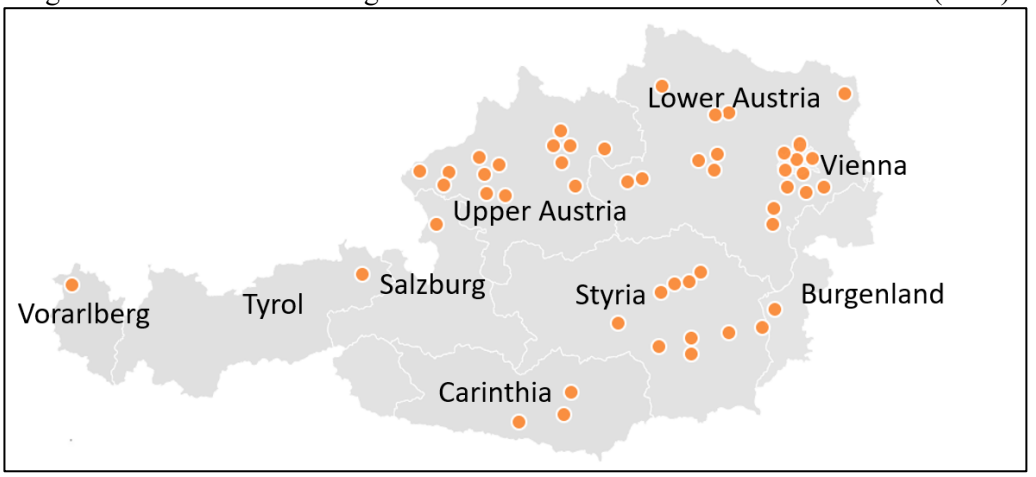
The longitudinal analysis confirms that the development of the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria has been closely linked to two major macro-level factors: the regime changes of 1989, which generated family reunification migration, and European integration in 2007, which stimulated labour migration and facilitated the numerical and geographical expansion of the community. The combined effect of these two contexts enabled not only an increase in membership, but also the diversification of activities, consolidating the church's position as a central social and cultural actor within the Romanian community in Austria.

4. Demographic and Geographical Distribution

The geographical distribution of the 51 Romanian Pentecostal churches affiliated with Pfingstkirche Gemeinde Gottes in Österreich faithfully reflects both the territorial dynamics of Romanian migration in Austria and the institution's capacity to adapt to the social and demographic realities of the diaspora. Predominantly located in the regions of Vienna, Lower Austria, and Upper Austria, these churches follow the most common routes of economic migration, covering the territories where Romanians have settled in significant numbers. The high concentration of churches in these regions is not coincidental, but rather the expression of a pragmatic institutional organization, through which spiritual and communal support is provided in close proximity to the migrants' areas of residence. The present analysis integrates thematic maps based on data from Statistik Austria (2024) and the denomination's membership report (2024), with the aim of correlating the geographical placement of the churches with the distribution and structure of the Romanian population in Austria.

The cartographic representation of the confessional network allows for the rapid identification of metropolitan clusters, peri-urban continuities and regional nodes, essential elements for understanding processes of localization and institutional consolidation.

Figure 1. Distribution of Pfingstkirche Gemeinde Gottes Churches in Austria (2024)



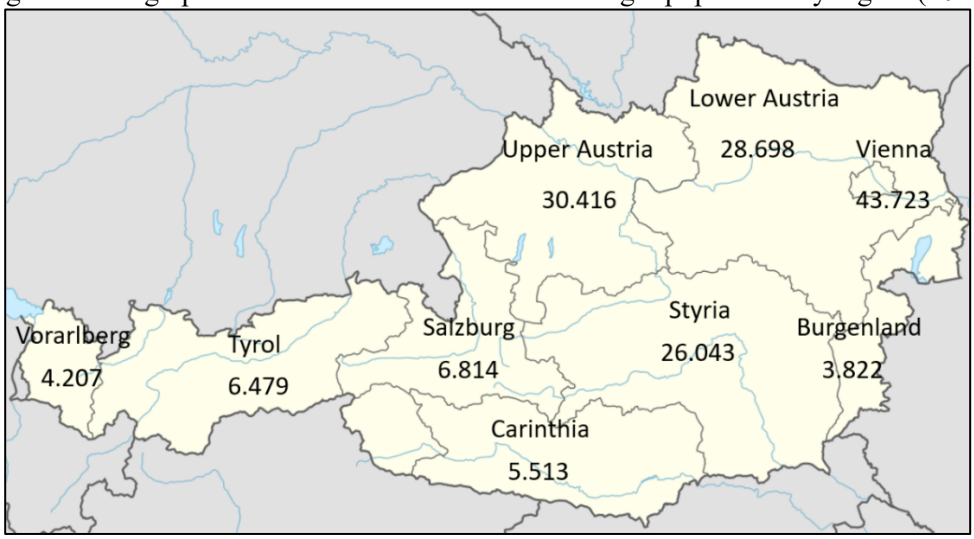
Author's own elaboration. Source: *The Communities in Austria*, official website of the Pentecostal Church

The confessional network takes shape in a polycentric model with an eastern focus, displaying a pronounced concentration in Vienna and in the peri-urban area of Lower Austria, which continues into Upper Austria through a coherent succession of communities arranged along internal mobility routes between residential areas and industrial centres. In the south (Styria, Carinthia) and in the west (Salzburg, Tyrol, Vorarlberg), the locations are fewer and the distances between them greater, which suggests a nodal functioning, with large regional service areas.

The correlation with the presence of the Romanian-origin population is more complex than a simple proportionality. Numerically, there is an overlap with the major urban centres, but density and positioning are mediated by contextual factors such as housing costs, internal mobility, and the maturity of community networks. After 2007, with an intensification following 2014 once full access to the labour market was liberalized, a trend of confessional peri-urbanization emerged. Communities expanded beyond the central nuclei toward satellite localities, such as Brunn am Gebirge. The church network does not automatically reproduce population density, but rather optimizes local access, placing communities in proximity to areas with a stable Romanian population, where confessional nuclei have been consolidated through processes of durable settlement and community cohesion. The resulting configuration indicates a model of controlled expansion, in which new locations appear on the margins of mature urban areas, while in the southern and western regions they function as regional poles of cohesion.

In order to provide demographic context for the placement of the network, the following map illustrates the numerical distribution of the Romanian-origin population across administrative regions.

Figure 2. Geographic distribution of the Romanian-origin population by region (2024)

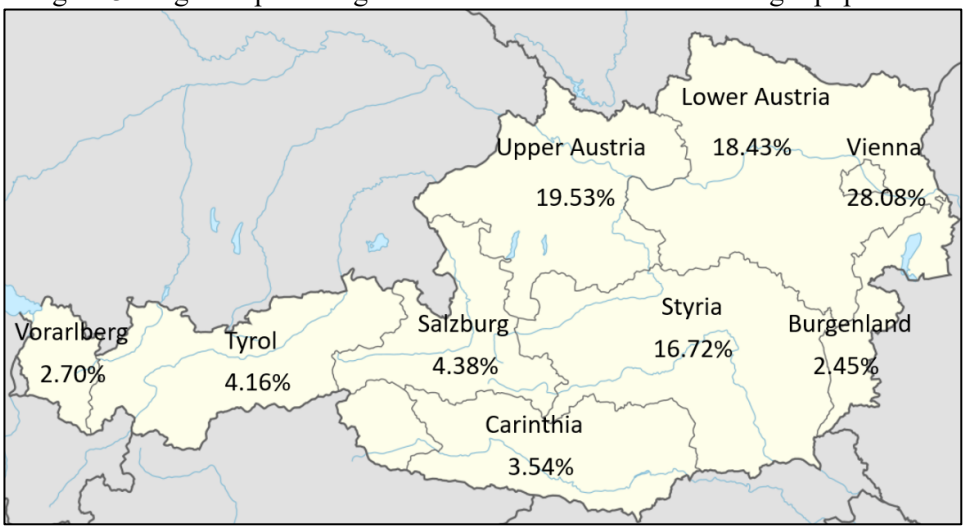


Author's own elaboration, data provided by Federal Statistic Office Austria

The numerical distribution of the Romanian population across administrative regions confirms this dynamic. Four major nuclei are outlined in the eastern and southeastern parts of Austria, while the western regions are visibly less populated. This demographic geography directly influences the architecture of the confessional network: where communities are numerous and compact, the density of churches is higher; in areas with smaller and more dispersed populations, religious communities are fewer and assume regional roles. Thus, a clear correlation emerges between the concentration of the Romanian population and the location of the churches.

For greater nuance, the analysis of proportions by federal state is essential. Regions with high shares of Romanian-origin population (Vienna, Lower Austria, and Upper Austria) support a dense and diversified ecclesial infrastructure. By contrast, regions such as Carinthia or Styria, although more modest in numerical terms, host well-cohesive communities, a sign of confessional intensity exceeding the expectations suggested by group size. This disproportionate confessional intensity in relation to numerical dimension suggests an accentuated religious mobilization in certain territories, where the church functions as a central pillar of identity.

Figure 3. Regional percentage distribution of the Romanian-origin population

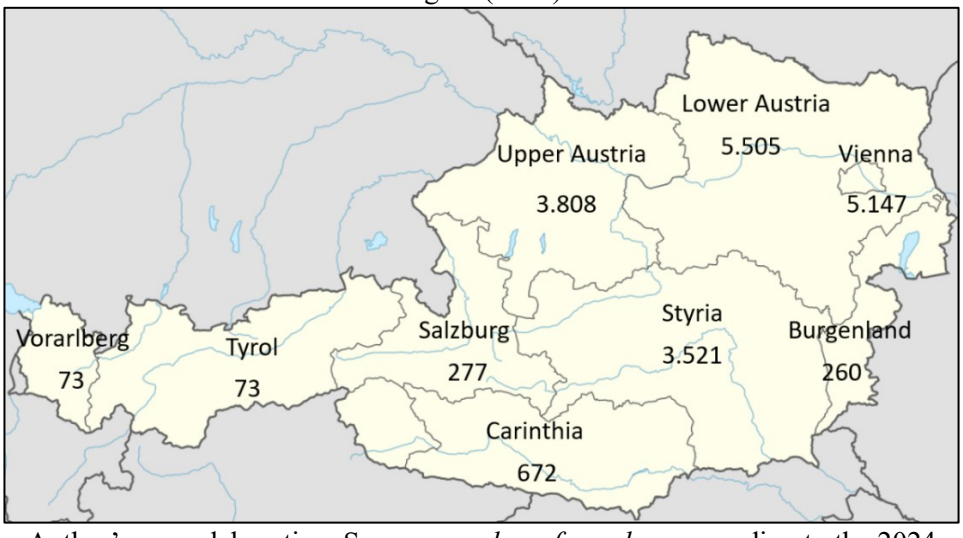


Author's own elaboration, data provided by Federal Statistic Office Austria.

he percentage data provide a complementary perspective on the distribution: approximately 28% of all Romanians in Austria reside in Vienna, while Lower Austria and Upper Austria together account for almost 38%. Styria contributes another 17%. The western regions, such as Tyrol, Vorarlberg, and Burgenland, register much smaller demographic shares. This structure supports the organization of a dense confessional network in the east and southeast, while in the federal states with smaller shares, nodal organizational models prevail, with regional centres serving several dispersed localities.

To evaluate the institutional response, the following map displays the number of members of Pfingstkirche Gemeinde Gottes by federal state.

Figure 4. Distribution of Pfingstkirche Gemeinde Gottes members by administrative region (2024)

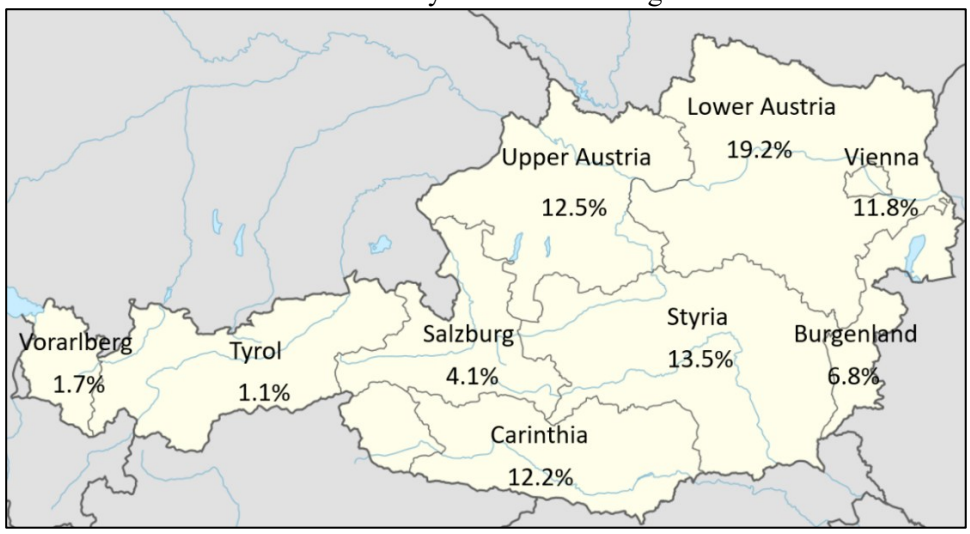


Author's own elaboration. Source: *number of members* according to the 2024 membership report of Pfingstkirche Gemeinde Gottes in Österreich.

The distribution of members confirms these observations. Lower Austria (5,505) and Vienna (5,147) concentrate the largest communities, followed by Upper Austria (3,808) and Styria (3,521). Carinthia (672), Salzburg (277), and Burgenland (260) maintain smaller but stable communities, while Tyrol and Vorarlberg (73 members each) remain peripheral. A notable phenomenon of recent years is the transfer of the confessional centre from the capital to the peri-urban area. The locality of Brunn am Gebirge, which since 2020 has become the main Pentecostal nucleus of Lower Austria, illustrates this process, surpassing Vienna in terms of membership. This shift can be interpreted both as an adaptation to socio-economic realities and as an expression of a stage of institutional maturation.

To estimate confessional intensity at the local level, the map below relates the number of members to the total number of residents of Romanian origin in each federal state.

Figure 5. Share of the Pentecostal community within the Romanian population and its distribution by administrative region



Author's own elaboration. Source: *number of members* according to the 2024 membership report of Pfingstkirche Gemeinde Gottes in Österreich.

The proportion of Pentecostal church members relative to the total Romanian population in each federal state varies considerably at the national level. The highest values are recorded in Lower Austria, where approximately 19.2% of Romanians are affiliated with this denomination, followed by Styria with 13.5%, Upper Austria with 12.5%, Carinthia with 12.2%, and Vienna with 11.8%. In contrast, Salzburg and Burgenland present intermediate values, around 4.1% and 6.8%, while in Tyrol and Vorarlberg the proportions remain very low, below 2%. This heterogeneous profile of confessional intensity reflects not only the numerical distribution of the population, but above all the capacity of local communities to generate, sustain, and reproduce institutionalized forms of religious life. Regions with higher proportions generally correspond to social and economic contexts favourable to migrant stabilization, where housing infrastructure, access to employment, and relative community cohesion create

conditions conducive to consistent confessional participation. Conversely, in regions with lower proportions, the territorial profile is marked by dispersion, high mobility, and seasonal economic opportunities, which make it more difficult to form stable religious centres.

Viewed as a whole, the proportion of Pentecostal members within the Romanian population in Austria stands at around 12.4%. This level is significantly higher than in Romania, where, according to the 2021 census, the Pentecostal denomination represented approximately 2.12% of the general population (National Institute of Statistics (Romania), Resident Population by Religion, 2021). This difference is not accidental and reflects a phenomenon relevant to the analysis of contemporary migration: confessional selection. Recent studies indicate that migration does not affect all religious categories within a society equally. Individuals with an active religious life and a clearly defined sense of community belonging tend to mobilize more easily within already existing diasporic networks, where they can find support, recognition, and a familiar framework.

The distribution of Romanian Pentecostal churches in Austria reflects a pragmatic adaptation to the residential realities of the diaspora, shaping a polycentric and flexible network. Communities are not concentrated exclusively in major urban centres but also extend to neighbouring localities and rural areas, following the residential stabilization paths of migrants. Compared to Romania, confessional mobilization is higher, which indicates a religious selection specific to migration and highlights the institutional role of the church as a form of community organization.

5. Social, Cultural, and Identity Functions of the Church

In the context of Romanian migration to Austria, the Romanian Pentecostal Church has naturally extended its traditional role, becoming a complex institution of community cohesion, practical support, and identity reconstruction. This extended functionality reflects the adaptation of a diasporic community to a different socio-cultural environment, responding to its members' needs for stability, belonging, and orientation.

Community Support and Social Integration

Since the 1990s, the church has functioned as a support network for migrants. According to Pastor Ionel Vlas, the church was a point of refuge for newcomers (Vlas, interview, July 15, 2025). In his words, "the church was the first place of hope" for those arriving without resources or personal networks. The community provided temporary accommodation, administrative support, free German language courses, and informal networks of community assistance, contributing to the integration of the most vulnerable, including undocumented individuals or those recently released from immigrant camps (Vlas, interview, July 15, 2025). This informal infrastructure became an essential component of the social integration process, particularly in the absence of institutional support from the host state. The church thus functioned as a mediator between migrants and Austrian society, emphasizing values such as hospitality, belonging, and trust. The relationships established with local authorities, schools, and the police extended the role of the community from one of ad-hoc charity to that of an intermediary institution, capable of generating internal cohesion and external bridges of collaboration. Through the active involvement of its leaders and members, the church encouraged civic participation and the socio-professional formation of its adherents. Pastor Ruben Avram emphasizes the importance of responsible integration: "you cannot be a citizen here and remain only culturally in Romania" (Ruben Avram, interview, July 15, 2025). In this

sense, the church also functions as an informal educational space for understanding the values and structures of Austrian society.

Religious Education and the Formation of the New Generation

One of the central objectives of the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria is the spiritual education of young people, situated within the context of their belonging to two distinct cultural spheres: the Romanian and the Austrian. The generation born and raised in the diaspora frequently faces an identity in the process of definition, oscillating between the familiarity of ethnic heritage and the demands of social adaptation. Some young people maintain their connection to Romania through language, family, or artistic expressions, while others gravitate toward the German language and the values of the host society. However, most, as Pastor Ruben Avram observes, position themselves in a middle ground, regarding this hybrid stance as an opportunity to affirm a personal and nuanced identity (Avram, interview, July 15, 2025).

Within this framework, Sunday school[1] plays a fundamental role. It does not provide only biblical instruction but also addresses a complex educational need, becoming a space of moral, theological, and cultural formation that is not ordinarily accessible in the family environment. Avram points out that many parents, although well-intentioned, do not possess sufficient linguistic or cultural competencies to transmit to their children a faith articulated in the terms of the Austrian context. In this sense, the church fills a major gap in the process of mediation between religious values and contemporary cultural challenges. The educational purpose is not merely catechetical but formative in a broad sense: young people are taught to distinguish between the essentials of faith and its contingent cultural forms. This distinction is crucial for maintaining a living faith in a pluralistic environment. "Young people must know what must be firmly preserved and what is negotiable," Avram argues, advocating for a transcultural approach that avoids confusing tradition with faith (Avram, interview, July 15, 2025). Thus, the church becomes not only a framework for religious learning but also a symbolic space of identity negotiation, offering an anchoring point for those who do not feel fully represented either by Romania or by Austria. In this process, Sunday school acquires a strategic function: it shapes a generation capable of internalizing Christian values in a way that is relevant for their life in the diaspora. It does not merely transmit religious information but cultivates cultural discernment and identity stability, providing young people with the necessary resources to assume a conscious, non-conflictual belonging within the context of a secularized Western society.

Cultural and Identity Dimension

On the cultural level, the Church functions as a bridge between tradition and the present. Through events organized in the Romanian language, as well as through bilingual initiatives (German–Romanian), it preserves the connection with Romanian heritage while simultaneously facilitating openness toward the host society. Christmas, Easter, and other holidays become occasions not only for religious celebration but also

[1] Within the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria, Sunday School is organized into age-homogeneous groups, closely aligned with the structure of public education. It includes children between the ages of 4 and 16, with each group composed of participants of the same age, allowing for a consistent educational process tailored to the children's developmental and cognitive levels.

for the reaffirmation of collective identity within a multicultural space. According to Ionel Vlas, these events are conducted primarily in Romanian; however, there is a clear trend of linguistic adaptation, especially among young people. Some churches already organize programs in German, particularly on the occasion of holidays, evangelistic campaigns, or special youth events (Vlas, interview, July 15, 2025). This openness reflects both the need for communication with the host society and the desire to maintain religious relevance in an intercultural context.

For many young people born or raised in the diaspora, Romania is not a lived reality but rather an imagined construct, an idealized 'home' transmitted through the language of parents, sermons, and childhood stories, observes Ruben Avram. "This mythical Romania functions as an affective reference point for their identity, but it is not always compatible with the everyday experiences lived in Austria" (Avram, interview, July 15, 2025). In this context, the church becomes the space in which young people can consciously navigate this tension between the idealized cultural heritage and the pluralistic reality in which they live. It provides a framework in which collective memory is articulated with the present, and traditional values can be reinterpreted in a way that is meaningful for diaspora identity.

Institutional Representation and Public Dialogue

The Church is also active at the institutional level, being a member of the Evangelical Alliance of Austria[2] and participating in civic initiatives such as the "March for Life" or the "Prayer Breakfast" organized in the Austrian Parliament. Ruben Avram, in his capacity as coordinator of interdenominational relations and liaison with state authorities, argues that such initiatives contribute to increasing the visibility of the Romanian community and to consolidating a positive public image. In parallel, there are Romanian interdenominational collaborations with Orthodox, Baptist, and Greek Catholic churches, reflecting a growing interest in the spiritual unity of the diaspora beyond doctrinal differences (Vlas, interview, July 15, 2025). These relationships contribute to a form of pragmatic ecumenism centered on solidarity rather than theological fusion. Thus, the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria emerges as an essential node in the social and symbolic ecology of the Romanian diaspora, functioning simultaneously as a space of worship, a support network, and a framework for identity formation.

6. Interpretive Analysis: Religion as an Identity and Institutional Vector in the Diaspora

Religion represents one of the essential resources through which diasporic communities negotiate their identity and consolidate their institutional presence in host societies. In the case of the Romanian Pentecostal community in Austria, the role of religion goes beyond the spiritual and liturgical framework, simultaneously functioning as an identity mechanism, a community institution, and an affective space.

[2] The Evangelical Alliance of Austria (Evangelische Allianz Österreich) is a national network that brings together Protestant and evangelical churches, organizations, and communities. It functions as part of the European Evangelical Alliance and provides a platform for interdenominational cooperation, public advocacy, and dialogue with state institutions. The Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria is an affiliated member through its designated representatives.

Religion as a Mechanism of Identity Continuity

One of the major effects of religion in the diaspora is the creation of a framework of continuity within a context characterized by mobility and exposure to different cultures. The presence of the Romanian language in worship services, the organization of religious programs for children and young people, contribute to the formation of a space in which belonging to Romanian identity is cultivated consistently. This process is not limited to the reproduction of cultural forms but involves an affective and spiritual rootedness that provides a sense of continuity and stability in relation to one's origins. The responses of interviewees confirm this identity dimension. Ruben Avram observes, for instance, that for many young people born or raised in Austria, Romania is no longer an everyday reality but rather a symbolic reference, an imagined framework that nurtures belonging. In this sense, the church becomes the space that translates the symbolic dimension into practical belonging, offering a common language and a set of values in which members of the community can recognize themselves, even when the direct experience of Romania is absent. This form of identity continuity is, however, dynamic. It presupposes a process of adaptation to the realities of life in the diaspora and a negotiation between inherited values and those encountered in the host society. In this respect, the religious community becomes a framework for reflection and balance between tradition and change. Through educational activities and pastoral involvement, it seeks to identify and preserve the elements considered fundamental, such as Christian moral values and the mother tongue, while more flexible cultural aspects are adapted according to the needs and expectations of the new generation (Avram, interview, July 15, 2025). Thus, religion contributes not only to the preservation of Romanian identity but also to the formation of a coherent personal and communal identity, capable of responding to the challenges of life in a multicultural environment.

Religious Recognition and Institutional Consolidation of the Community

An essential aspect in the current dynamics of the Romanian Pentecostal community in Austria is the endeavours to obtain official recognition as a religion within the Austrian state. This process is perceived by community leaders as a natural but fundamental stage in the institutional maturation and the consolidation of the public visibility of the Romanian religious community in the diaspora. At present, the Romanian Pentecostal Church operates under the legal status of religious denomination (staatlich eingetragene religiöse Bekenntnisgemeinschaft), which allows the conduct of religious activities but limits access to certain rights and forms of official representation (Avram, interview, July 15, 2025). The status of recognized religion (anerkannte Kirchen und Religionsgesellschaften)[3], regulated by Austrian legislation, grants access to a series of

[3] In Austria, legal recognition (gesetzliche Anerkennung) constitutes the highest status that the state can confer upon a church or religious society. It entails the granting of public-law legal personality (Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts) and full private legal capacity. Recognized religious bodies are considered to serve the public interest, including religious, social, and cultural functions. According to the Staatsgrundgesetz (Basic Law on the General Rights of Citizens), they are guaranteed the right to public religious practice and internal self-governance. Recognition is subject to several conditions, including a minimum of 20 years of presence in Austria (with at least 10 years in organized form and 5 years as a registered confessional community) and a membership representing at least 0.2% of the total Austrian population, based on the latest census.

important benefits: the teaching of religion in schools, tax deductibility of donations, extended legal protection, and, above all, participation in advisory councils in the dialogue between the state and religious communities. According to Ruben Avram, the process is at an advanced stage: the official dossier has been prepared and already submitted to the Ministry of Culture and is currently under review in accordance with Austrian institutional procedures. Behind this endeavor lie years of administrative work and internal mobilization.

From the perspective of the community, recognition would officially validate not only the existence of an active and organized religious reality but also its contribution to social and educational life in Austria. It would also provide a framework through which young people in the community could learn religion in schools with teachers trained in the specific confessional tradition. In addition, recognized status would allow for the consolidation of institutional partnerships at the local and regional level, including collaboration with municipalities, schools, the police, and other civic structures, areas in which the church is already actively involved on an informal basis. This legal endeavour is not motivated solely by administrative benefits. In a pluralist and secularized society, where access to the public sphere is mediated through structures of official recognition, legal status is also an indicator of symbolic legitimacy. In this context, obtaining recognition means not only being tolerated but being regarded as a legitimate dialogue partner, an integral part of the religious diversity acknowledged by the Austrian state. This process expresses the transition of the religious community from a stage characterized by organization based on internal solidarity and local resources to a mature institutional form capable of interacting formally and equitably with the institutions of the host state. At the same time, it marks a repositioning of Romanian religious identity within the Austrian space: from a tolerated community to one affirmed, recognized, and actively involved in civic life.

The Transnational Dimension of Religion and the Consolidation of European Ties

An important feature of the Romanian Pentecostal community in Austria is the maintenance of consistent transnational relations, both with the Pentecostal Church in Romania and with other Romanian communities in the European diaspora. These ties support confessional and identity cohesion and facilitate a broad framework of spiritual and organizational cooperation. Collaboration with the Pentecostal Church in Romania is both formal and informal. Before the pandemic, an official protocol of collaboration and fraternal connection was signed, formalizing the relationship between the community in Austria and the Christian Pentecostal Denomination – Church of God Apostolic of Romania (Vlas, interview, July 15, 2025). According to Pastor Ionel Vlas, this relationship is natural and profound, since "for the majority of members, the moment of conversion and the first religious experiences took place in the home country, so the spiritual roots remain there." Exchanges of ministers, invitations to conferences, and participation in joint evangelistic campaigns are constant manifestations of these ties.

At the international level, the church in Austria is affiliated with the Church of God, a global Pentecostal organization headquartered in the United States, recognized for its extensive network of communities in Europe and worldwide. This affiliation provides a stable confessional framework, supports spiritual formation, and grants access to organizational, theological, and educational resources. Although participation in international meetings is sometimes limited by logistical resources, the church in Austria

is an active part of this network: "We are part of an international network, we maintain regular ties with them, and we are invited to conferences and meetings. We cannot always participate, but we are included and count within their structure" (Vlas, interview, July 15, 2025).

With regard to relations with other Romanian communities in the European diaspora, cooperation generally has an informal character and develops through occasional participation in conferences, youth gatherings, or missionary events. Pastor Vlas mentions, for example, participation in a European youth meeting organized in Lignano, Italy, before the pandemic. Although the involvement was not structural, such initiatives contribute to maintaining fraternal bonds and strengthening the sense of common belonging: "We rejoice whenever we meet, even if we do not have a solid common structure at the European level".

Through these multiple networks, the church in Austria is inscribed within a transnational logic of faith, in which confessional identity is consolidated through simultaneous belonging to several spheres: spiritual, cultural, and institutional. Religion thus becomes a vector of cohesion between communities separated by distance but united through beliefs, practices, and doctrinal loyalty.

Religion as an Affective Space and the Reconstruction of the Idea of "Home"

In the context of migration, the notion of "home" becomes an affective and symbolic construct rather than a fixed geographical reality. For many members of the Romanian community, the experience of leaving the country and adapting to a new socio-cultural environment entails a profound reconfiguration of identity and emotional reference points. Religion plays an essential role in this process, offering a framework of stability, belonging, and continuity in a reality marked by transition and mobility. Pastor Ruben Avram summarized this experience through the idea of a "sacred mobility": the divine presence accompanies the believer regardless of place, offering spiritual stability even under conditions of mobility. Religion thus becomes an affective vehicle of continuity, an anchor that accompanies the individual across borders and transforms uncertainty into belonging. Pastor Ionel Vlas adds a further nuance: for many believers, especially those who have formed their families and lives in the diaspora, "home" is no longer Romania, but the place where they live day by day: "for some, home is Romania; for others, home is here, where they raise their children, work, and where their church is". This "home" is no longer tied to national origin but to the networks of support, community, and faith that give meaning to everyday life in a new context. In this framework, the church becomes a space where the spiritual dimension intersects with the need for social and emotional stability. It is the place where believers find community support, cultural continuity, and identity recognition. Here the Romanian language is preserved, religious values are transmitted, and relationships of solidarity are built, in an environment free from the pressure to conform to the majority norms of the host society. For many migrants, the church functions as a point of safety and belonging, offering a form of "home" that does not depend on geography but on relationships, faith, and shared values. In this way, religion acquires an extended social function, becoming a stabilizing framework under the conditions of mobility and uncertainty that characterize life in the diaspora.

Conclusions

This study has highlighted the way in which the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria has been constituted and consolidated as an essential actor in the life of the Romanian community in Austria, going beyond the strictly religious sphere and assuming social, educational, and identity functions. The analysis has shown that this institution provides not only a framework for worship but also concrete resources for migrant integration, ranging from administrative support and language courses to activities of community cohesion and the formation of new generations. The geographical distribution and institutional organization reflect continuous adaptation to the territorial and demographic realities of Austria, confirming its pragmatic character and its capacity to respond to the needs of the community. The data also indicate a more intense confessional mobilization than in Romania, a sign that migration favours the selection and consolidation of religious forms with a high degree of community functionality. On the identity level, the church contributes decisively to maintaining symbolic continuity and to articulating a collective belonging that is no longer defined exclusively by geography, but by social networks, shared values, and community solidarity. Through the preservation of the Romanian language, the transmission of religious traditions, and engagement in public life, the institution provides its members with stability and coherence in a pluralist and constantly changing environment. Overall, the case analysed confirms that religion, in the context of the diaspora, is not reduced to a form of tradition preservation, but becomes a catalyst for social integration, community cohesion, and identity reconstruction within a transnational framework.

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HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY

Ioan ZIRBO*

Abstract. *The paper offers a comprehensive and balanced approach to Christian eschatology, analyzing it both theologically and culturally. The author highlights how the idea of the end has provided meaning and hope in times of crisis, from the early Church to the contemporary world. Eschatology is not treated merely as doctrine, but as a mechanism for interpreting suffering and collective fear. Particularly valuable is the connection drawn between religious and modern secular narrative structures. The social functions of eschatology—identity formation, mobilization, and consolation—are also clearly emphasized. In conclusion, eschatology becomes a "mirror" of humanity, reflecting the hopes, traumas, and the need for meaning in every era.*

Keywords: *Christian Eschatology, Secular Perspective, Parousia, Secularization, Illuminism.*

Introduction

Eschatology, defined as the body of beliefs concerning the end of the world, the final judgment, and the destiny of humanity, constitutes a central element of Christian religious thought. From a secular perspective, the study of eschatology offers a unique window into the ways societies interpret uncertainty, suffering, and hope. This paper explores the historical evolution of Christian eschatology, its social and cultural roles, as well as its contemporary expressions, without evaluating its theological truthfulness, but analyzing it as a historical and cultural phenomenon.

Eschatology, a term derived from the Greek *eschatos* (“last”) and *logos* (“word,” “discourse”), designates the branch of theology concerned with the study of events at the end of history: death, final judgment, resurrection of the dead, the coming of the Messiah, and the establishment of a divine order. In Christianity, these themes have occupied a central place since the early Church, being closely tied to the hope of the return of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, the way eschatology has been understood, experienced, and applied has varied greatly depending on the historical era, social conditions, and political context (Grudem, 2004: 1133).

From a secular perspective, eschatology is not regarded merely as a religious doctrine, but as a cultural and social phenomenon that reflects anxieties, aspirations, and collective mechanisms of interpreting crisis. The study of eschatology thus becomes a window into the soul of historical epochs. From the persecuted Christian communities of the first century, who eagerly awaited an imminent deliverance, to modern post-apocalyptic films or theories of climate collapse, eschatology provides a narrative

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framework for confronting suffering, uncertainty, and the hope of change. This paper aims to analyze Christian eschatology from a historical and secular angle, focusing on three fundamental dimensions (Boyer, 1992: 137–150).

1. The historical evolution of eschatological conceptions across different eras: the Early Church, the Middle Ages, the Protestant Reformation, modernity, and the contemporary period (Pagels, 2012: 45–60).

2. The social and psychological functions of eschatology, how it provided hope, cohesion, or mobilization (Brown, 2013: 171–175).

3. Modern and secularized manifestations of eschatology, themes such as ecological collapse or artificial intelligence adopting apocalyptic narrative structures outside the religious context (Jameson, 2003: 65–79).

This paper does not aim at the theological validation of Christian eschatology, but rather at a critical analysis of the ways in which it has influenced and has been influenced by the culture, history, and collective fears of humanity.

1. Historical Perspectives on Eschatology

1.1. Eschatology in the Early Church (1st–4th Centuries)

Social and political context

The first Christian communities developed within the Roman Empire, marked by persecutions, instability, and messianic expectations. These conditions fostered the emergence of an intense eschatology, in which Christ was expected to return soon to establish the Kingdom of God (Ehrman, 2018: 97–102).

Core elements of early eschatology

- Imminence of the Parousia.

The conviction that Jesus would return during the lifetime of the apostolic generation (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17).

- Jewish apocalypticism.

The direct heritage of Jewish apocalyptic literature (Daniel, Enoch) strongly influenced the Christian vision of the end of history (Collins, 1998: 111–115).

- Martyrdom as an eschatological sign.

For many persecuted Christians, martyrdom was considered part of the end times and a confirmation of the imminence of divine judgment (Moss, 2013: 53–60).

Secular interpretation

Secular scholars highlight how early eschatology served as a mechanism of psychological resilience. The promise of a final judgment overturned the world order, offering hope to the marginalized and persecuted (Pagels, 2012: 45–52).

1.2. From imminent eschatology to the consolidation of the Church (4th–8th centuries)

Transformation of expectations after the Edict of Milan (313).

The legalization of Christianity under Constantine radically changed the relationship between Church and state. The expectation of an imminent end diminished, as the Church began to collaborate with political power for social stability (MacCulloch, 2009: 259–265; 655–671).

Augustine's Amillennialism

St. Augustine (354–430) proposed an allegorical interpretation of the millennium in Revelation 20, arguing that the thousand years represent the spiritual reign of Christ

through the Church, not a literal future period. This vision, later called amillennialism, became predominant in the Western Church and stabilized the long-term expectations of believers (Augustine, 1871: 718).

Eschatology in monasticism

Monastic movements preserved a stronger eschatological tension: the ideal of withdrawal from the world was associated with preparation for meeting Christ, but without necessarily preaching an immediate end of history (Brown, 2003: 143–148).

Secular interpretation

From a secular point of view, the transition from imminent eschatology to a more symbolic vision reflects Christianity's adaptation to its role as the official religion. The emphasis on consolidating the institution replaced the need for an immediate apocalyptic expectation (Cohn, 1970: 18–22). This shift from an imminent eschatology, specific to the earliest Christian communities, to a more symbolic and spiritualized vision reflects not only a theological development but also a strategic adaptation to new socio-political conditions. When Christianity moved from being a marginalized and persecuted religion to the official religion of the Roman Empire, the focus was no longer on the imminent expectation of the end of the world, but on consolidating the existing order and strengthening ecclesiastical institutions (MacCulloch, 2009: 259–265).

This shift in emphasis was necessary for the Church to assume a stabilizing role in society. A continuous apocalyptic expectation would have become subversive in a context where religious authority gradually merged with political authority (Moss, 2013: 89–94). Thus, eschatology was reinterpreted not as an imminent prophecy, but as a distant promise or an inner spiritual reality. Instead of cosmic catastrophe and imminent judgment, the emphasis shifted to moral order and the progress of the soul toward eternal life (Brown, 1996: 92–95).

Moreover, this transformation allowed Christianity to respond to new intellectual and cultural challenges coming from Greco-Roman philosophical thought. A literal and immediate eschatology became difficult to maintain in an intellectual climate dominated by Stoic, Neoplatonic, or Aristotelian ideas, which favored the concept of an eternal or cyclical cosmos (Collins, 1998: 135–140).

Therefore, from a secular perspective, Christian eschatology should not be viewed merely as a religious doctrine, but as a mechanism of adaptation and survival within a changing historical context. The spiritualization of apocalyptic symbols allowed the Church not only to preserve its authority but also to extend it into political, educational, and cultural spheres (Pagels, 2012: 63–70).

1.3. Eschatology in the middle ages and the renaissance (9th–16th centuries)

Medieval eschatology: fear and hope

In the Middle Ages, eschatology acquired a practical dimension, constantly present in preaching, art, and literature. People lived with the conviction that death and the final judgment were imminent, reflected in themes such as *memento mori* and *danse macabre* (Delumeau, 1983: 57–62). Hell, purgatory, and heaven were described in detail in sermons and theological works, contributing to the maintenance of moral discipline through the fear of eternal punishment (Emmerson, McGinn, 1992: 87–95). Jacques Le Goff shows how the doctrine of purgatory emerged in the 12th–13th centuries as a transitional space, fostering the development of practices such as indulgences, with significant economic and social consequences (Le Goff, 1986: 152–158).

Popular millenarianism

Millenarianism (or chiliasm) is an eschatological doctrine according to which Christ will return prior to the establishment of a thousand-year kingdom on earth. This current was present not only in early theology but also in numerous popular movements that awaited a radical transformation of history (Emmerson, 2007: 113–116).

Although the official amillennialism [1] of the Church dominated theological discourse, popular movements with millenarian visions periodically emerged; for example, the flagellants or heretical groups (the Cathars [2], the Taborites [3]) used eschatology to challenge the established order (Cohn, 1970: 38–45).

The Renaissance and the change of perspective

The Renaissance brought a renewed interest in humanism and the study of ancient texts, which gradually led to a weakening of apocalyptic expectations in intellectual circles. However, at the popular level, apocalyptic prophecies connected to dramatic events of the time (e.g., the fall of Constantinople in 1453) continued to circulate (McGinn, 1979: 102–107).

Secular interpretation

From the perspective of secular historians, medieval eschatology functioned both as an instrument of social coercion (through the promise of heaven and the threat of hell) and as a mechanism of resistance in popular movements against clerical abuses (MacCulloch, 2011: 390–395).

1.4. Eschatology in the protestant reformation and the early modern era (16th–18th centuries)

The Reformation and apocalypticism

The Reformers employed eschatological language to criticize the Catholic Church, which some identified with Babylon the Great or with the beast of the Apocalypse (Bainton, 1950: 233–237). Martin Luther wrote that he was living in the last days, while radical Protestant movements adopted millenarian ideas, proclaiming the nearness of the end (Cameron, 1991: 248–251).

Eschatology as a driver of conflict

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[1] **Amillennialism** is the doctrine according to which the "millennium" in Revelation 20 does not designate a literal period of one thousand years, but is a symbol of the spiritual reign of Christ between His first and second coming. This view, supported by Augustine in *De Civitate Dei* (Book XX), became the dominant position of the Western Church in the Middle Ages.*Augustine, The City of God, translated by Nicodim Milaș, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1998, Book XX.*

[2] **The Cathars** were men and women of great integrity, who referred to an ancient Christianity, dissatisfied with the situation of the Church of Rome. Catharism in Florence spread on fertile ground; artisans and merchants joined, taking advantage of the support of noble families in an attempt to confront the dreaded Inquisitions organized by the Holy See. Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 38–45.

[3] **The Taborites** were a radical religious group that took part in the Bohemian Reformation and the Hussite Wars of the 15th century. Known pejoratively as *Picards*, the Taborites strongly believed in the imminent return of Christ to establish His kingdom. They upheld Jan Hus's claim that the Bible was the sole authority for faith and doctrine, and they believed that the only biblical sacraments were the Eucharist and baptism.Howard Kaminsky, *A History of the Hussite Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 187.

Eschatology fueled the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. For example, the Anabaptist movement in Münster (1534–1535) established a violent theocratic regime, proclaiming the beginning of the Kingdom of God on earth (Cohn, 1970: 210–218).

Rationalism and the beginnings of desacralization

With the Enlightenment, philosophers such as Voltaire and Kant rejected eschatological literalism, promoting a vision of human progress based on reason. Thus, apocalyptic expectations faded among intellectual elites, even though they continued to exist among the general population (Israel, 2002: 75–80).

With the rise of the Enlightenment, a significant rupture occurred in the way the Western world understood the relationship between humanity and the transcendent. Rationalism, as the dominant paradigm, rejected literal interpretations of Scripture and sought to replace revelation with autonomous reason as the foundation of knowledge. Philosophers such as Voltaire and Kant criticized the traditional eschatological vision, regarding it as obsolete in light of human progress and scientific rationality.

Voltaire, a prominent representative of the critique of institutionalized religion, mocked popular beliefs about the end of the world, which he considered superstitions harmful to the development of critical thinking and religious tolerance. In his writings, he argued that morality and human progress should not be conditioned by eschatological fear, but by natural reason and universal justice (Voltaire, 2006: 187–189).

In turn, Immanuel Kant rejected revelation as the supreme source of knowledge and argued that the essence of religion is found in practical reason and in the categorical imperative, not in dogmas related to an apocalyptic end of the world (Kant, 2004: 32–36). This change of perspective led to a decrease of interest in eschatology among intellectual elites. Instead of an imminent end of history, Enlightenment philosophy proposed a narrative of continuous progress, in which humanity evolves toward a state of moral and rational enlightenment. Eschatology was thus marginalized and desacralized, becoming a subject of interest mainly for the masses, who continued to interpret biblical texts about the end of the world literally (Collins, 1998: 117–120).

However, this desacralization did not mean a complete disappearance of fears about the end of history, but rather a shift from the religious to the secular register. Social crises, wars, and new ideologies took the place of apocalyptic symbols, constructing other eschatologies—this time secular and rationalized. Thus, the beginning of modernity coincided with a profound reconfiguration of the way humanity projected its future and understood the meaning of its existence.

Secular interpretation

From a secular perspective, the Reformation transformed eschatology into an ideological weapon for delegitimizing religious opponents, while the Enlightenment contributed to the secularization of eschatology, transferring the expectation of a cosmic end into a belief in the unlimited progress of humanity (Lilla, 2007: 53–56).

From a secular perspective, the history of Christian eschatology can be read not only as a succession of theological beliefs but as an ideological instrument used to redefine political and social order. The Protestant Reformation, especially through the writings of Martin Luther and other reform leaders, transformed eschatology into a rhetorical and theological weapon against the Roman Catholic Church. The Pope was frequently identified with the Antichrist, and Rome was seen as Babylon the Great in the Book of Revelation (McGinn, 2000: 184–189). This polemical use of eschatological

symbolism served to delegitimize papal authority and to justify the religious rupture as part of a divine plan for the restoration of truth.

Paradoxically, this emphasis on the imminent end and the corruption of the dominant religious world also had a political effect: it fueled revolutionary and reform movements that saw in the end times an opportunity to establish a new, purer, and more just social order. Thus, eschatology was instrumentalized not only religiously but also socially and politically (MacCulloch, 2009: 659–661). The apocalyptic imagination was undermined by the rationalist spirit. Philosophers such as Condorcet and Voltaire replaced the vision of a cosmic end of history with the idea of humanity's continuous progress. In this new paradigm, there was no longer any need for divine intervention to establish a perfect order; man, through reason, science, and education, could build a better future (Delumeau, 2005: 387–390). Eschatology was thus secularized, and in place of a heavenly Kingdom of God was born the myth of an earthly utopia.

This shift from religious expectation to secular hope reflects one of the most profound transformations in the history of Western thought. Although the idea of the end was not abandoned, it was transformed into an ideal of social perfection, projected not beyond history but within it.

1.5. Modern eschatology and the rise of dispensationalism (19th–20th centuries)

Socio-political transformations

The 19th century was marked by revolutions, industrialization, and colonialism—events that created a tense social context, favorable to the revitalization of eschatological beliefs. In many Protestant circles, eschatology was reinterpreted to respond to new crises (Jenkins, 2011: 113–118).

John Nelson Darby and the birth of dispensationalism

John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) laid the foundations of a vision called dispensational premillennialism, which holds that:

- history is divided into distinct dispensations in which God acts differently;
- the secret rapture of the Church will occur before a time of tribulation;
- the physical restoration of Israel is a major sign of the nearness of the end (Weber, 1979: 25–30).

This vision was popularized through the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909), which had a massive influence on evangelical Christianity in the United States (Boyer, 1992: 123–130).

Millenarian movements and new sects

The period saw the emergence of groups with radical eschatologies, such as the Seventh-day Adventists or Jehovah's Witnesses, who set various dates for the end of the world (1844 in the case of William Miller) (Knight, 1993: 44–52). Even though failed predictions caused internal crises, these movements continued to thrive, adapting their interpretations (Boyer, 1992: 144–150).

Secular interpretation

Secular historians regard dispensationalism as a product of the anxieties of industrial modernity and globalization: the literal interpretation of prophecies provided a clear framework of meaning in a world perceived as chaotic and rapidly changing (Boyer, 1992: 95–98).

1.6. Contemporary eschatology (20th–21st centuries)

Eschatology in evangelical and charismatic movements

Today, many evangelical churches in the U.S. and elsewhere adopt dispensationalist or premillennialist views. The conviction that the end is imminent influences missionary priorities and, at times, even political choices, particularly regarding support for Israel as part of the signs of the last days (Weber, 2005: 89–94).

Amillennialism and symbolic eschatology

In traditional churches (Catholic, Orthodox, historic Protestant), eschatology today has a more symbolic character: the Kingdom of God is seen as a spiritual reality rather than an earthly reign, and the emphasis is placed on moral responsibility in the present (Wright, 2008: 181–190).

Secular apocalypse: climate, pandemics, and technology

Sociologists and anthropologists observe that in modern secular culture there have appeared secular eschatologies—narratives about climate collapse, artificial intelligence out of control, or global pandemics—which employ a language and narrative structure similar to religious eschatology (Scranton, 2015: 17–25).

Although lacking a judging God, these visions describe a dramatic end of civilization, and specialists consider them reflections of humanity's fear of losing control over its destiny (Wallace-Wells, 2019: 3–12).

Popular culture and eschatology

In contemporary society, the collective fascination with the end of the world has not diminished but has been reconfigured into a secularized form through popular culture. Films, series, books, and post-apocalyptic video games have become channels through which traditionally eschatological themes—world destruction, judgment, survival, hope for a new order—are reinterpreted in a secular framework, often science-fictional or dystopian.

Post-apocalyptic films, books, and video games (*Mad Max, The Walking Dead*) reflect the collective fascination with the end of the world and perpetuate eschatological themes in a secularized form (Sontag, 2002: 123–125).

These narratives no longer invoke divine judgment but crises generated by humans, technologies out of control, or climate catastrophes (Botting, 1996: 163–166). In this way, the religious apocalypse is transformed into an ethical and political warning concerning the excesses of modern civilization and the structural vulnerabilities of the contemporary world.

This secular eschatology retains the narrative structure of the religious one: a violent end, followed by a struggle for survival and the possibility of renewal. The fundamental difference is that salvation no longer comes from a divinity, but is the result of the courage, morality, or intelligence of human characters (Barkun, 2003: 39–44). In this sense, popular culture reflects the collective anxieties of the age—the fear of ecological collapse, uncontrolled technologies, or global pandemics—and reinterprets them symbolically in an accessible and engaging language.

More than simple entertainment products, these works play a formative role in the contemporary imagination: they shape perceptions of the future, of the limits of progress, and of human fragility. They propose, indirectly, a form of secular reflection on humanity's destiny—a theology without God, yet still concerned with the meaning and end of existence (Rosen, 2008: 4–8).

1.7. Social and psychological functions of eschatology

Providing meaning in the face of suffering

Eschatology responds to a fundamental human need: the explanation of suffering and injustice. Belief in a final judgment or in an eschatological restoration of justice offers believers comfort and hope in a world marked by inequalities (Berger, 1967: 29–35, 51–60).

Strengthening group identity

Myths about the end of the world are not mere products of religious imagination, but reflect a deep archaic structure of thought in which destruction and renewal succeed one another cyclically, giving meaning to existence through a return to an original moment. As Mircea Eliade underlines, apocalyptic scenarios are re-enactments of a logic of mythical repetition, in which profane time is suspended to allow the regeneration of the world and of the sacred order (Eliade, 1999: 37–45). On the other hand, sociologists of religion have shown that expectations of an imminent end can produce powerful social effects. Bryan R. Wilson points out that eschatological tension favors the internal cohesion of the group, creating an identity a distinct identity and providing a legitimate framework for rejecting the dominant values of wider society (Wilson, 1970: 37).

Reason for social or political mobilization

Throughout history, eschatology has often served as a catalyst for movements of change—both peaceful (movements of spiritual renewal) and violent (the Anabaptist revolt of Münster). Apocalyptic rhetoric can legitimize radical actions in the name of a cause considered ultimate (Cohn, 1970: 95–110).

Reflection of collective anxieties

Contemporary anthropologists observe that moments of crisis—pandemics, wars, natural disasters—are accompanied by a revival of interest in eschatology. It functions as a barometer of the emotional state of society. The greater the collective anxiety, the more apocalyptic scenarios gain ground (McGinn, 1998: 76–82).

Secular eschatology: similar function, different content

Fears about ecological collapse or technological disasters today play roles similar to religious eschatologies: they provide explanations for crises and allow fear to be channeled into a coherent narrative. From a sociological perspective, this phenomenon shows a cultural constancy in humanity's need to imagine an end to the present order (Scranton, 2015: 17–25).

2. Eschatology in the context of contemporary Europe: between secularization and secular ecumenism

In contemporary Europe, Christian eschatology faces two major trends that profoundly alter its reception: the secularization of society and the emergence of a secular ecumenism. These phenomena not only undermine the traditional theological dimension of discourse about the end of the world, but reinterpret it in cultural, ethical, or ideological terms, thus challenging the Church to rethink its prophetic and communal role in a post-Christian space.

2.1. The secularization of eschatological discourse

Secularization in Europe does not mean merely a decline in religious practice, but also a shift of ultimate meanings from transcendence to immanent horizons: progress, ecology, technology, global security. Where once eschatology offered a transcendent vision of the end, we now witness a shift toward immanent horizons: technological progress, ecological sustainability, global survival (Collins, 1998: 10–12). In this context,

eschatological themes (judgment, the end of history, collective salvation) do not disappear but are transformed into secular narratives about climate collapse, pandemic crises, or technological singularity (Moltmann, 2004: 18–22). This phenomenon has been called by some authors an "apocalypse without God."

In the introduction to his work, Scranton states: "the greatest challenge we face… is to understand that this civilization is already dead, even though the zombie-system of petro-capitalism continues and, for the moment, accelerates greedily but sterilely." (Scranton, 2015: 23).

Eschatology is no longer the exclusive domain of institutionalized religions but becomes a "cultural battlefield," where collective anxieties are expressed in quasi-religious language. Dystopian films, science-fiction literature, and activist discourse on the extinction of civilization have adopted traditional eschatological narrative structures (judgment, destruction, renewal) and integrated them into the secular imagination (Bauman, 2007: 41). In this climate, the Church is challenged to recover its relevance not merely by reaffirming dogma, but by offering an eschatological discourse that concretely addresses contemporary fears.

2.2. Secular ecumenism and the relativization of the eschatological horizon

Another emerging phenomenon is what some theologians call "secular ecumenism" (Brie and Brie, 2028; Brie, 2009)—a form of global moral solidarity without confessional anchoring, which adopts Christian values (love of neighbor, care for the planet, universal peace) but secularizes them. In this context, eschatology is absorbed into projects of ethical transformation of the world, without recourse to transcendence. For instance, the European project itself is, to a certain extent, a secular eschatology—a vision of a pacified political, social, and moral order, based on human rights and interstate cooperation. This secular "eschaton," however, is profoundly tense: European integration has created an axiological plurality that weakens the ability of religious discourse to speak prophetically about the end. In a world of moral consensus and relativism, prophetic eschatology (with judgment, moral choice, reward) risks being labeled as intolerance (Taylor, 2007: 525–536).

Moreover, European Churches—especially traditional ones—are called to reformulate their eschatological message within a pluralistic framework, without compromising revealed truth. To speak about the end of the world in a context where many consciences reject the idea of a final judgment requires a hermeneutics of dialogue and, at the same time, the courage to affirm theological distinctiveness (Eliade, 1992: 112–119).

2.3. Current challenges for the Church

Today, the European Church faces a tension: between remaining faithful to a biblical eschatology (which involves judgment, crisis, renewal) and finding cultural languages through which its message can be understood by a pluralistic and often skeptical society. The refusal of any form of eschatology leads to a dangerous relativization of ethics: if there is no end, there is no ultimate responsibility (Cohn, 1970: 296).

In this sense, the contemporary challenge is not only apologetic but also pastoral. How can the Church proclaim an eschatological hope without appearing retrograde or disconnected from humanity's major concerns? How can it integrate the discourse about the end into debates about climate crisis, fragile democracy, or artificial intelligence—without abandoning the biblical roots of hope?

Conclusion

Eschatology, beyond its specific theological content, proves to be a profound expression of humanity's desire to understand, to order, and to give meaning to ultimate events—death, suffering, crisis, and hope. From a secular perspective, it is not merely a religious doctrine that speaks of the end of the world or the return of a messianic figure, but a narrative and symbolic mechanism through which societies have articulated responses to their own historical and existential tensions. Every era has constructed its own end of the world, adapting eschatological symbols to its fears, traumas, and expectations.

In the period of the early Church, eschatology offered comfort in the face of persecutions and a sense of meaning to suffering, projecting a divine order that was to replace the injustice of the present world.

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V. BOOK REVIEWS

Valeriu ȘARGAROVSCHI ⇔ *Green Deal Challenges for a Sustainable Future of the EU*

Mihai GHIȚULESCU ⇔ *Presidents, Prime Ministers and Majorities in the French Fifth Republic. Note de Lecture*

GREEN DEAL CHALLENGES FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE OF THE EU

Valeriu ȘARGAROVSCHI*

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The volume „Green Deal Challenges for a Sustainable Future of the EU", coordinated by Prof. univ. dr. habil. Melania-Gabriela Ciot, was published in 2024 by Presa Universitară Clujeană and brings together the contributions presented at the conference of the Doctoral School of International Relations and European Studies (UBB), organized within the Jean Monnet Chair project "Green Deal and European Negotiations." The work reflects the concerns of young researchers regarding the issues of the European Green Deal, confirming the relevance of this topic for the current scientific and political agenda. At the same time, the volume represents a platform for the affirmation of doctoral students, among whom is the author of this review.

The theme of the European Green Deal has become, in recent years, one of the central directions of the European Union's policies, marking a paradigm shift in the relationship between economic development, environmental protection, and societal well-being. In this context, the volume „Green Deal Challenges for a Sustainable Future of the EU", coordinated by Prof. univ. dr. habil. Melania-Gabriela Ciot and published by Presa Universitară Clujeană in 2024, represents not only a collection of academic studies but also a concrete contribution to strengthening interdisciplinary dialogue around this topical issue. The work gathers the results of the conference organized by the Doctoral School of International Relations and European Studies at Babeș-Bolyai University, within the Jean Monnet Chair project "Green Deal and European Negotiations," and stands out by bringing together early-career researchers, doctoral students, and young specialists who offer diverse perspectives on major themes related to the green transition.

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The introduction of this volume into the academic circuit holds multiple significances. On one hand, it reflects the vitality of an academic community in full formation, which finds in the Green Deal a fertile ground for research and debate. On the other hand, it serves as evidence that European themes, particularly those related to sustainability, are no longer addressed exclusively by established elites but become an integral part of the training of a new generation of researchers. This openness to doctoral contributions confers upon the volume a dual value: a scientific one, through the quality of the analyses, and a formative one, through the integration of emerging voices into the European academic dialogue.

Furthermore, the work also has practical relevance, as the discussed themes touch upon essential aspects for contemporary policies: from energy security and natural resource management to technological innovation and education for sustainability. The geographical diversity of the studies—covering both Europe and Africa, Asia, or the Arctic region—provides a comparative perspective that highlights global interdependencies. In an era marked by simultaneous crises—climatic, economic, and security—such analyses become indispensable for understanding the complexity of the green transition and the EU's role in promoting it internationally.

Last but not least, the volume aligns with a broader trend of combining the green dimension with the digital and innovative one, showing that the success of the Green Deal depends not only on political will but also on the ability to integrate new technologies and form appropriate competencies. Through the way the assembled articles reflect these concerns, the book coordinated by Melania-Gabriela Ciot offers a faithful image of current challenges, as well as solutions proposed by a new generation of researchers. At the same time, through the participation of the author of this review in the creation of the volume, the work acquires a personal dimension, confirming the relevance of this academic experience in the training and affirmation of young doctoral students.

Structure of the Volume

The book comprises a total of 19 studies, divided into four major thematic sections, providing a comprehensive overview of the complexity of the European Green Deal and its implications.

Section 1 begins with „Sustainable Development and the Challenges of the Contemporary International System", where Chapter 1 analyzes the challenges of energy security in Africa, highlighting states' dependence on traditional resources and the need for diversification. The author argues that the green transition could become an opportunity for the continent but requires external investments. Chapter 2 explores the impact of urbanization on the environment, with a focus on Asian megacities. It discusses the effects of pollution and the role of smart infrastructures in reducing emissions. Chapter 3 addresses the issue of autonomous vehicles, emphasizing the ethical dimension and implications for road safety. The study shows that technology can contribute to pollution reduction but raises questions of legal and moral regulation.

Section 2 continues with „Implementing the European Green Deal – New Perspectives", where Chapter 4 focuses on the Arctic region, highlighting accelerated climate changes and the geopolitical consequences of opening new maritime routes. The author emphasizes that the green transition must be accompanied by stricter international governance. Chapter 5 analyzes Cyprus's specificities in applying the Green Deal, with emphasis on insularity and energy vulnerability. It highlights the need for investments in solar energy. Chapter 6 investigates the impact of the Green Deal on the European labor

market. The study shows how the transition to green energies transforms the competency profile, requiring massive professional reconversion.

Section 3 continues with „Research and Innovation for the Green and Digital Transition", where Chapter 7 deals with artificial intelligence and its role in environmental management, showing how algorithms can optimize resource consumption. Chapter 8 addresses the creative economy, explaining how cultural industries can contribute to sustainability and mindset changes. Chapter 9 analyzes education for the green transition, insisting on the role of school curricula in forming environmentally friendly competencies. Chapter 10 proposes innovative models of cooperation between universities and the business environment to stimulate green innovation. Chapter 11 discusses the digital transition as a complementary factor to the green one, showing how IT infrastructures can support sustainability.

Section IV continues with Chapter 12, which treats the theme of collective identities in the context of globalization and climate crises. It shows how ecological movements shape new forms of transnational solidarity. Chapter 13 analyzes the Eurasian Middle Corridor, discussing the economic and geopolitical implications of a sustainable trade route. Chapter 14 focuses on European security and defense policies, correlated with new ecological risks. Chapter 15 presents case studies on EU relations with Middle Eastern states on energy resources. Chapter 16 examines international cooperation for managing hazardous waste. Chapter 17 deals with climate policies in Southeast Asia and how they align or not with the Green Deal. Chapter 18 analyzes the role of NGOs in promoting the Green Deal and creating bridges between governments and civil society. Chapter 19 concludes the volume with a reflection on the future of the green transition in the EU, emphasizing resilience and adaptability.

Strengths

The volume stands out through its interdisciplinarity, combining political, economic, social, and technological analysis within a common framework. Additionally, by including global perspectives, not just European ones, the work highlights interdependencies among world regions and the relevance of the Green Deal beyond EU borders. Another strength is the integration of educational themes and the innovative dimension, which shows that the green transition is not limited to public policies but also involves changes in mindsets, competencies, and social systems.

At the same time, the volume's value is strengthened by promoting young researchers, which gives it freshness and openness to new ideas. The fact that the reviewer of this article is among the volume's authors confirms the formative and participatory role of the Jean Monnet project and the UBB Doctoral School.

Conclusions

„Green Deal Challenges for a Sustainable Future of the EU" is a relevant work for the specialized literature on the green transition and European policies. It addresses not only the academic environment—researchers, doctoral students, and undergraduates—but also practitioners and political decision-makers interested in the impact of the Green Deal on contemporary societies. The volume provides an overview of the challenges and opportunities of the green transition, while also serving as a testament to the dynamism of the Doctoral School of International Relations and European Studies at UBB.

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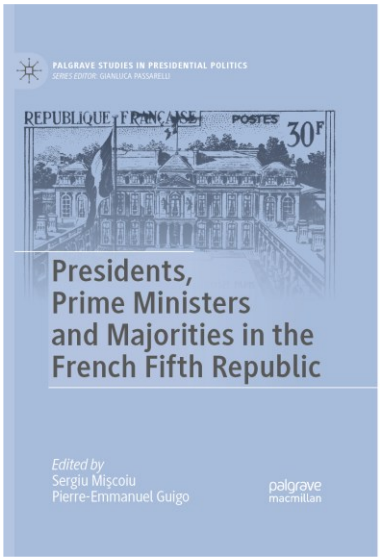
PRESIDENTS, PRIME MINISTERS AND MAJORITIES IN THE FRENCH FIFTH REPUBLIC. NOTE DE LECTURE

Mihai GHIȚULESCU*

Review of: Note de Lecture: Sergiu Mișcoiu, Pierre-Emmanuel Guigo (Dir.), *Presidents, Prime Ministers and Majorities in the French Fifth Republic*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, 219 P.



L'un des premiers responsables et universitaires occidentaux à conseiller les nouveaux dirigeants de Bucarest en 1990 fut Robert Badinter, président du Conseil constitutionnel français et ancien Ministre de la Justice. Selon Ion Iliescu et d'autres, ses conseils furent déterminants dans l'élaboration des dispositifs institutionnels de la « Petite Constitution » et, plus tard, de la Constitution de 1991. On peut supposer que la situation aurait été similaire même sans l'intervention directe de ce juriste réputé, la France étant traditionnellement perçue comme un modèle pour la Roumanie. Peu après Badinter, le célèbre Maurice Duverger se rendit également en Roumanie. Nous ignorons son influence – nous pouvons supposer qu'elle fut limitée – mais nous lui rendons hommage pour avoir diffusé le concept attrayant mais ambigu de « semi-présidentialisme », l'associant principalement au système politique français après 1958/1962 (Ve République). Comme dans d'autres cas (par exemple, sa « loi » sur la relation entre les systèmes électoraux et les systèmes de partis), Duverger a lancé une idée brillante mais imprécise, irritant de nombreux universitaires à travers le monde et générant une grande quantité de littérature en science politique.

En Roumanie, l'étiquette « semi-présidentiel » s'est fortement ancrée dans la rhétorique politique et même dans la jurisprudence constitutionnelle. Utilisée non pas tant dans un sens explicatif et analytique, mais plutôt de manière axiologique, voire normative, selon les orientations politiques. Selon certains, nous avons un système semi-présidentiel, et les choses doivent donc se dérouler d'une certaine manière (par exemple, la décision n° 784/2012 de la Cour constitutionnelle) ; selon d'autres, nous n'avons pas de véritable système semi-présidentiel, mais nous devrions en avoir un, pour que les choses se déroulent d'une certaine manière (par exemple, le rapport de la Commission présidentielle de 2009). Dans les deux cas, le semi-présidentialisme est associé à la Ve République. Le premier cas est une tentative dangereuse de conférer une force

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juridique/constitutionnelle à un concept strictement doctrinal. La seconde – qui repose sur le constat correct que les Roumains n'ont suivi que partiellement le modèle français – semble entachée d'une vision trop idéalisée du régime français et, plus largement, du rôle des institutions dans le fonctionnement des systèmes politiques.

Par conséquent, une revue des avatars du régime français au cours des sept dernières décennies aurait été utile, ne serait-ce que pour son influence sur le régime roumain. De toute évidence, la question est bien plus vaste, comme le souligne Sergiu Mișcoiu : « L'Hexagone tend à être perçu comme un modèle par une multitude d'élites dirigeantes à travers le monde » (p. 2). La littérature sur le sujet est très riche, mais il était nécessaire d'adopter une approche dépassant les textes et théories constitutionnels, afin de ne pas se perdre dans « la complexification des efforts théoriques visant à comprendre la nature et le fonctionnement des systèmes semi-présidentiels » (p. 4). Tel était l'objectif de l'ouvrage collectif dirigé par Sergiu Mișcoiu et Pierre-Emmanuel Guigo. Après un nécessaire « aperçu largement analytique et historique » signé par Sergiu Mișcoiu, qui comprend une revue des contributions depuis Duverger et souligne certains aspects qui méritent (plus) d'attention, le livre suit « la dynamique du « triangle du pouvoir » (c'est-à-dire le président, le premier ministre et la majorité parlementaire) pendant le(s) mandat(s) de chaque président : de Gaulle (Bryan Muller), Pompidou (Olivier Sibre), Giscard d'Estaing (Alexandra Alina Iancu, Sorina Cristina Soare), Mitterrand (P.-E. Guigo), Sarkozy (Marius-Mircea Mitrache), Hollande (P.-E. Guigo) et Macron (Fabrice Hamelin).

Il s'agit de « dynamiques interinstitutionnelles », au-delà des deux schémas principaux : celui de la majorité présidentielle, où les deux chefs de l'exécutif ont la même couleur politique, et celui de la majorité parlementaire et du gouvernement, dont l'orientation diffère de celle du président (la soi-disant cohabitation). En réalité, l'étude dépasse largement les aspects strictement institutionnels, puisqu'elle analyse « l'influence prépondérante des parcours et des profils des présidents sur leur conception de la fonction présidentielle » (p. 8) ainsi que divers événements et contextes, peu politiques en eux-mêmes, mais qui affectent d'une manière ou d'une autre l'exercice du pouvoir. De même que les auteurs ont constaté une récente désacralisation de la figure présidentielle (en contradiction avec la logique originelle du régime), on peut comprendre que, par cette approche, une désacralisation salutaire de la science politique est réalisée, en la détachant de toute affectation théorique et méthodologique et en la reliant à la politique réelle. Prises ensemble, les contributions forment une solide synthèse de l'histoire politique de la Ve République, allant au-delà du récit classique et cherchant comment les faits ont déterminé la transformation du régime, même lorsque les dispositions constitutionnelles sont restées inchangées. Le droit public et la science politique sont toujours présents, mais de manière subtile, avec pour rôle d'expliquer le sens des réalités, et non de les filtrer au nom de l'apparence académique, comme cela s'est souvent produit ces derniers temps.

Même appliqué strictement à la Ve République française, le semi-présidentialisme s'avère un concept trop large et faible, incapable de dire grand-chose sur le fonctionnement d'un régime particulier. Même la Ve République est un terme générique, appliqué, en vertu du maintien de la Constitution de 1958 – dont de nombreuses dispositions importantes (bien que « ambiguës, pour le moins », Mișcoiu, p. 5) sont restées dans leur forme initiale – et de certaines coutumes, à une série de sous-régimes qui, certes, ont beaucoup en commun, mais sont loin d'être identiques. La Ve République est « un véritable bric-à-brac », comme l'a justement écrit M.-M. Mitrache (p. 159).

Français Même avant la grande réforme constitutionnelle de 2000 (réduction du mandat présidentiel à cinq ans ; avec son pendant de 2001 : l'organisation d'élections législatives immédiatement après les présidentielles) et de 2008 (augmentation des pouvoirs du Parlement), qui peut justifier l'étiquette de « République bis » de J.-F. Copé (Mitrache, pp. 172, 176), on peut parler informellement de République 5.1, 5.2, voire 5.1.2, etc. Bien que le cadre constitutionnel reste (en grande partie) le même, en pratique le régime serait différent, car les relations entre le Président, le Premier ministre (le Cabinet) et le Parlement varient selon la volonté des électeurs et/ou des représentants, plus une multitude de facteurs souvent imprévisibles et impondérables.

Comme on dit « administration » de Nixon, Reagan ou Obama, on peut dire « régime » de Pompidou, Mitterrand ou Sarkozy. Et il ne suffit pas d'associer un nom au régime – il faut, encore une fois, le numéroter – car il peut y avoir des différences significatives entre les mandats (lorsqu'un président a été réélu) et même au sein d'un même mandat. Nous pensons tout d'abord aux différences entre les périodes de majorité présidentielle et celles de cohabitation. Dans le premier cas, le régime tend à devenir plus présidentiel, le chef de l'État traitant son Premier ministre comme un collaborateur – qu'il le dise ouvertement (comme Sarkozy à propos de Fillon, Lachaise, p. 151 ; Mitrache, p. 161 ; Guigo, p. 185) ou non. Même s'il accepte une sorte de diarchie – le terme appartient à Sarkozy, qui ne l'a pas acceptée (Lachaise, p. 151) – le chef du gouvernement est responsable (uniquement) des « affaires courantes/de la politique courante » intérieure – jouant peut-être aussi le rôle de chef de la majorité – mais le Président est toujours « censé guider politiquement le pays et en déterminer les grandes orientations » (Mișcoiu, p. 10). Durant la cohabitation, le régime glisse vers le parlementarisme ; le Premier ministre, en tant que chef de la majorité parlementaire, tente d'agir comme un chancelier et le Président est en quelque sorte placé en position de chef de l'opposition. Dans de telles situations, même le rôle du chef de l'État dans les relations internationales, ce que l'on appelle le « domaine réservé » (Guigo, p. 130, 185), peut être remis en question, comme ce fut le cas en 1986-1988, lorsque Chirac, récemment nommé Premier ministre, « tenta de garder le contrôle des affaires étrangères et de la politique de défense ». Et, ne parvenant pas à destituer complètement le président Mitterrand, il décida de l'accompagner aux réunions internationales, « surprenant les autres délégations en se présentant en duo » (Guigo, p. 116). Cela rappelle certains épisodes de l'histoire politique et constitutionnelle de la Roumanie, mais ce n'est ni le moment ni le lieu d'y revenir. Il faut observer que, même dans ses périodes de faiblesse politique, le président français reste au sommet. Il conserve une certaine prédominance (au moins symbolique), comme le laisse deviner un épisode comique relaté par Guino.

Au-delà du fait que cette première cohabitation était surprenante – « la possibilité d'une cohabitation n'avait pas été anticipée par les pères fondateurs de la Ve République » (Guino, p. 115) – il convient également de noter que la rivalité entre le Premier ministre et le Président était, au moins en termes de défense et de relations internationales, « purement symbolique » (ou, disons, électorale) : « En fait, ils n'avaient pas de vues très différentes sur les affaires étrangères… Dans le domaine de la défense, le Président et le Premier ministre avaient des points de vue communs » (Guino, p. 116). Cependant, une telle situation était prévisible, sur la base d'expériences antérieures, différentes mais similaires. Différentes, car elles ne représentaient pas de cohabitations formelles ; similaires, car elles connaissaient des « formes cachées de pratiques de type cohabitation » (Iancu, Soare, p. 92). En 1976-1978, le président Giscard d'Estaing et le Premier ministre, le même Chirac, appartenaient au même camp politique (mais pas au même

parti), mais leurs relations furent d'abord tendues, puis franchement mauvaises, aboutissant à une lutte pour la « primauté, non pas tant en termes de pouvoir exécutif, mais en tant que dirigeants informels de la coalition » (Iancu, Soare, p. 97). Finalement, le chef de l'État l'emporta, « remplaçant le Premier ministre par un technocrate » et augmentant ainsi « la marge de manœuvre présidentielle » (Iancu, Soare, p. 105). C'est pourquoi, pour le seul mandat de Giscard, on peut parler de « deux schémas », voire de « deux présidences différentes » (Iancu, Soare, p. 92). En remontant encore plus loin (1969-1972), on retrouve le président Georges Pompidou et le Premier ministre Jacques Chaban-Delmas, tous deux gaullistes, mais qui, « outre leurs désaccords personnels et politiques », avaient également une « vision opposée des institutions » (Sibre, p. 68). Le programme du Premier ministre « attaquait les fondements mêmes de la pensée pompidolienne » (Sibre, p. 66). En tentant de s'imposer « en demandant la confiance du Parlement », ce dernier « affaiblit le caractère présidentiel du régime ». Là encore, le Président l'emporta, le destituant et démontrant « que le Premier ministre était d'abord et avant tout responsable devant le Président » (Sibre, p. 67-68).

Rétrospectivement, on constate que, malgré toutes les tensions – disons inévitables dans l'architecture institutionnelle de la Constitution de 1958 – la Ve République est restée, pendant trois décennies, dans le cadre fixé par Charles de Gaulle, avec un président ressemblant à un « monarque républicain ». Une analyse approfondie de la manière dont la monarchie était imaginée serait ici nécessaire – à la manière des monarchies continentales du XIXe siècle (avec une autre discussion sur le rôle du Second Empire), et en aucun cas comme les monarchies constitutionnelles du XXe siècle. On notera seulement que « le général de Gaulle a construit ses relations de pouvoir autour de compromis. Le premier compromis, implicite dans la Ve République, était la réconciliation de plusieurs traditions historiques, parfois antagonistes, propres au pays » (Muller, p. 47-48). Quoi qu'il en soit, même après de Gaulle, l'impression générale était que « la Ve République était conçue de manière à permettre à tout individu sacré par l'élection présidentielle au suffrage universel de diriger le pays » (p. 49). Cela a été confirmé par Pompidou, Giscard, Mitterrand (« le dernier monarque républicain » ?), au-delà de ses deux expériences de cohabitation (1986-1988, 1993-1995). Mais, à un moment donné, quelqu'un a pensé (à juste titre, pourrait-on dire) que le « cadre constitutionnel » ne garantissait pas que le président dirige toujours le pays.

En 1997, l'ancien « Monsieur Premier ministre », alors président depuis deux ans, dut faire face, de l'autre côté, à une cohabitation (la troisième, la plus longue et, à ce jour, la dernière de la Ve République). Cela se produisit à la suite d'élections législatives anticipées convoquées pour consolider son pouvoir. Cependant, une majorité de gauche fut élue et Chirac dut accepter le socialiste Lionel Jospin comme Premier ministre. Ce fut « une rupture dans l'histoire de la Ve République » (Lachaise, p. 138), dont le souvenir est encore « vivace » et « douloureux » dans le monde politique français (Lachaise, p. 139). L'ancien modèle de « monarchie républicaine » semblait avoir pris fin. Certains réclamaient une VIe République. Pour remédier à la situation, il fut décidé de réduire le mandat présidentiel de sept à cinq ans (une idée remontant à l'époque de Pompidou) et d'inverser le calendrier électoral (législatives juste après la présidentielle). Ces réformes de 2000 et 2001 ont accru les chances du chef de l'État de disposer d'une majorité parlementaire et d'un gouvernement loyal. Cette nouvelle situation peut être considérée comme un renforcement (car elle fait du Président un véritable chef de l'exécutif) ou une violation des principes initiaux (car elle soulève des questions sur son rôle d'« arbitre », puisqu'il est, plus clairement qu'auparavant, le chef de la majorité). Comme le notait

Lachaise, « la différence de jugement varie selon le point de vue des spécialistes sur la "monarchie républicaine" » (p. 143).

Les deux dernières décennies ont montré l'importance des personnalités, des événements et des contextes dans le fonctionnement d'un régime politique. Chirac est parvenu, en 2002, à disposer d'une majorité et d'un Premier ministre soumis. Son second mandat fut radicalement différent du premier, mais même cette fois-ci, il ne parvint pas à être un président véritablement fort. Cette faiblesse provenait de tensions et de contestations au sein de son propre groupe, notamment de la part de l'étoile montante du gouvernement, Nicolas Sarkozy. Ce dernier attaqua Chirac, le qualifiant de « roi fainéant », et se lança dans la lutte pour sa succession, promettant qu'il serait un président d'un tout autre genre, beaucoup plus actif au gouvernement. C'était à l'époque où l'on parlait en Roumanie de « président joueur », mais il n'est pas question ici de faire des comparaisons. Élu en 2007, Sarkozy a tenu parole. Il était différent, en effet, « plus visiblement engagé dans la politique quotidienne de l'État » (Mitrache, p. 158), voire un « hyper-président sur-présent » (Mitrache, p. 163), avec une précision importante, pour le régime français en général : ces étiquettes ne sont pas tant dues à ses actes qu'à sa manière de les accomplir. « Le comportement hyperactif de Sarkozy n'était ni original ni inédit… Ce qui le distinguait chez Sarkozy, c'était que son langage et son style personnel étaient différents de tout ce à quoi le public français était habitué » (Mitrache, p. 164). « L'hyper-présidence n'était pas entièrement de son fait, car son cadre structurel avait été façonné bien avant l'accession de Sarkozy au pouvoir » (Mitrache, p. 179).

Quoi qu'il en soit, « le premier président postmoderne de la France » a joué un rôle décisif dans la désacralisation du statut présidentiel et dans l'accession au pouvoir de celui qui promettait d'être un « président normal » et qui, en l'absence d'un tel prédécesseur/contre-candidat, n'aurait probablement eu aucune chance. Ironiquement, François Hollande, élu en 2012, est, d'un point de vue historique, moins un « président normal » qu'un « président sans précédent ». Il semble que tout ait joué contre lui et qu'il n'ait rien pu faire. L'analyse de tous les facteurs qui ont fait de lui le seul président (hormis Pompidou) à ne pas se représenter pourrait faire l'objet d'un autre livre. On peut dire que « son quinquennat… a révélé que la présidentialisation de la Ve République était un processus irréversible », car il a démontré que, malgré peut-être le style de Sarkozy, les électeurs français souhaitaient un gouvernement « plus affirmé et plus impliqué dans le processus décisionnel politique quotidien » (Guigo, p. 198). Je ne relierais pas nécessairement cela au « nouveau système institutionnel né en 2000 », mais à la manière dont la politique est médiatisée aujourd'hui. Quoi qu'il en soit, son résultat le plus important (pas nécessairement positif) (sans lui accorder l'exclusivité) est d'avoir rendu possible l'élection d'Emmanuel Macron, le président qui a tenté une re-sacralisation originale, qui se voulait un « monarque républicain » (post)moderne. Naturellement, son second mandat étant en cours, le chapitre qui lui est consacré est le moins évaluatif. Ce qui est sûr à ce stade, c'est qu'il a détruit « le paysage politique » (Hamelin, p. 205), « le clivage partisan et la vie politique française » (Hamelin, p. 202) ou, plus concrètement, la « configuration bipolaire » qui a longtemps constitué « le fondement de la vie politique française » (Sibre, p. 62).

Après un premier mandat avec une majorité parlementaire, mais aussi avec peut-être les plus grands défis depuis 1968, ce second, avec un gouvernement fragile, me semble une transition vers une re-bipolarisation, d'une manière impensable il y a 20 ans, et même il y a 2 ans. À ce stade, je devrais supprimer quelques lignes, car le Président vient d'annoncer la dissolution de l'Assemblée nationale – la sixième depuis 1958 et la

première depuis la réforme constitutionnelle de 2000 – suite à la victoire aux élections européennes de ce que l'on appelle traditionnellement « l'extrême droite ». « Le Président de la République a activé l'arme nucléaire constitutionnelle », écrit *Le Figaro*. Et il a « soudainement plongé le paysage politique et la nation dans l'inconnu ». Je ne suis pas certain du « brutal », mais même si l'on peut imaginer des scénarios, l'inconnu est le maître mot. Je maintiens donc ce que j'écrivais avant la dissolution.

Cette exploration riche et perspicace de la politique française contemporaine manque d'une conclusion claire et nette. De plus, les « méandres du concret » – pour reprendre l'expression d'un président roumain – la rendent impossible. Tenter d'en tirer des leçons claires peut être fallacieux. Il suffit de voir comment les choses se sont déroulées pour admettre que la combinaison de facteurs institutionnels et extra-institutionnels peut conduire à des situations diverses et surprenantes. Le « semi-présidentialisme » peut signifier bien des choses, souvent selon ce que chacun veut lui donner.

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