

The Enlargement of the EU Towards the Western Balkans

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FROM EXCLUSIVE BORDERS
TO INCLUSIVE FRONTIERS
IN THE **Western Balkans**



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I. CHALLENGES AND MILESTONES IN THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS

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Reza TAVALLA ⇔ *Digital Nationalism and European Integration: Insights from Romania as a Model for the Western Balkans*

THE IDENTITY CHALLENGES OF THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS OF NORTH MACEDONIA

*Mircea BRIE**
*Angela SOLCAN***

Abstract. Despite peacefully achieving independence from the former Yugoslavia in 1991, North Macedonia has had to face several identity challenges both domestically and in its relations with neighboring states. The present research is intended to be an analysis of the implications and challenges of the identity disputes in North Macedonia within the context of the European integration process (We are taking into account both internal disputes, such as those between the Macedonian and Albanian communities, and external ones, focusing on North Macedonia's relationship with Greece and Bulgaria). Based on this, the purpose of the paper is to establish and analyze the relationship between the management of identity disputes in North Macedonia and the process of rapprochement, of Euro-Atlantic integration. As specific objectives, we propose: 1. Identification and analysis of North Macedonia's internal and external identity disputes, 2. Establishing a correlation and analysis of the mutual influence between the Euro-Atlantic integration process and the management of identity disputes, and 3. Analysis of public perceptions and support among the population of North Macedonia for resolving identity disputes and reaching compromises in order to achieve geopolitical goals (integration into NATO and the EU). Methodologically, we propose a three-level analysis: a. Analysis of how identity issues, specifically internal and external identity disputes, influenced the level of integration and the rapprochement process with the European Union, b. Analysis of rapprochement with the EU and integration into NATO to determine the degree of flexibility of the Macedonian position on identity issues and c. Analysis of public perceptions regarding identity disputes in the Euro-Atlantic integration context (our focus is to conduct this comparative analysis at the level of the Macedonian and Albanian communities, with the latter being the largest minority community in this state).

Keywords: EU, Integration Process, identity, ethnicity, religion, minority, language,

1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

North Macedonia peacefully gained independence from the former Yugoslavia in 1991. Since then, it has faced numerous internal and external identity challenges that have affected its geopolitical orientation and relationship with neighboring states. The Republic of North Macedonia has long expressed its intention to join the EU. However, progress in the negotiations has been limited and is often blocked by various identity disputes. "The country has implemented substantial constitutional and legal reforms, resolved its name

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dispute with Greece through the Prespa Agreement, and aligned its foreign and security policy with that of the EU" (Abazi Imeri, 2025: 102). Internal challenges have also proven to be significant, with the greatest pressure being the political polarization caused by identity fragmentation.

The ***purpose*** of this paper is to establish and analyze the relationship between the management of identity disputes in North Macedonia and the Euro-Atlantic integration process. We mainly take into account the internal disputes between the Macedonian and the Albanian communities, as well as the external disputes, focusing on North Macedonia's relationship with Greece and Bulgaria. Due to the latter two disputes (with Greece and Bulgaria), the small Balkan state was kept away from NATO and the EU for a long time. As specific ***objectives***, we propose: 1. Identification and analysis of North Macedonia's internal and external identity disputes, 2. Establishing a correlation and conducting an analysis on the mutual influence between the Euro-Atlantic integration process and the management of identity disputes, and 3. Analysis of public perceptions and support among the population of North Macedonia for resolving identity disputes and reaching compromises to achieve geopolitical goals (integration into NATO and the EU).

Methodologically, we propose to develop a *three level analysis*:

- a. Analysis of how identity issues, specifically internal and external identity disputes, influenced the level of the integration and the rapprochement process with the European Union,
- b. Analysis of rapprochement with the EU and integration into NATO, to determine the degree of flexibility of the Macedonian position on identity issues,
- c. Analysis of public perceptions regarding identity disputes in the Euro-Atlantic integration context (our focus is to conduct this comparative analysis at the level of the Macedonian and Albanian communities, with the latter being the largest minority community in the country).

Our research, focused on achieving these objectives and developing the three levels of analysis, is based on the following hypotheses:

- Rapprochement with the EU and integration into NATO have led to a more flexible Macedonian position on identity issues.
- Internal and external identity disputes have influenced the integration level and the process of rapprochement with the European Union.
- Minorities in North Macedonia are more willing than Macedonians to compromise on external identity disputes in order to ensure rapprochement with the EU and NATO.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the nineteenth century, the European space has undergone an extensive process of identity transformation. The European societies are modernizing, and modernization has led to profound changes at both the domestic and international levels. This identity revolution was not confined to the second half of the nineteenth century, when the emergence of new ideas led to the erosion of the old monarchical order of powerful governments. Peoples are developing an increasingly strong national consciousness, culminating in the principle of self-determination, as seen in the treaties that regulated the post-First World War order. One of the most visible transformations is the national and identity emancipation. Today, this process continues to develop new levels of identity. At the same time, more and more "border" cleavages are emerging within European societies. These boundaries are most often symbolic and ideological (Brie, 2023: 283-284).

Despite the progress made at European level in terms of consolidating the European identity, we are witnessing a resurgence of the national in the contemporary period. The process of European construction was accompanied by a certain blurring of the national identity, particularly in terms of the expression of nationalist-extremist movements. European identity appears as a higher-ranking identity, reducing the forms of expression of national and regional identities. This is, at least, in theory. On the other hand, in the current context, we are entitled to believe that European identity has emerged alongside national and regional identities, without being closely related to them. In other words, the reduction or amplification of manifestations at one level does not lead to a counterweight at another level (Brie, 2018: 237). Diachronically, stimulated by the phenomenon of globalization and the success of the EU, especially the European enlargement to the east and the disappearance of the "Iron Curtain", the European identity has experienced exaltation at both the level of public discourse and in daily life. In our opinion, the phenomenon has another facet: the identity revenge of the current period. As a result of systemic crises at EU level (economic, financial, social, institutional or legitimacy), new geopolitical realities in the neighboring area (e.g. the situation in Ukraine, the Middle East and North Africa), but also as an effect of mass migration, there has been a return to local, regional or national identities (see Brie and Blaga, 2015: 255-273 for more details). Without intending on this occasion to analyze the political realities or the discourse of political leaders in Europe and beyond, we are witnessing in this period, more than at any other time in the last hundred years, a radicalization of the discourse with an emphasis on the national. Political movements are gaining more and more national, ethno-cultural and identity-based nuances. It is not only populism that is gaining ground, but also the xenophobic, tribal debate of fear and danger portrayed in the image of the other (Brie, 2018: 238; Brie, 2023: 283-284).

The topic of identity and identity borders has been a key personal interest in our research on the Balkan and Eastern European space over the last decade. This paper develops in a new methodological construction ideas and synthetic research contained in others previous papers on identity as a border in the space of Central and Eastern Europe (Brie, 2016: 359-381; Brie, 2023: 281-294; Brie; Jusufi and Polgár, 2023: 69-97; Brie, Jusufi and Polgár, 2021: 65-72).

The fall of communism and the disintegration of Yugoslavia initially amplified the process of identity emancipation and the emergence of new cleavages in the Balkan space. Following the armed conflicts that ensued after the initial proclamation of independence in several of these countries, a period of consolidation began, accompanied by European integration, as well as cooperation and reconciliation efforts. The gradual resolution of these conflicts has relieved the public sphere from excessive ethnic nationalistic discussions, which has been conducive to the emergence of civic identities and, with the further rapprochement to European Union, offering the prospect of European non-ethnic identities. The European Union opted for a regional approach in this part of the continent, in order to achieve greater stability among the conflicted communities and states. In 1996, the European Union began to differentiate between the two terms 'South-East (SE) Europe' and 'Western Balkans'. 'South-East Europe' refers to all the countries from the Gulf of Trieste to the Black Sea, while the 'Western Balkans' consists of all the former Yugoslavian states except Slovenia, plus Albania (Trenchov, 2012: 1-12). Basically, we can say that the relations between the EU and Western Balkan countries are developing, and the European Union's approach to the region has brought progress and cooperation between the conflicted countries. The main tool in this process, where we can see also great

achievements, is the organization of bilateral and multilateral meetings by or with the support of the European Union, where political leaders from the region gather and make common decisions that are valuable for the whole region (Alujevic, 2012: 6-9; Brie, Jusufi and Polgar, 2021).

At a *conceptual* level, identity constructions appear to be on the same level of analysis, but they can have different connotations. Regardless of the level of reporting (European, national or regional/local), identity is found as a form of expression in the public space despite universal trends, globalization and the uniformity of values, characteristics or community expressions. Elements of ethno-religious identity are found in the global public space, including in forms multiplied through the channels of global propagation. Therefore, it is not only the global increase itself that is important, but also the particular and the specific.

The latter often take forms of extremism, nationalism and ethno-religious violence are multiplied by gaining followers thousands of miles away. The national and ethnic state, associated with the national territory, has not only survived the pressures of the "global society", but has also demonstrated an even greater capacity for affiliation. *Identity globalization* has proven to be stronger in urban and industrialized societies. However, where there are consistent rural areas, a rich heritage and cultural tradition, resistance to globalization has developed. Consequently, local and national-cultural identities are more strongly preserved in the rural-agricultural environment, as well as in the proximity of cultural sites (Brie, 2021: 5-29). Such a reality does not rule out the possibility of a European supranational identity developing and consolidating in parallel. Conceptually, this seemingly antagonistic relationship appears: European identity versus national/local identity. We hereby propose three levels of analysis regarding the concept of identity: the European level, the national level and the regional level. Specialist literature captures the dispute over the establishment of the identity of a person or community. This process comprises two dimensions: self-identification and hetero-identification. In either cases, whether one identifies themselves or is identified by someone else, the debate on identity involves both objective and subjective elements. Theoretical analyses, on the other hand, seize a dispute around the subjective and objective dimension of identity. Unlike the concept of *national origin*, which refers to something given, inherited by birth, *national identity* is, above all, the expression of the consciousness of belonging to a cultural community that is defined as a political community (Brie, 2021: 5-29). Ernest Renan refers to this reality when he characterizes the nation, suggestively, as a "daily plebiscite" (Flóra, 2011: 114). The national identity in this case is related to the concept of nation. The latter one understood as a population that divides a territory (to which it relates through the historical dimension), myths and common historical memories, a mass culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for each member (the latter referring to the state political organization). This analysis presupposes the existence of two things: 1. a segment of the population living in a certain territory, and 2. a certain type of relationship that expresses the consciousness of identity and belonging, or a "community spirit" (Brie and Blaga, 2015: 255-273).

Such a perspective on the nation is in line with the philosophy of the Westphalian state that focuses on the idea of state-nation-territory.

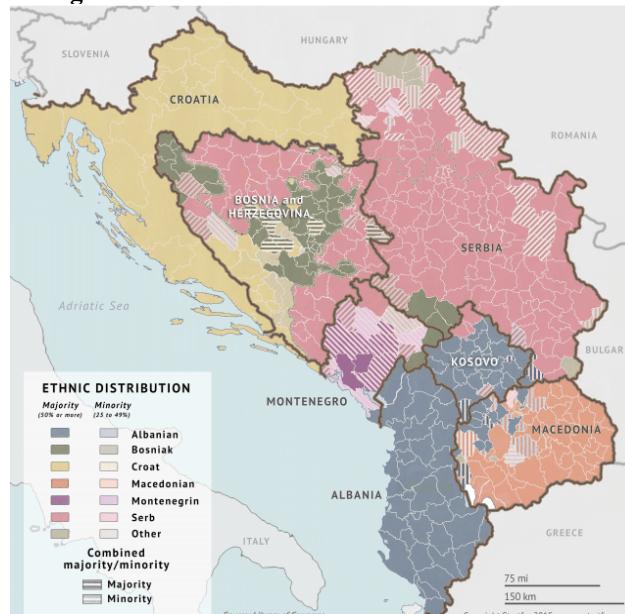
Conceptually, the entire identity building has at least two elements of specificity ever since its construction (Brie, 2016): 1. National identity born of ethnic belonging, and 2. National identity born of civic/citizen affiliation. In the first case, national identity serves a particular ethnic group that is often in competition with other ethnic groups (most often

present in the same reference space). The perspective gives rise to nationalist-tribal expressions that may involve the exclusion of representatives of other ethnic groups. In the second situation, the civic dimension serves the state, leading most often to patriotism (this perspective is rather positive compared to the first situation when we are dealing with a perspective with negative connotations!).

In most Western countries, the national identity has been built mainly around citizenship, and consequently, the territory of citizenship has become the fundamental term of reference for the "national territory" - the civic dimension of national identity. Eastern Europe has had a different pattern of development, in which ethnicity, the ethnic belonging or affiliation has fulfilled a fundamental role in building the national identity – the ethnic dimension of national identity (Flóra, 2011: 116). Thus, the Western model of the nation emphasizes the centrality of the national territory or homeland, while the Eastern model focuses on ethnic origin and cultural ties.

A fundamental feature of state-type nation-state constructions in the Western Balkans is their permanent lack of legitimacy or, rather, their incomplete legitimacy. By identifying the state with a single national identity, other national communities inevitably found themselves excluded from this process of legitimization, which constituted a fundamental source of inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions. This reality has led to the sacralization of the state territory considered national territory (Flóra, 2011: 118-128) (the righteous property of a single nation/nationality!), while the cultural-historical philosophy seeks to delegitimize the contribution of other national communities as much as possible. At the European level, the legitimate question is to what extent we are talking about a common European identity or, in antithesis, about the presence of identity borders in the European space. A certain identity cleavage can be observed between Western and Eastern Europe. This reality is given by the historical, cultural, religious and political heritage (Brie, 2021: 5-29).

Figure 1. Ethnic distribution in the Western Balkans



Source: United States. Central Intelligence Agency. Cartography Center, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2008620837/>, accessed on May 20, 2025

From the conceptual point of view, we can identify different characteristics of identity in the Balkan countries. Many cleavages or borders are associated with identity:

- citizen identity/civic identity
- ethnic identity
- religion identity
- linguistic identity
- alphabet identity
- cultural identity
- geopolitical identity

The young states born from the disintegration of Yugoslavia had to consolidate and strengthen their national identity by referring to its various associated forms. The **national identity based on citizenship**, respectively on civic identity, was difficult to achieve in regions of great ethnic and religious diversity. The new reality of strong identity cleavages, which culminated in violent inter-ethnic conflicts, has left a profound mark on Balkan societies. Competition and mutual distrust characterized the first two decades after the fall of communism. Proofs of this are the complicated realities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia's disputes with Kosovo (Brie, Jusufi and Polgar, 2021: 185-209; Polgar and Brie, 2024: 497-528). Strong identities used for political purposes were justified ethnically, religiously, linguistically or culturally. This hindered the weak initiatives of the states that resulted in the former Yugoslavia to create a national identity based on citizenship. In the absence of a solidarity based on citizenship, identity borders were highlighted to more obviously separate communities built on other identity criteria. This resulted in the emergence of identity borders.

The ethno-national identity border. A strong identity supports and justifies a strong statehood. Political regimes have often used logic, and vice versa, in order to justify newly appearing national-state constructions on the European map. Thus, the existence and survival of a political-state construction came to depend, among other things, on the need for an identity construction that would distinguish it from the neighboring states and peoples, drawing not only state borders but also identity borders. Like the state of Montenegro, North Macedonia developed after independence a specific policy aimed at highlighting the unitary relationship within the triangle state, nation, citizenship (Džankić, 2015). The three dimensions must be mutually supportive and mutually reinforcing. If the national dimension is weaker, statehood and citizenship must sustain and justify national existence and consolidation.

In North Macedonia there is a very interesting relationship between Macedonians and Albanians in terms of ethnic borders.

Language as a border: individuality and foundation of nation. Language was used as a political tool in the nation-building process. Linguistic solidarity is key to establishing a distinct identity in relation to others, causing the individual to position themselves "inside the linguistic borders", alongside the linguistic community and in opposition to others. The linguistic individuality of a people has always played an important role in consolidating statehood. A distinct language leads to an additional force to preserve statehood. The close relationship between a state construction, an ethno-national identity, on the one hand, and the linguistic individuality of a population, on the other hand, is not specific only to the contemporary period, not even to the modern one. It is deeply rooted in history, and has nothing to do with a specific geographical area. The language of one community has always served as a means of distinguishing itself from another community. It has always been a form of creating a consciousness of community

belonging, of solidarity of individuals with the group. It is no wonder, therefore, that it has been used by certain states or political regimes to create and support identity disputes inside or outside a state, inside or outside communities (Brie, 2023). For example, in Montenegro, the public policies and public discourse have led to the assertion of linguistic individuality in relation to the Serbian language. If the Serbian language was initially accepted as the official language, the 2007 constitution required the "Montenegrin language" as the official language, causing dismay on the Serbian side (Morrison, 2018: 138).

A similar case is that of the Republic of Moldova, where the promotion of *Moldovanism* as an identity has caused controversy. The Moldovan language, distinct from Romanian, serves the same interests and political or geopolitical objectives.

The Cyrillic alphabet as an identity border. The alphabet can also be used as an element of distinct identity, taking the form of a cleavage, such as identity boundaries. While the use of the Latin alphabet by the Albanians in the former Yugoslavia was accompanied by the existence of a clearly distinct language, this was not the case for other peoples who were part of the former federal state. For a long time, the linguistic individuality of Croats in relation to Serbs was linked to the use of the Latin alphabet by the former and the use of the Cyrillic one by the Serbians. This dispute can be identified in the case of Montenegro (Morrison, 2018: 130-152) or the existence of a separate Bosnian language (Džankić, 2015: 48). The alphabet has always played a very important role in the justice of the decision to draw a linguistic boundary of an identity nature.

The issue of the Cyrillic alphabet in the identity dispute of Bosnian Serbs has returned to the agenda. In this case, alongside religion, the Cyrillic alphabet plays a significant role in defining identity. On 15 September 2021, on the occasion of Serbian 'Unity Day', MPs from the two parliaments of Serbia and Republika Srpska passed two laws to encourage the use of the Cyrillic alphabet in a new attempt to strengthen a common national identity (Serbia, 2021). All public institutions and societies, schools and universities, national associations and companies are required to use the Cyrillic alphabet (Cyrillic Alphabet mandatory, 2021). Furthermore, private companies have been offered tax reductions provided they use this alphabet. The Cyrillic alphabet is one of a number of increasingly complex factors that are bringing nationalism back to the complicated Balkan republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In the case of the Republic of Moldova, the introduction of the Cyrillic alphabet as a distinctive element in relation to the Romanian language was a weapon used by the Soviet regime but also the Russian one (both the Tsarist and current one). In Transnistria, Cyrillic spelling is still used to write "Moldovan". The choice of the alphabet has often proved to be a political act aimed at often solving geopolitical problems (to be seen the case of the Soviet Republics presented by Alexe and Ciapai, 2021).

Religion as a border. In the Balkans, religion has always played a role in shaping community identity, in relation to which the boundaries of identity-national communities, and even of states, have been drawn. In the former Yugoslav state, despite numerous efforts made after the Paris Treaties to achieve national cohesion, religion has always been an impediment to this success. Slovenes and Croats are mostly Catholic Christians, Serbs, Montenegrins and Macedonians are mostly Orthodox Christians, Albanians and Bosnians are Muslims. This mosaic is clearly visible in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where religion has played a significant role in shaping identity borders. The Serbs are Orthodox, the Croats are Catholic, and the Bosniaks are Muslim. Despite efforts to standardize language and religion (but not only it!), the ethno-national communities have remained

distinct. Moreover, there is no longer any unity within Orthodoxy itself, as evidenced by the case of the Church in Montenegro. Here, a significant proportion of the population criticizes the hierarchical superiority of the Serbian Church and challenges it (Brie, 2021).

3. NORTH MACEDONIA'S IDENTITY CRISES AND INTEGRATION PROCESSES

North Macedonia is a young Balkan state with a population of 2.1 million that is ethnically, religiously, and linguistically diverse (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025). Internal identity disputes, primarily between Macedonians and Albanians, have been exacerbated by disputes with neighboring states. North Macedonia shares borders with Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece.

In both its internal affairs and its relations with neighboring states, North Macedonia has had to make efforts to resolve identity disputes in order to avert crises and achieve certain geopolitical objectives. However, despite these efforts and sacrifices, the process of rapprochement with the EU has often been hindered by bilateral and geopolitical constraints, as well as persistent internal challenges, the most significant of which is political polarization (Couteau et al., 2024; European Commission, 2024).

3.1. Internal identity balance and the national integration process

The country has a complex and ethnodiverse population, with ethnic Macedonians holding the numerical majority, followed by ethnic Albanians. Albanians are the largest ethnic minority in North Macedonia. According to the census held in 2002, Albanians comprised 25 percent of the population of North Macedonia. Unofficial estimates are higher due to large emigrant community (Visoka and Gjevori, 2013: 479-498). Albanians live mainly in the north-western parts of the country.

Similarly, religion is reflected in the main religion of each group, which is Orthodox Christian in the case of Macedonians and Muslim in the case of Albanians (Piacentini, 2020). The large majority of Albanians in North Macedonia are Muslims, but there are also some who practice the Bektashi dervish order, Roman Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity. North Macedonia has been identified as one of the examples of the states that have more or less implemented a political system of consociationalism (McCradden, 2006: 2). However, it is important to acknowledge that language serves as the most distinguishing feature between the two groups because the two are not mutually intelligible. It is also worth noting that the primary and secondary education is segregated, making language “not only the main ethnic marker between the two largest communities, but also a prime obstacle in bridging them” (Sorrells, 2025: 127; Piacentini, 2020, 100-101).

Since North Macedonia gained its independence in 1991, the country's politics have been heavily influenced by both tensions and political dialogue between its two largest communities, the Albanians and the Macedonians. Among other notable crises one must include the Gostivar flag crisis in 1997 and the Kosovo war in 1999. The inter-ethnic tensions culminated with the ethnic conflict that occurred in 2001, which was the peak of the inter-ethnic struggle in the post-independence North Macedonia. The conflict left deep scars in the country's collective consciousness (Kristen; Simkus and Listhau: 75-95). The Conflict came to an end with the signing in August 2001 of the peace agreement, the Ohrid Framework Agreement, named after the city where it was concluded.

The Ohrid Agreement was a significant development in this regard, as it established a framework for enhanced protection and representation rights for the Albanian community (Székely and Horváth, 2014: 426-448). As a result of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, important guarantees were provided for ethnic Albanians, particularly as regards local governance, education, language use and participation in public life, including public-sector employment. The Agreement ceased the hostilities and led to the constitutional and administrative changes in order to meet the grievances of the ethnic Albanian and other minority groups. The Agreement opened a new era in North Macedonia's transition as it brought a major change in the national policy (Koneska, 2017: 36-50).

At the Western Balkans level, the Albanian community is present in an extensive area in the southern part of the ex-Yugoslav space.

Figure 2. Distribution of Albanians in neighboring countries



Source: https://www.mapmania.org/map/70331/distribution_of_albanians_in_neighboring_countries, accessed in 12.06.2025.

It is important to note that the Albanian community in the Balkans has experienced certain nuances in terms of identity. It seems that from an ethno-linguistic and religious perspective, this community has managed to maintain a status that would ensure the preservation of its cultural-community specificity. Identity has “migrated” to other associated forms of identity connected with citizenship, the civil one, and in some cases even global – European nature. This phenomenon is most clearly observed in Kosovo, where it appears to be a growing attachment among citizens to the citizen identity given by the identity-state value. If, in this case, the Kosovo national identity is associated with the Albanian one, in North Macedonia, the ethno-Albanian community is subject to a form of national otherness by associating it with the Macedonian citizenship identity of the state. In the latter case, the partnership compromise for the well-being and preservation of statehood can lead to a mixed syncretic identity. The ethno-identity dimension (even

linguistic or religious) takes a second role in the process of constructing national identity. The national identity is gradually acquiring a more pronounced civic dimension, which is the result of political compromise (Brie, Jusufi and Polgar, 2021).

The balance in inter-ethnic relations in North Macedonia is in the process of strengthening. The Albanian community, supported in its external efforts, has become aware not only of the influence it has on the domestic policy of the state, but also of its limits.

„North Macedonia's institutional design, shaped by the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement, has codified ethnic power-sharing mechanisms. While these mechanisms are widely regarded as being crucial for peace and stability, it is also acknowledged that they have embedded ethnic identity as a primary axis of political mobilization” (Abazi Imeri, 2025: 104). The 2024 Bertelsmann Transformation Index notes that ethnic segmentation in the party system “makes it difficult to foster issue-based competition,” reinforcing voter alignment along identity rather than policy lines (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024; Abazi Imeri, 2025: 104).

3.2. The identity crisis of the state's name and the integrative compromise at the security level

Following a long period of tensions over the name and historical legacy, the Prespa Agreement was signed on 18 June 2018 in the village of Psarades (Nivici in Macedonian) near Lake Prespa. Macedonia changed its name to the Republic of North Macedonia (which Greece officially recognized), and the people and language were to be recognized as “Macedonian”. It is important to note however that Macedonia renounced all claims to Greek Macedonia and its history. In exchange, Greece allowed Macedonia to join NATO and the EU (Prespa Agreement, 2018).

The agreement was not met with universal approval, with both Greeks and Macedonians expressing their discontent and bursting in protests.

The claims regarding the identity heritage related to the name "Macedonia" have strained bilateral relations between the two neighbors for decades. In the absence of a solution, Greece has blocked North Macedonia in its aspirations towards NATO and European integration. Despite the fact that in certain areas and social groups the agreement is still a sensitive subject, the Prespa agreement is still seen as a step forward for North Macedonia towards the EU. Based on the achieved results we can consider the Prespa agreement as a real game-changer for the entire region which demonstrates the transforming force and modernizing dynamics of the enlargement policy, a process that contributes to the stability and prosperity of Europe and its neighborhood. With seven years having passed since the agreement was signed, we can consider it an important achievement, a success recorded by the Republic of North Macedonia in its European and Euro-Atlantic course. This success can be attributed to the perseverance and firm political will of the Macedonian political leadership, with support from the civil society, which has expressed a clear and firm choice in favor of the community of democratic values established in the EU and NATO (Brie, Jusufi and Polgár, 2023: 81).

The Prespa Agreement was warmly received in Western states that were expecting a settlement that would lead to the integration of this small Balkan state into NATO and the EU, and with it to the consolidation of security and a Euro-Atlantic future for the Western Balkans.

NATO integration was accelerated immediately after the signing of the Prespa Agreement. “On 1 August 2018, the NATO Secretary General sent a letter to the Minister

of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of North Macedonia together with the Plan for implementation of the NATO accession process" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025) and on 27 March 2020, North Macedonia became a member of NATO.

European integration was also gaining new impetus in the context of NATO integration. Despite the compromises made, EU accession faced new obstacles: Bulgaria blocked progress due to disagreements over language and national identity.

3.3. The compromise with Bulgaria

The issue is one with deep historical roots, and its complexity leads to difficulties in reaching a real legal compromise and its implementation.

As a young state, national construction was necessary through all means of identity. In Bulgaria, where there were many supporters of a possible "reunification" based on a historical narrative, there was a sense of hostility towards the nation-building process of the Macedonians. Each country has in the past accused the other of not respecting the rights of its national minority living across the border.

Macedonians are seen as a "product of the political history of the late 19th century" (Sivignon 2099: 121). Moreover, the Serbian Macedonian identity (as distinct from Greek Macedonian and Bulgarian Macedonian) became even more pronounced during the Yugoslav period (Sivignon 2099: 122-123). The Macedonian Republic thus found its place in terms of identity and politics within the Yugoslav Federation. Identity issues are central to the dispute. Bulgaria refuses to recognize the existence of a separate ethnic Macedonian identity and a separate Macedonian language. It demands that the EU avoid using the term "Macedonian language", and instead use the term "Official language of Republic of North Macedonia" (Phillips 2022). It insists that the Macedonian language is a Bulgarian dialect and ethnic Macedonians are a subgroup of the Bulgarian nation (Phillips 2022). Macedonia and Bulgaria share linguistic and cultural similarities but also hold differing views on their history and language. These differences can be traced back to the 19th century, when Bulgarian nationalists claimed Ottoman-ruled Macedonia as part of Bulgarian territory (Marusic 2017; Brie, Jusufi and Polgár, 2023: 84).

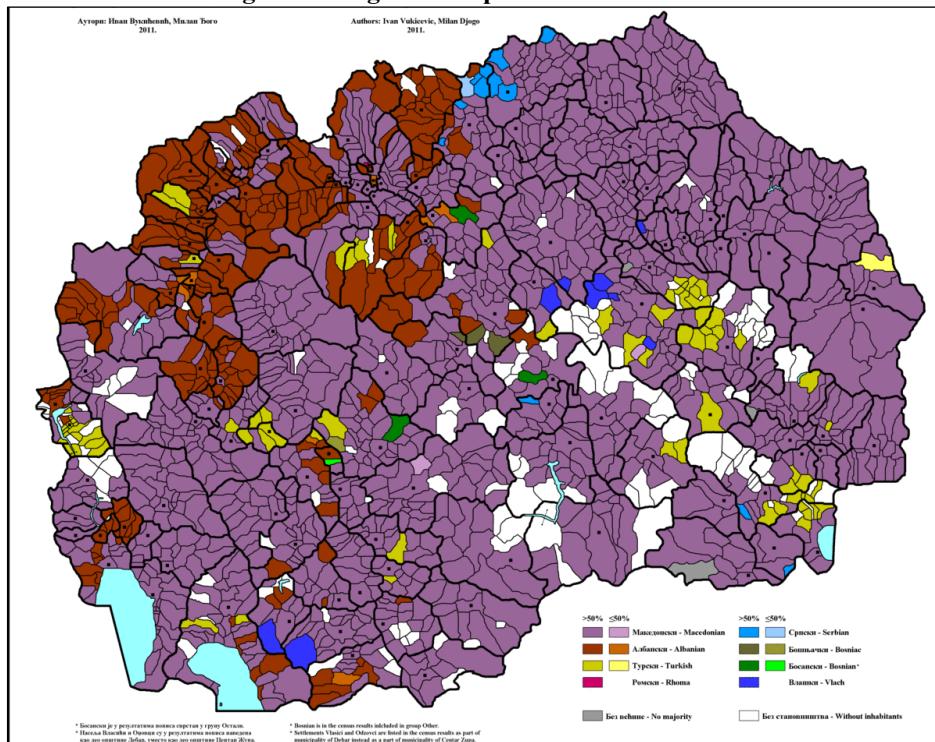
North Macedonia has an identity dispute with Bulgaria which focuses on three main demands of the Bulgarians: 1. the identity of the Macedonian language as the Bulgarian side demands that their neighbors should formally recognize the Bulgarian roots of their language, respectively the official formulation of a "common history", including identity; 2. the recognition and inclusion of the Bulgarian minority in the Constitution of North Macedonia (this claim would mean that the remaining majority is not Bulgarian as the more extreme Bulgarian claims sound, which would put an end to a nationalist dream of the Bulgarian side); and, a much vaguer formulation, 3. that North Macedonia renounces to what is called a "hate speech" against Bulgaria and „revision of the national historical narratives".

The history of disputes is long. In the context of negotiations related to the Euro-Atlantic integration process, the Macedonian government made a conscious effort to adopt a more open stance towards negotiation. However, many discussions were sterile, and there were times when promises were not fulfilled. This was also influenced by the clear opposition of public opinion to these compromises.

In 2017 Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov signed Bulgarian-Macedonian *Treaty on friendship, good neighbourliness and cooperation* in Skopje (European Western Balkans, 2017). At the regional and European level, the bilateral treaty may have major implications for Sofia's attempt to join

the EU's regional initiatives, which promise (also) economic opportunities, first of all through the Berlin-process (Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeurop,a 2017). Both countries will also now say they have no territorial claims against each other. Both countries also pledge to protect the rights of the other country's nationals living on their soil – not to interfere in the other's domestic affairs (Treaty, 2017). The 2017 Friendship Treaty between North Macedonia and Bulgaria called for the establishment of a joint commission on historical and educational issues. But implementation of the Friendship Treaty languished (Phillips 2022). In October 2019, Bulgaria warned that it would block North Macedonia's EU accession unless its "anti-Bulgarian ideology" was addressed. Bulgaria strongly objected to state-supported or tolerated hate speech and minority claims towards Bulgaria. North Macedonia politicians across the political spectrum rejected the claim that Macedonians and Bulgarians were a single people, divided by Yugoslav policy during the 20th century (Phillips 2022). In March 2020, the EU Council decided to open the long-awaited accession negotiations. And just as the first intergovernmental conference was about to take place, in November 2020, Bulgaria blocked the adoption of the negotiation framework over issues of identity and history. The year 2021 did not bring any progress in the negotiation process. Despite a relative progress with the signing in 2017 of the *Treaty on friendship, good neighbourliness and cooperation* at civil society level, there has been no improvement in the perception of the required compromise in the relationship with Bulgaria (Brie, Jusufi and Polgár, 2023; Brie, 2023).

Figure 3. Linguistic map of North Macedonia



Source: apud <https://www.deblauwetiger.com/macedonie-sociaaldemocraten-en-albanzen-gaan-regeren/>, accessed in 12.07.2025 (Ivan Vukicevic, Milan Djogo, 2011)

In the end, after further rounds of negotiations and under the pressure of the EU, which wanted to give a clear signal of integration to the Western Balkans, Bulgaria's veto was lifted after mediation by the French Presidency of the EU Council. The solution was a bitter compromise for North Macedonia, as the opinions expressed by civil society would show. The grievances were clear, but the compromise was necessary. Thus, with the vote of the parliament in Skopje on 16 July 2022 and the signing of the agreement between the two sides in Sofia a day later, the agreement enabled the formal opening of negotiations on the accession of North Macedonia to the EU, officially announced in a communiqué of the Council of the EU on 19 July 2022 (Council of the EU, 2022).

It was an agreement and a promise (later unfulfilled). The center-left government accepted a Bulgarian demand to insert a reference to the Bulgarian ethnic minority in North Macedonia's constitution. However, that administration lacked the parliamentary majority to implement the change. In 2024, a conservative government led by Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski came to power, who "has said it will only amend the constitution if Bulgaria first approves North Macedonia's EU membership" (Testorides, 2025).

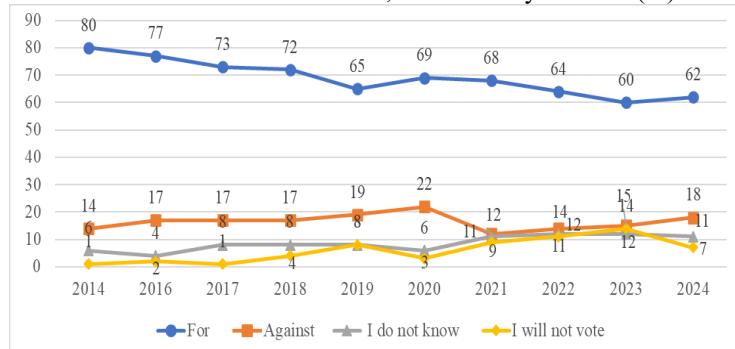
After three years, in 2025, the EU still demands that North Macedonia amends its constitution due to the impasse with Bulgaria. On May 15th, 2025, "European Council President Antonio Costa has called on North Macedonia to change its constitution to include the Bulgarian minority as a way for the country to continue its path toward full European Union membership" (Testorides, 2025).

4. ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS REGARDING IDENTITY COMPROMISES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS

We aim to develop a synthesis of opinion polls conducted over the last years to capture some trends recorded in relation to sensitive identity issues that have influenced the Euro-Atlantic integration process.

General trends: "The declining public support for EU membership in North Macedonia over the past decade can be largely attributed to the low credibility in the country's EU accession prospects, which was initially triggered by the prolonged Greek blockade of the process, based on the longstanding name dispute between the two states. While the resolution of this issue in 2019, following the ratification of the Prespa Agreement, was expected to reinvigorate the accession momentum, this enthusiasm proved to be short-lived. By the end of 2020, the start of accession negotiations was once again obstructed by a new blockade tied to a new bilateral dispute with Bulgaria that involves issues of national identity, history, and language" (Damjanovski, 2025:11). As mentioned, the deadlock was temporarily lifted with the Macedonian government's approval of the EU-backed "French proposal", which (among other conditions) required the recognition of a Bulgarian minority in the Macedonian Constitution (2022). The accession negotiations were blocked again: the constitutional amendments could not be implemented due to the lack of consensus between the parties in Parliament. The new conservative government of Hristijan Mickoski (voted by parliament in June 2024) refused to implement the agreement with the Bulgarian side regarding the constitutional amendment.

Figure 4. If next week there is a referendum for membership of the Republic of North Macedonia in the EU, how would you vote? (%)



Source: author's own preparations based on data collected from Damjanovski, 2025: 13 (public opinion surveys research conducted in the period 2014-2024)

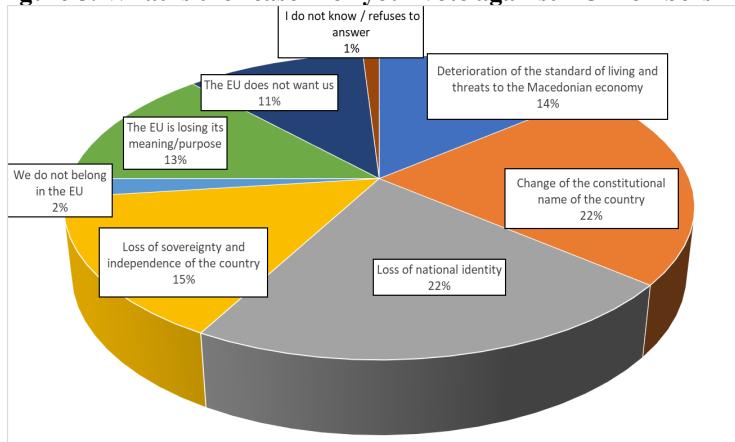
We propose to continue by focusing on the current implications of the European integration process and the public perceptions that are expressed in relation to identity issues. Given our limited space but also the topicality of the debate, our study is directed towards analyzing public perceptions in relation to the dispute with Bulgaria (an issue that remains unresolved).

Analysis of data from several opinion polls shows a high level of support among the citizens of North Macedonia for EU accession.

The graph above shows this support, although in recent years a decrease in this percentage can be observed. The reasons are multiple. Some are related to the lack of a perspective, a certain fatigue, the growth of resentment and nationalism amid numerous disputes with neighbors.

In the context of an endless series of identity disputes and the lack of a predictable geopolitical future, resentments and traumas caused by identity crises always appear. Even though it is older, the issue of changing the name also reappears in the context of disputes with the Bulgarians. Too many compromises have been made and the society is experiencing radicalization and the path to extremism.

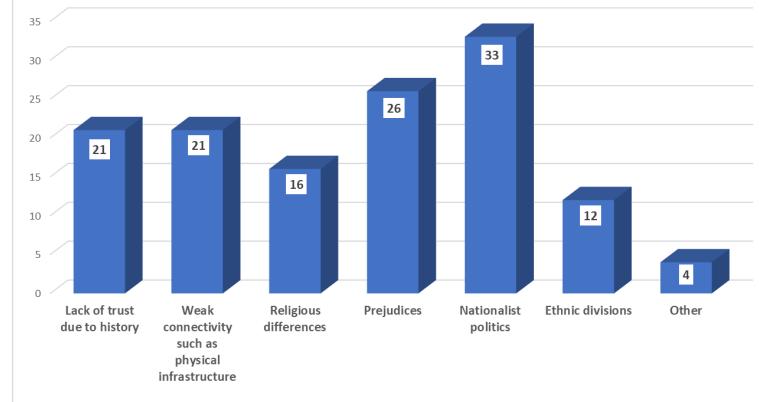
Figure 5. What is the reason for your vote against EU membership?



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

Even though the share of the Eurosceptic population remains very low (11%), the associations of the anti-EU vote with changing the country's name, with the loss of sovereignty and national identity are very strong (59% of those who stated that they would vote against a possible referendum on EU accession motivated their decision by association with identity disputes).

Figure 6. Challenges in regional cooperation with neighbors (North Macedonia, 2024)



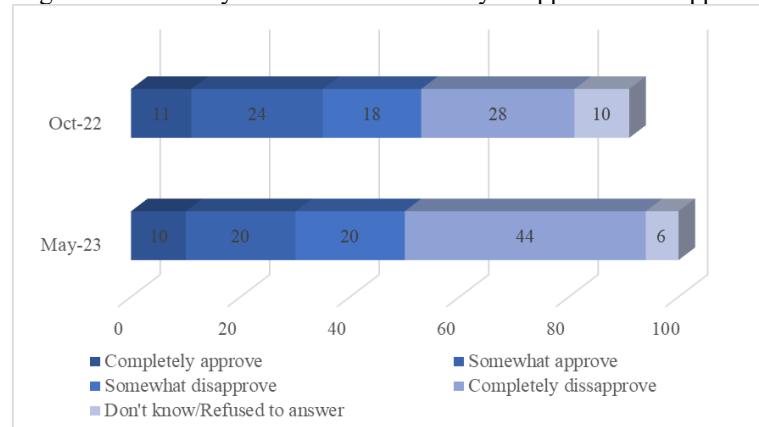
Source: author's own preparations based on data collected from Balkan Barometer, 2024: 52.

Q: In your opinion, what hampers regional cooperation between Western Balkan economies?

(All respondents, N=6000, multiple answers, share of total, %)

These internal and external identity disputes lead to a weak openness to cooperation of this Balkan state. Even the limited regional cooperation is also explained by the association mainly with identity challenges and suspicions in relation to its neighbors. Lack of trust due to history, religious differences, prejudices, nationalist politics and ethnic divisions are the main challenges for a better regional cooperation.

Figure 7. For the EU accession negotiations to continue, North Macedonia has agreed to include the Bulgarian community in its constitution. Do you approve or disapprove of this? (%)

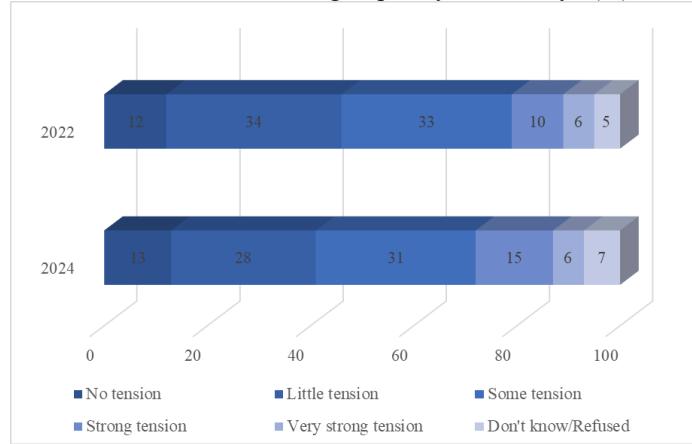


Source: author's own preparations based on data collected from Brima: 2023: 77.

The rejection of a compromise by changing the constitution is increasingly evident after 2022. The share of those who disapprove of this approach increases in 2023 and 2024. Moreover, although they are aware of the importance of this approach for the

EU accession process, Macedonians do not approve of it. This phenomenon identifies a compromised European integration process for this category of population (hate speech towards Bulgarians is more important).

Figure 8. How would you rate the level of intensity of tension between different ethnic groups in your country? (%)

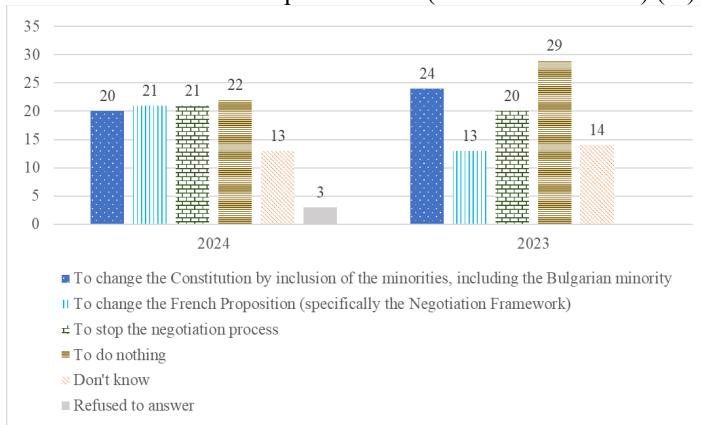


Source: author's own preparations based on data collected from IPSOS, 2024: 94

The level of intensity of tensions between different ethnic groups is perceived by public opinion as increasing as well. One can therefore identify a blockage that appears in addressing identity issues and in achieving the compromises necessary to implement the agreements required in relations with neighboring states.

The radicalization of public opinion is also reflected in the policy of the government. During this period a new conservative government led by Hristijan Mickoski is established in Skopje (the lack of compromise in terms of identity becomes official policy), which refuses to implement the agreement reached to change the constitution, indicating a process of rapprochement with the EU that is facing challenges.

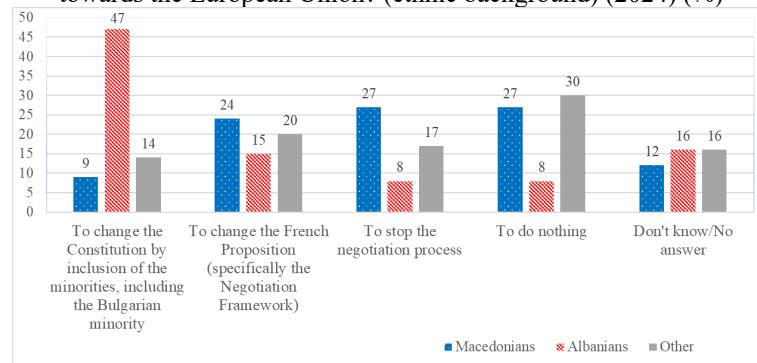
Figure 9. What changes do you think need to be made on the path towards the European Union? (historical overview) (%)



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

A radicalization and a decreasing inclination towards compromise can be observed in the context of 2022-2024. Changing the constitution in accordance with the Macedonian-Bulgarian agreement of 2022 regarding the Bulgarian minority is far from being resolved.

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

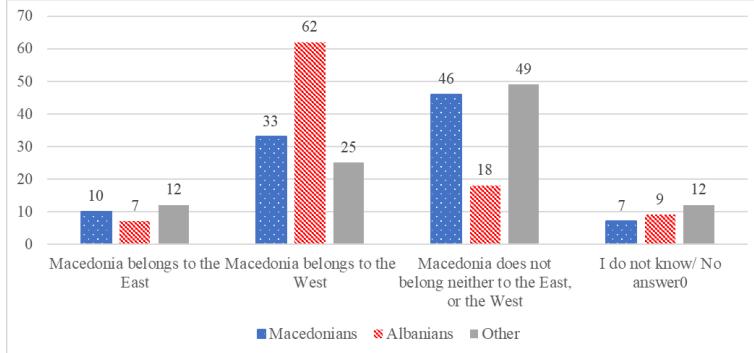


Source: author's own preparations based on data collected from Velinovska and Sofeska, 2025: 10

It is interesting to note the greater openness to compromise of the Albanian minority in North Macedonia, which appears to be more focused on achieving the goal of European integration and to a lesser extent interested in the identity dilemmas of Macedonians in relation to Bulgarians (this could be seen both in relation to the historical narrative and in relation to the identity of the Macedonian language or the recognition of the Bulgarian minority).

The case of the Albanians in North Macedonia is a relevant example of how a minority group can become a powerful force in influencing the European integration of a country. The Albanians forced the country to take a more proactive approach and to take ownership and leadership for the EU-related reforms (Brie, Jusufi and Polgar, 2021: 86-87).

During the period from October to December 2024, it was found that „82% of the ethnic Albanian respondents expressed their support for North Macedonia’s EU membership aspirations” but only 56% of the ethnic Macedonian respondents support them (Damjanovski, 2025: 50. In 2021, 63% of ethnic Macedonian respondents expressed support for the country’s European integration, while a significant proportion of ethnic Albanians (82%) voiced their support for North Macedonia’s membership in the EU (Damjanovski 2022: 4).

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

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

The attitude towards geopolitical affiliation differs depending on ethnicity. The Albanian community played a decisive role in the pro-Western orientation of Northern Macedonia. In 2024, the highest percentage of support for the Western orientation is observed among ethnic Albanian respondents (62%), while Macedonians support the Western orientation only by 33% (Velinovska and Sofeska, 2025: 17).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Analyzing the identity crises that have been linked to integration discussions at the regional and Euro-Atlantic levels, we conclude by emphasizing the idea that only compromise can be the key in identity disputes between the parties involved. North Macedonia has made many compromises, but it is fair to say that it is still not enough to resolve all the controversial aspects of these disputes.

A fatigue can be noted in this process, given that the beneficial effects of these compromises are for Macedonian citizens (and their political leaders) only promises of a possible European integration that would produce (possible) positive effects on the state and society.

Directly following the achievement of the assumed objectives, and developing the three levels of analysis that our methodology contains, we draw several conclusions:

- An internal identity dispute between Macedonians and ethnic Albanians, an external dispute with Greece over the name of the state and a much more complex one with Bulgaria were identified and analyzed. The first two had a relatively positive outcome at the integration level (national, regional and Euro-Atlantic – North Macedonia joined NATO for example or internally developed a partnership that increasingly integrated the two largest national communities). The last, the one with Bulgaria, is still far from being resolved and is related to the complexity of the historical narrative, the recognition of the Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia (with the inclusion of this fact in the Constitution – as provided for in the 2022 agreement) or the issue of the Macedonian language.

- Our analysis led to the conclusion that the Macedonian position was becoming more flexible under the pressure of negotiations related to the Euro-Atlantic integration process. The Macedonian position was not a comfortable one. The pressures of the Greek and Bulgarian neighbors created widespread frustration beyond the flexibility of political positions. In the context of radicalization trends and growing

nationalist frustrations, Macedonian society and the new conservative government that came to power in mid-2024 have become increasingly inflexible in implementing the agreement with the Bulgarian side.

- The analysis of public perceptions and support of the population of North Macedonia for resolving identity disputes and reaching compromises in order to achieve geopolitical objectives has highlighted support for integration into NATO and the EU (with decreasing trends in this support). Another conclusion is the increase in the share of those who reject identity compromises and the existence of different perceptions among ethnic Albanians compared to Macedonians. Albanians support the Euro-Atlantic integration process and the achievement of identity compromises with the Greek and Bulgarian states more than Macedonians.

The first hypothesis, namely a rapprochement with the EU and integration into NATO, which has led to a more flexible Macedonian position on identity issues, is partially confirmed (at least until the government led by Hristijan Mickoski came to power in 2024 – a less flexible position has been announced by the new government).

The second hypothesis, that internal and external identity disputes have influenced the integration level and the process of rapprochement with the European Union, is confirmed: the integration process was directly influenced and is still blocked by the lack of compromise related to changing the Constitution by including Bulgarians among the recognized national minorities.

The third hypothesis, that minorities in North Macedonia support to a greater extent than Macedonians compromises in external identity disputes, in order to ensure rapprochement with the EU and NATO, was also confirmed. Furthermore, it is important to highlight the fact that national minorities, especially Albanians, pursued the Euro-Atlantic integration objective in a much more pragmatic way and gave more limited attention to the Macedonians' identity compromises.

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PUBLIC DEMANDS IN TREATY-MAKING AN ANALYSIS OF ALBANIA'S ALIGNMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF EU INTEGRATION

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Abstract. The paper investigates three fundamental public demands in the EU treaty law and practice - transparency, accountability and participation - that Albania, as an EU candidate country, must address in its legal and political processes. A recent illustration of the tension between public demands and treaty practices is the migrant agreement between Italy and Albania, which exposed significant concerns over transparency and public participation. The agreement raised questions about the role of civil society and public discourse in shaping the terms of bilateral treaties, demonstrating the gap between Albania's current practices and EU expectations.

The research begins by outlining the EU's established standards regarding these principles drawing on relevant legal framework, reports and jurisprudential sources. It then assesses how these standards are addressed in Albania at the national level by analysing parliamentary debates related to treaties, reports of civil society, media coverage, political party positions and case law, particularly those of the Constitutional Court. On the international level, the paper reviews Albania's treaty practices as perceived by international organizations and media outlets. Through this comparative analysis between Albania's current situation and EU expectations, the paper identifies critical gaps and challenges in meeting these public demands, which often are underexplored aspects of the alignment process. Finally, it offers concrete recommendations for aligning Albania's treaty-making practices with EU standards, contributing to the broader discourse on democratic participation in international law.

Keywords: *Albania, EU integration, treaties, transparency, accountability, participation*

1. INTRODUCTION

During different periods of its communist history, which lasted from the end of World War II until the collapse of the regime in 1991, Albania's treaty involvement on the international stage was minimal with a foreign policy characterised by isolationism and ideological purity. Treaty participation was largely confined to trade agreements with key ideological allies such as Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union and China. By the late 1970s, after breaking relations even with China, Albania withdrew almost completely from international treaty networks, further isolating itself economically and diplomatically,

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until the regime's eventual collapse in 1991. This legacy left the country with a weak institutional tradition in terms of treaty practice.

Following the fall of communism, Albania shifted dramatically in its foreign policy orientation, characterised by active pursuit of signing of multilateral and bilateral international agreements and membership in international organizations, with European Union (EU) accession standing as its most significant foreign policy objective. Despite the intensity of engagement, studies on the general practice of treaty law in Albania remain scarce, mostly stemming from the country's relatively recent engagement with international legal frameworks. As Albania continues its EU accession journey, aligning its legal framework with European standards, including those concerning public demands for information, transparency, accountability and public participation in treaty-making becomes increasingly essential. Therefore, this study aims to address this critical and underexplored aspect of the alignment process, often characterised by a lack of transparency which has been felt to the core, as there is severe lack of any information regarding treaty practice of Albania. Treaty models or attitude to interpretation are not made publicly available, harming transparency efforts. A more recent illustration of the tension between public demands and treaty practices is the migrant agreement between Italy and Albania, which exposed significant concerns over transparency and public participation. The agreement raised questions about the role of civil society and public discourse in shaping the terms of bilateral treaties, demonstrating the gap between Albania's current practices and EU expectations.

Notably, this is not a shortcoming exclusive to Albania as there appears to be a lack of research focusing directly on transparency, accountability and participation in process of making EU international agreements or other comparable treaties. The field seems to be more developed by civil society means of proposals or communication but that too does not offer a complete panorama. Given this situation, there is a clear need for further research on how treaty processes can be more democratically inclusive.

This paper combines secondary and primary research to address this gap. Due to the fact that this field of study has not been developed much before, the secondary research has been limited to the reporting of civil society, scholarly articles, news articles and journals. To make do for the lack of studies in this specific domain, the origin of the broader right to information and its implications and principle of democracy have been used to draw parallels to the issue of treaties. Firstly, the paper establishes the current standards of the aforementioned public demands in the European Union by making use of reports of non-governmental actors dealing with the broader question of right to information. The paper also analyses the measures taken by the EU to fulfil this right via its web infrastructure. Having thus established the set of standards that are to be reached by candidate countries of the Western Balkans, the paper discusses the treatment of the matter in Albania firstly in the national plane by analysing reports of non-governmental organizations/civil society, media articles, political party stances and statements, keynote legal cases on matters pertaining to treaties. Then, the article will analyse the international plane of Albania's involvement in treaties. The paper then compares the Albanian current state to the European Union standards established within the paper, to compare Albania and the European Union. From this comparative analysis, conclusions will be drawn to determine the gaps Albania as a candidate country, has to fulfil to be on par with the European Union expectations in this matter. This article will focus on Albania's treaty making process and treaty practice seen through the lens of the right to information. In this aspect, Albania will be compared with its own destination point: the

European Union. The paper takes a look at the mechanisms in place, or lacking, that make possible for the treaty making process to be transparent, subject to accountability and with the participation of the public and interested parties. It then aims to compare the EU and Albania in a way that would be conducive and telling of Albania's performance indicators in this domain and reforms still required.

2. TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY AND PARTICIPATION IN CONTEXT OF EU TREATY-MAKING

The issue of treaty law in the EU is unique, as the very existence of the Union is based upon treaties between its members and thus is a product of international law. In addition, the Union can enter into international agreements on behalf of all EU member states, albeit in areas where the treaties between the members have authorised the EU to legislate (Cremona, 2012: 93-124). It is in this way that the EU drives integration and advances its foreign policy goals. These types of international agreements are the focus of this research when discussing EU treaty practice. The EU has concluded a sizable amount of such treaties with states or other international organizations (European Council, 2025). It is interesting to note that the very Stabilization Association Agreement between Albania and the EU, which made Albania's intent to join the EU recognized, is such a treaty between the EU and a third country (Stabilization and Association Agreement, 2021). While these treaties primarily serve a political and strategic aim, they also provide with guiding principles on EU's treaty making process. Core values such as transparency, accountability and participation are fundamental to the functioning of the Union and stipulated in several articles of the TEU and TFEU (Articles 10(3) and 11(1) TEU and Articles 15(1) and 15(2) TFEU). Article 10 is regarded as the article that espouses the principle of democracy as per a recent ECJ decision (Case C-808/21). Though previous literature might suggest that the transparency and participation in treaty making of the EU depended on the area of law in which it was fledged, the latest statistical insight into the matter maintains that the level of transparency, accountability and participation is the same regardless of the area of law in which the treaty is made (Reis, 2024: 21-58). The same stands even in areas in which the member states that are "polarized", in that there is no "dimming" of transparency in international law making but that, again, the transparency, accountability and participation maintain the same levels (Reis, 2024: 21-58). These facts grouped together can paint the picture of a very transparent decision-making process in treaty making, yet it is important to have in mind the nature and context of the EU.

First, it might be hard to measure the level of transparency of 27 states that act as a *sui generis* international organization. Additionally, the trio of transparency, accountability and participation, where sometimes democracy is used as a word instead, makes up what is known as the right to information or the right to know (Diamandouros, 2006). The primary concern with the right to information being quantified, is the fact that the rankings usually asses the freedoms recognized in the legal frameworks of each country or the public perception on freedoms rather than provide a quantifiable amount of transparency in reality (UNESCO, n.d.). This methodology has resulted in peculiar results in which Taliban-governed Afghanistan ranks first in the world in the Right to Information ranking (RTI Rating, n.d.). Due to this type of results and to err on the side of caution, as Albania focus of this research is ranked 7th overall, this paper will not refer to this ranking in determining the degree of transparency. Moreover, the transparency of

a particular issue that the paper covers: that of treaty making and not transparency in the legal framework as a whole (like the RTI ranking) is what is being studied.

In analysing the public demands in treaty-making with regard to European Union's external action, this paper will refer to the democracy rankings and freedom rankings, as the right to ask for accountability of the governance and to participate in decision making that are the crux of the right to information. These rankings serve as proxies for assessing the extent to which individuals are empowered to demand accountability and to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes. These two dimensions are at the core of the right to information and form the foundation for evaluating the openness of governance structures. Building on this framework, the outline of EU standards of transparency, accountability and participation in treaty making and treaty practice will be based on a matter-of-fact approach, only those procedures and practices that are consistently made public or involve the public will be considered reflective of EU standards. If the EU bodies do not, as a matter of course, make known to and include the public in a part of the process then that excluded part will not be considered as "EU standard" and as a result fall outside the scope of such standards. Lastly, it is important to underline that the treaty making and practice in which the EU as an entity can act as a party is limited to a number of fields of law where the EU enjoys the competence. Accordingly, this analysis will focus exclusively on treaty-making in areas where the EU holds exclusive competence under the Treaties (European Commission, 2025a).

Beginning with the area of trade, the European Commission has an entire website dedicated to transparency on trade policy (European Commission, 2025b), that is fairly easy to come across in search engines. The website provides public access to the text of negotiations, a news section with the latest developments, a calendar section that has set out the next important meetings on matters of trade that are in the process of being negotiated (including the livestream information as well as the possibility to register yourself/organization as a participant in meetings that may directly affect you). Lastly, the website provides links to a podcast dedicated to EU trade policy and a newsletter on the same issue and specific subsections dedicated to the relation to Ukraine and the WTO.

In terms of participation of the public in the treaty making processes in trade, that is made quite transparent through this website, options are more limited. Apart from the possibility to sign up as a participant in the meetings as a member of interest groups, there is also the possibility to comment, in written on the draft texts or proposals of upcoming international agreements. It is fair to say that the interface of the page under which public consultation via writing is hosted, is considerably more crowded than the main website interface. It is hard to locate the button that sends one to the list of open public consultations and it being placed at the very bottom of the webpage make it even less visible. Trying to leave a comment is confusing as well and sends the visitor to different pages of the website. Moreover, at the time of writing, the only open public consultation was on "hiatus" due to technical issues. What was a positive feature was that the page contained information on the target group of the consultation "invitation", background information on the issue being consulted and the reasoning behind the consultation (and by extent, of the proposal of changing legislation that gave rise to the consultation itself).

Moving on to the area of customs, the dedicated webpage (European Commission, 2025c) was very informative of what customs are, how they work and contained detailed information on the customs regime of the EU, but it too, like the trade

website, had consultations placed at the very bottom of the page (European Commission, 2025c). Moreover, the highly minimalistic interface of the website made it less approachable, as it was difficult to locate where consultations were placed and their status of being open or closed.

Regarding any other needs for consultation, the EU has a general consultation website, in which EU citizens and non-EU citizens can share their opinion on current or upcoming pieces of legislation. Unlike the Trade and Customs websites, here there is no legal text provided, and people are invited to pinpoint their proposal themselves. The platform is very liberal and transparent, however, as people's proposals are frequent, published and their liberty in expression is the same as that in the comment sections of social media outlets (European Commission, 2025d).

As for treaty practice, the EU has not made public any guideline or outline that it has followed in conceptualizing its international agreements. Yet, there remains the well documented manner in which the EU engages in international agreements of certain established types with third parties (European Commission, 2025e). Treaty practice is well established and well-documented for certain, but not very well organized in the sense of approachability for the general public. Certainly, the database made available present an amazing tool for the law person to learn more about the international agreements concluded by the EU, but the lay person will face difficulties trying to locate the needed information and will also have a hard time finding patterns of similarity that the EU follows as a matter of practice in its international agreements. Nevertheless, the website is transparent enough to list the types of acts that are subject to treaty practice such as international agreements, memorandum of understanding, declaration, agreement, communication, amendment to an agreement, arrangement, protocol, protocol to the agreement, corrigendum and exchange of letters, amongst others (European Commission, 2025e). Although the database makes treaty practice more transparent, there is no identifiable measure that seeks to make it interactive in any sort of measure that would include the participation of people in the process.

In both treaty-making and treaty practice in the EU, there were efforts to make the process more transparent with treaty making being a par excellence example of transparency. In treaty making there was an effort to achieve participation in the process, albeit this effort was rather modest in scope and lacks the depth needed for meaningful engagement, when compared to the work done to increase transparency. As for treaty practice, there was no effort at all to involve public or promote participatory mechanism. Moreover, neither in treaty-making nor treaty practice were there any discernible efforts to enhance accountability. For instance, for each explanation given on how or why something exists in the context of the EU, there could have been a line of information directing citizens to channels where malpractice and maladministration could be denounced. This mechanism could have reenforced democratic oversight and ensured citizens empowerment in external policy.

An important moment in the debate over transparency, accountability and participation was the negotiating period of Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), which highlighted further the limitation of EU in this context. The deal would have been the biggest Free Trade deal of the EU ever. It was being negotiated with the US and would have affected trade completely in all the EU. Although the texts of the negotiations are publicly available today (European Commission, 2025b), at the period of negotiating before being pronounced "no longer relevant" in 2019 (Council of the European Union, 2019), there were protests and activism against the agreement

(Johnston, 2015). The activists accused EU institutions of holding silent talks and that the process was not open enough to the public to involve all stakeholders. These concerns highlighted a perceived lack of openness and inclusiveness in the negotiation process.

Following the negotiations for the TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership) and its “death”, there was a need for change in the handling of transparency in treaty making. Yet, until very recently, some issues have persisted. Civil society finds that simply publishing negotiation texts is not up to par with what is meaningful transparency, *i.e* transparency that truly exerts its function of making things known to the public and making the public aware (EPHA, 2021). The information is highly technical and very dense and this in effect makes it harder for smaller-scale stakeholders to be able to participate in negotiations. Effectively, participating in the negotiations of the EU would require a considerable network scale. Another issue is the manner in which stakeholders participate. The holding of separate meetings based on the “category” of stakeholders presents an issue as there is no interaction between the categories of competing interests, which can lead to many important objections not being made.

These concerns were echoed in findings by the European Ombudsman, who, in a detailed report, pointed out significant shortcomings in the EU’s approach to both stakeholder interaction and transparency. The report underscored that while steps had been taken to improve access to documents and to formalize consultation procedures, deeper reforms are needed to ensure that treaty-making is not only transparent in form but also participatory and inclusive in substance (European Ombudsman, 2014).

In conclusion for this part, while the EU has made tangible progress in improving transparency in treaty-making and, to a lesser extent, treaty practice, significant gaps remain—particularly in the areas of participation and accountability. The standards in place are evolving, but they still fall short of fully supporting an inclusive and democratically accountable external policymaking.

3. TREATY-MAKING FRAMEWORK IN ALBANIA IN POST COMMUNISM PERIOD

Albania emerged from communism fully only in 1992; thus the treaty-making and treaty practice of Albania that will be discussed in this paper will be in this period onwards. Reasons on why the communist period will not be considered are first and foremost the complete opacity in which the Albanian State of the time interacted with other countries unbeknownst to Albanian citizens, as well as the fact that in a dictatorship accountability and participation are not possible.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Albania had just started to emerge from decades of isolation under the communist dictatorship. Being a hermit kingdom for the past twenty years or so it did not have diplomatic relations with many states. Yet on 2nd July 1990, on a day now commemorated as the Day of Embassies, Albanians *en masse* sought refuge inside the territory of the present Embassies in Tirana. This moment marked the beginning of the end of the communist regime.

Within the year a treaty was signed with the US to reestablish diplomatic relations, constituting a turning point in its reintegration in the international community (Department of State, 1991). From that moment forwards Albania tried to “catch up” by entering numerous multilateral treaties in which it was not a party prior due to its ideological stance (UN Treaty Collection search, 2025). According to an estimate by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the number of agreements concluded after 1990 exceeds 2,000 (Skapi, 2017). In this realm, Albania is generally characterized by its openness to

accession and the lack of reservations made (Skapi, 2017). The Albanian public opinion at large is in favour of accession in “Western” treaties, seeing these as steps closer to a more liberal country and to eventual EU accession. Yet, when it comes to transparency or accountability and participation towards the public, the context in which the brunt of multilateral treaty negotiations and treaty making happened post-1990s, it is important to note that there were no requirements of transparency, accountability and participation. Judging from the time period and complete lack of infrastructure in Albania at the time, it is also understandable that even if requirements were in place, their implementation would severely lack. The private press was just emerging, with the first private newspaper founded in January 1991, and thus the state still had a monopoly on information. Moreover, the energetic network in Albania during those years was too weak to support the rapid expansion of household appliances and television viewing too, was limited by being or not during black out hours.

Both Albania and the European Union operate under a monist legal system with respect to international agreements (Ciongaru, n.d.). However, Albania did not adopt a formal legal framework governing treaty-making until 1998 (Law No.8371). The law of 1998, in article 28, abrogated the Regulation of the Popular Presidium of 1978. In all of 1998's articles that dealt with treaty-making (Articles 9 to 15), there was no mention of the inclusion of the citizens in the process. All negotiations were to be held by the ministries and bodies of the two states. Although the law included in its scope multilateral treaties, the language used is that which describes negotiations between two states only. The same goes for international organizations which are mentioned in the law but not adequately accounted for in the situations of negotiation described in the law. Another issue is that the definition of a treaty (Article 2, point “a”) is “an international agreement that mainly has a political character/nature”. Meanwhile there is no definition of international agreement (Law No.8371). From these very issues in the law, it is deducted that the Albanian standards of treaty-making did not only been lack transparency to Albanians but also were poorly understood by the lawmakers of the time, who have essentially equated a treaty with a memorandum of understanding. This begs a whole other research question over the nature of agreements Albania has concluded under this law and whether there is a need for a Chapeau agreement of sorts to correct any possible implications on the legal nature of the agreements. Nonetheless, this discussion falls out of the scope of this paper.

Yet, this is the context in which Albanian treaty making operated up until 2016, when the 1998 law was repealed and a new law was passed. Although Law No.43/2016 “On international agreements in the Republic of Albania” (Law No. 43/2016) is considerably better in all the areas of criticism the previous law suffered (such as the vague definitions and the lack of proper negotiating procedure rules that fit different contexts), it too does not include the public at all in treaty making.

The competent bodies that draft the treaties are chiefly the ministries. In fact, Law No.43/2016 exists in the context of the laws on the right to information which were passed in 2014, respectively Law No.119/2014 “On the right to information”, which includes in its scope only transparency considerations and makes no mention at all of international agreements (Law No. 119/2014), and Law No. 146/2014 “On announcement/notification and public consultation”, which under Article 4, point (b), expressly excludes international agreements, bilateral and multilateral agreements from the scope of the law (Law No. 146/2014).

Thus Albania, from the legal perspective, is completely opaque to the national public in the process of treaty making. Albanian access to these agreements is then only exercised by the Parliament after the negotiation process is already over to begin with and the treaty is fully concluded. Duly, as per the law provides, the confusing website of public consultation (Konsultimi Publik, n.d.) does not have a single document of transparency admitted to public consultation or even public viewing with regards to international agreements. Moreover, the website requires a login via biometric identification (through the governmental programme e-Albania) in order to leave commentary, making it much less free and liberal than any parallels found in the EU websites.

In 2016, based on the needs identified by the structures of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), ALTRI a local organization, started a project on digitalization of the international agreements with funds from Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI) and Australian Direct Aid Program (ALTRI Center, 2018). The declared goal was to strengthen the Albanian governance accountability and transparency by raising the awareness for the obligations of Albania originating from international treaties by setting up a free accessible comprehensive electronic database of international treaties www.treaties.al This web page cannot be reached as of 2025.

Treaty practice is equally as opaque. As mentioned above, Albania does not, by default, negotiate much in international multilateral treaties, taking instead the “acceptance” back seat. The only measure of treaty practice that exists is that in bilateral agreements, which are sporadically published in governmental websites (Taxation Office, 2025). It is more or less apparent that Albania follows the same type of structure when concluding such agreements, yet they are not easily accessible by people. BIT (Bilateral Investment Treaties) also serves to understand treaty practice in Albania, but no Albanian official governmental website has them published. They can, however, be found in the website of UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD, n.d.) (not all the BITs have the content published), in which it is evidently clear that all the negotiations for all these treaties were carried out under the older law (that of 1998) or prior to the adoption of that law. The structure and provisions seem to follow a uniform model, but it is hard to know for certain in the light of the fact that not all these treaties are available.

Albania does not have an easily accessible database that would make it possible for ethnic Albanians holding foreign citizenship, foreign individuals or entities to get information about treaties that give rise to rights to them in case of a link to Albania. The most comprehensive place where treaty text can be found is the official website of the Centre of Official Publications (QBZ, 2025), yet the issue stands that the material there is very hard to locate for lawyers, let alone lay persons.

As for individuals or entities that are unfamiliar with Albanian as a language the issue is even less transparent and even more complicated, as there is no translation in English of the treaties in this official government website. Judging from these state of affairs, the transparency, accountability and participation in treaties in the international plane is, somehow, even more opaque and non-existent than it is in the national plane.

4. RECURRING FAILURES TO MEET PUBLIC DEMANDS FOR TRANSPARENCY, PARTICIPATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN ALBANIAN TREATY-PRACTICE

Albania, despite its small size and limited regional influence, has repeatedly served as a logistical, humanitarian, or diplomatic platform for addressing international

crises rooted in the Middle East. It could be said that Albania appears as quite the treaty maker when it comes to agreements to house emigrants from conflicts or to support in other ways. The Albanian public becomes aware through the news about these agreements, and it is not coincidental that it is bilateral agreements that the public is more aware (and also wary) of. From the mujahideens, to the attempt of demounting the Assad regime chemical weapons, to the housing of the Afghan refugees from the Taliban, Albania has repeatedly found itself involved—directly or indirectly—in complex issues originating in the Middle East. To properly assess the Albanian desire to have a right to transparency, accountability and participation it serves to have a general overview of the past decade's international agreements.

Perhaps the most tumultuous, was the agreement of the Republic of Albania with the Republic of Greece with regards to the delimitation of the sea waters (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Albania Decision no.15, 2010). With its negotiations beginning in 2004 and the agreement itself being signed in 2009 (Stoukas, 2020), the text of the agreement (later annulled by the Albanian Constitutional Court (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Albania Decision no.15, 2010)) is not public to this day. Its alluded content ignited a lot of discussion that continues even in recent years in Albania (Ora News, 2018), whenever that topic arises. Although it concerns Albanian territoriality, the Albanian people were not aware of the text of the agreement or any subsequent negotiations in more recent times and the discussion is reliant on what the political parties wish to reveal. In 2010, it was the left-wing opposition parties that took the agreement to the Constitutional Court (in whose decision, a semblance of what the agreement entails can be found, yet, as said the full text is not public), while in more recent discussions, the current opposition denounces new negotiations on the matter (Saracini, 2023). Albanians, however, are not allowed the right to view these negotiations closely in a transparent manner, thus everything is up to speculation.

Much discontent, too, followed the news of the arrival of the Iranian opposition as refugees in Albania. The agreement was initially agreed between the then-leaving Prime Minister, Berisha and the Secretary of State of the US, Hillary Clinton (Cubolli & Susuri, 2023). The terms were not made public and even the exact number of people on which the agreement was reached is unclear (some sources state 210 people, others 270) (Cubolli & Susuri, 2023; Newsbomb, 2023; Politiko, 2021). That agreement was later extended, and more people came to Albania, yet Albanians are unaware of the terms of the agreement to this day and whether or not there is a timeline by which these refugees will leave the country (Cubolli & Susuri, 2023; Newsbomb, 2023; Politiko, 2021). The public opinion on the matter, although not expressed through a massive protest, was negative then and continues to be negative today (Balkanweb, 2016; Tela, 2023; Top Channel Albania, 2020).

Yet, the single most memorable and impactful reaction of the Albanian public towards international agreements and the opacity that characterizes their negotiations, is the protesting, and subsequent “victory”, against an agreement between Albania and the USA for the destruction and demounting of the chemical weapons that were seized from the Assad regime in Syria (Bengali, 2013). In the Albanian public conscience, the moment is regarded succinctly as “The Chemical Weapons” and is regarded to this day as the most massive civil protest (being distinguished from protests called by political parties or movements). When news broke out about such an agreement being brokered, protests erupted all over the country (in some 14 cities (Xhafa, 2013)). The text of the agreement being negotiated and the contents of the agreement, which weapons, under

which conditions, with what benefits for Albania, were not publicly available. The Prime Minister himself addressed the protesters in an attempt to calm the protest down or bring its end, yet he too, did not make the content of the agreement or its specificities public (Rama, 2013). So strong was the reaction to this opacity towards the Albanian people, that the demonstrations and protests succeeded in making Albania “back off” from that agreement (Xhafa, 2013).

From that point in time onwards, many more international agreements have been negotiated but the lack of bringing into attention to the public or their irrelevance to Albanians, another example being the agreement with Ukraine in the fields of Arms (President of Ukraine, 2025) but to illustrate the general sentiment towards the lack of transparency, to not mention the complete lack of accountability and participation, this paper will now discuss the agreement on housing the Afghan refugees fleeing the Taliban after the US withdrawal, as well as the Protocol on refugee camp with Italy. Both cases were badly received by the public but the pushback has been more considerable in the case of the Protocol.

When the Taliban took control of Kabul, the eyes of the world watched as people risked all to flee the country. News of the flights that were able to leave the Kabul airport were all over the world media. But where would these people that were escaping Afghanistan be located? Most of them were people that had worked with the until-then US backed government or US-backed NGOs of Afghanistan, making them at risk for being targets of political prosecution by the Taliban. The US promised to take them as refugees (Refugee Congress, n.d.), but their visa applications would be processed while they would physically be in third countries. One such country would be revealed to be Albania, but once again, the number of Afghans that would arrive, the benefits/earnings that Albania would make (if any) and the duration of time they would spend here, all of which should have been specified in the treaty, were not made public. The Albanian government, however, proclaimed that the Afghans would stay for 1 year (BoldNews.al, 2021; Telegrafi, 2021), after which they would move to the USA, and that their number would be approximately 3000. Today, 3 years later, the number of Afghans that have been located in total to Albania is approximated to have been 4000 and there still remain 400 Afghans in Albanian territory (Top Channel, 2025). Once again, the lack of transparency on what the agreement contains and the amendments that it could have sustained, have led to an effective deception of the Albanian public, which was not necessarily “thrilled” to house the Afghans, whose expenses, supposedly are covered by the American government.

The last impactful international agreement much discussed was the Protocol (for strengthening cooperation in the field of migration) signed by Albania and Italy on November 6, 2023 in Rome. The peculiarity of this agreement is unparalleled. It is noteworthy that, unlike the previous examples mentioned above, the text of this agreement was made publicly available one day after the signature (Kryeministria, 2023), yet we are not in front of an example of transparency, accountability and participation, as this right has no effect in accountability and participation when the negotiation stage is over. With the agreement being already signed, there is no place to discuss accountability or participation. This agreement was denounced by the Albanian opposition, and invested to the Albanian Constitutional Court (Shqiptarja, 2023), as being unconstitutional and illegal not only because it waived Albanian jurisdiction on legal matters in the Albanian territory of Gjadër to Italian jurisdiction, but also because it was, reportedly not, compiled by the Albanian Ministries, which is the provision of the

Albanian law on the matter. The Albanian Constitutional Court did not agree with these arguments and proclaimed the agreement constitutional (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Albania Decision No.2, 2024). The Court did not address concerns over the lack of transparency.

The Agreement has not been received badly only by the Albanian opposition and general public but by the Italian opposition and Italian general public as well (Euronews, 2024). As is evident from the numerous protests in both Albania and Italy (Syri TV, 2024), the people of the countries concerned, do not want and do not agree with the contents of this agreement. Even the number of legal challenges this agreement has faced (Euronews, 2024) is evidence of the degree of non-acceptable nature of this agreement to the citizens of both countries. Concern for the human rights of the subjects of the agreement, as well as concerns about its costs are the two prevailing themes.

All the above examples illustrate that the Albanian public and citizenry is in want of a transparent, accountable and participatory negotiation process in treaty making, as Albanian citizens are rarely, if ever, pleased with the outcomes of such negotiations. The judicial control of the Constitutional Court has come prior to ratification but even this control does not make the process any more transparent, as it comes after the terms are already set. Moreover, the treaties under review are often neither published nor included in the Court's decisions, leaving the public unaware of their actual content—even when a Constitutional Court ruling exists.

It is essential to emphasize that constitutional review cannot substitute for the citizen's right to information. Judicial and parliamentary ratification processes, while institutionally important, do not fulfill the democratic standard of public access and participation. The right to information, as a core element of democratic governance, requires direct and meaningful engagement of the citizenry, not merely the involvement of representative bodies or judicial institutions.

5. CONCLUSION

Both Albania and the European Union operate under a monist legal system with respect to international agreements. In practical terms this means that once ratified international agreements automatically become part of domestic law without the need for further implementing legislation. In this regard, Albania is closer to the EU's way of functioning when it comes to treaty applicability and can be considered to have fulfilled that standard or requirement. Yet, the most crucial issues that impact the transparency, accountability and public participation are not necessarily those moments when the treaty enters into force, but in earlier moments when it is being first formulated or negotiated.

In the European Union these principles are not mere procedural norms, they are understood as fundamental expressions of democracy in the Union. As such, it is not legal formality alone, but the overall level of democratic practice, that determines the extent to which a country like Albania can align with EU standards in treaty-making. While Albania may meet the structural requirement of treaty incorporation through monism, it falls substantially short in terms of democratic engagement. In fact, under the Albanian law, transparency, accountability and participation in treaty-making are not just absent, they are actively excluded. The law fails to include international agreements within the scope of public consultations, impeding citizen involvement. In contrast, the EU has developed institutional mechanisms that enable public oversight. For instance, draft treaties and related materials are publicly accessible online, often open to comments from EU citizens and non-citizens alike. These tools allow for broader democratic input, both

through institutionalized interest group meetings and open online platforms for individual commentary - even anonymous contributions. In Albania, by contrast, not only is there no similar infrastructure, but even basic engagement mechanisms are restricted by requirements such as digital identification to participate in public discussions, which further limits public input. In Albania, there seems to be a complete lack of transparency considerations for foreign individuals that might interest themselves on the rights that arise to them in Albania due to treaties Albania is part of.

Although Albania has made notable progress on paper concerning the broader “right to know,” its implementation in the domain of treaty-making is effectively nonexistent. Moreover, while the EU’s approach is far from perfect - civil society actors frequently critique the Union for its limited participatory mechanisms - the gap between Albania and the EU remains substantial. In terms of transparency, the EU operates a comprehensive and accessible digital infrastructure, while Albania has systematically excluded international agreements from public view. In terms of accountability, both the EU and Albania lack strong, direct mechanisms for citizens to hold negotiators accountable for the content of treaties; however, in Albania, the absence of transparency compounds this deficiency.

When it comes to participation, Albania again lags significantly. Public consultation on international agreements is excluded by law, and no substitute channels exist for public involvement in the negotiation phase. By contrast, the EU allows participation through structured consultations, stakeholder forums, and digital platforms, even if these mechanisms remain underdeveloped compared to its transparency initiatives.

Although the Albanian Constitutional Court conducts a judicial review prior to treaty ratification, it is essential to emphasize that it cannot substitute for the citizen’s right to information. Judicial and parliamentary ratification processes, while institutionally important, do not fulfill the democratic standard of public access and participation.

As a candidate country for EU membership, Albania must make significant reforms to close this democratic gap. A crucial first step would be to amend the Law on Public Consultation to explicitly include international agreements within its scope. Equally important is the need to revise the Law on International Agreements to reflect the fundamental right to information and to introduce procedures that ensure this right is upheld throughout the treaty-making process.

It must also be acknowledged that the EU itself is not uniform in its democratic standards. Transparency, participation, and accountability vary significantly among member states, and the Union’s institutional mechanisms.

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INTERNAL DIVISIONS AND SOCIAL COHESION - OBSTACLES IN THE EU ACCESSION PROCESS. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE WESTERN BALKANS AND THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Abstract. The process of integration into the European Union represents a strategic objective for many of the states in the Western Balkans, including the Republic of Moldova, regions situated at the crossroads between Europe and the former Soviet spaces. Although EU membership brings numerous economic, political, and security benefits, it also entails a series of internal challenges, some of the most significant being related to internal divisions and social cohesion—major obstacles in the accession process, as the success of integration largely depends on the internal political and social cohesion of the candidate states. In the case of the Western Balkans, ethnic, religious, and national divergences, fueled by post-communist conflicts, continue to undermine the stability of the region. In many Balkan states, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, and Montenegro, the process of reconciliation between ethnic and national groups is incomplete, and nationalism and separatism continue to influence domestic politics and external relations. These divisions are a significant factor affecting the EU accession process for some of these countries, despite progress in certain areas. Regarding the Republic of Moldova, internal divisions are reflected in the complex context of the relations between pro-European and pro-Russian forces, fueled by the unresolved conflict in Transnistria and the historical and cultural ties with the Russian Federation. While Moldova expresses its commitment to European integration, these internal divisions complicate the reform process and the strengthening of state institutions, and public opinion remains polarized, which can affect political stability and, implicitly, the European path. Thus, both in the case of the Western Balkans states and in the case of the Republic of Moldova, social cohesion plays an essential role in ensuring a favorable climate for the reforms necessary for EU accession.

This article aims to highlight the impact of social division and social cohesion on the integration process of the Western Balkans states, including the Republic of Moldova, into the European integration space.

Keywords: EU integration, Thematic cluster Internal Market, The Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina Directorate for European Integration, Institutional communication, Institutional performances.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The last decades have shown that the enlargement process has been a key instrument for consolidating democracy and stability, as well as supporting economic growth in the EU's eastern and south-eastern neighbors.

Whether one thinks of the path to European integration, albeit a differentiated one, it stands also vis-à-vis many home-grown factors – internal differences and levels of cohesion which are deeply rooted in the system. Such factors may not only impede the structural change, rule of law, and successful approximation with the *acquis communautaire* that are necessary for a country wishing to one day accede (as seen in many of the criteria set out for accession) but expose how false our positive “diagnosis” is, with which too often western observers comfort themselves when contemplating life ‘over there’.

Moldova and the Western Balkans provide instructive examples of how social polarization, economic disparities, ethnic conflicts, and political fissures may cause a new member candidate to either initially or subsequently fail in taking steps toward accession. Even with EU institutional support, these societies still have low engagement in civic life and public trust in institutions, as well as the legacies of history that shape political and social realities. In this way, they influence society and act as a factor of social cohesion but also as a source of heterogeneity that is projected onto European integration.

At this moment, the Republic of Moldova and the Western Balkans are trying to find their way through Europe.

2. THE WESTERN BALKANS WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS

The Western Balkans represent a variety of nations, states, languages, cultures, and religions. The term "Western Balkans" was devised by political analysts in the EU reports and carried out a policy of internal use, then later has been widely accepted for official use since its first official use by the European Union (EU) on December 8, 1998. At present, this term encompasses six states: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia (Liridon, 2021).

From the geographical-historical as well as from a political view, the Western Balkans are in the process of developing as a macroregion within the European context (Berisha, 2023). The region has an intense overlapping of local and regional wealth, deeply interrelated social and environmental stakes that have severed stable ground, simply shattered the area into inner disputes, and gave it "interesting but tough" features on the global spectrum. Moreover, the Western Balkan area is essential for Europe's perspective from the point of economic growth to migration and stability, energy networks, geopolitics as well as pollution decrease, climate change, and rule of law (Uvalić 2019). Geography is an influential determinant that even increases the value of politics in a small state — especially when it occupies a part which has importance militarily or geostrategically with regard to proximity to another greater power — besides population, wealth, and political orientation which could be used for stability, measuring how powerful a state can become in terms of its size. In fact, today this reality keeps the entire globe as part of a real big power competition and causes instability in the region. It is also the "crushing belt" of Europe and Asia — a bustling location where East meets West, and Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (the world's three major religions) exist side by side.

Most Balkan states are small in population, dimension, economic importance, army control, and power of the word. The conflicts it had been through during the course of them were henceforth committed to being fought again in its shadow, and they were forced to confront their mistakes — as well as a wholly arbitrary sloughing off of landmass & populace — which birthed such legacies in politics, society, and economics. On the other side, challenges in the EU's decision-making structure and costs of diverse national interests within its member states — China, Russia, and Turkey — that pushed one or another direction in relation to their strategic interest for the zone equally interrupted the European integrationist tendency in the Western Balkans (Qorraj, 2025)

By signing *Stabilization and Association Agreements with the EU*, the Western Balkan partners have opened up commerce and brought the region into compliance with EU norms. The general basis for EU ties with the Western Balkans is provided by the Stabilization and Association Agreements. We work together to tackle shared security issues. In order to foster good neighborly relations and create shared prosperity through regional integration, the EU also offers its member states financial and political help. The EU promotes regional cooperation organizations to increase economic development, improve connectivity, and improve security, among many other benefits in the region, in addition to its strong political support for the Western Balkans and the Berlin Process.

The prospect of EU membership is an incentive to promote reforms in the Western Balkans. Reforms are essential for the European path, but more importantly, they are crucial for improving political and economic governance, the rule of law, freedom of the press and conditions for civil society. This is in the common interest of the citizens of the Western Balkans and the EU. The EU accession process is at the heart of EU-Western Balkans relations. The conditions for establishing these relations were first set out in the Council Conclusions of April 1997. In 1999, the EU Council established the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP). It was confirmed that the Western Balkan countries would be eligible for EU membership if they fulfilled the criteria set out at the Copenhagen European Council in June 1993 (The Diplomatic Service of the European Union, 2025). An important turning point for Europe and its unwavering commitment to expansion and unification was the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003. The notion of integrating the Western Balkans into the European family was at the center of this gathering in the Greek city. The summit started the integration paths for nations coming out of a turbulent past in addition to reaffirming the EU's commitment to the enlargement agenda. However, the Western Balkans' ambitions and their integration into the European Union are still, in many respects, unmet twenty years after the Thessaloniki Summit. The only nation to become a member of the EU in 2013 is Croatia. In the meanwhile, accession talks between Serbia and Montenegro didn't start until 2012.

Croatia is only the second nation to get an official EU invitation this year. Meanwhile, talks on the accession of Serbia and Montenegro started only in 2012.

On the contrary, Albania and North Macedonia are still waiting for the official start of accession negotiations, which were approved by the European Council in March 2020. Kosovo's path is nuanced due to the non-recognition of its independent state by several EU member states. After the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the only real perspective for the newly emerged states was integration into the European Union, as this perspective would help to adopt democratic rules and standards and to establish and consolidate the market economy. The dismemberment of Yugoslavia at the end of the 20th century conditioned the emergence of seven countries that emerged from the former

Yugoslavia (Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Slovenia, which became a member of the European Union in 2004, and Croatia, which became a member of the EU in 2013), to which Albania must be added, they are called the Western Balkans and have a total population of 5 million inhabitants.

However, fragmented among different peoples, languages, religions and cultures, these countries are very different from each other and each has its own history. The northern part of the Western Balkans (Slovenia, Croatia) lived for centuries in the orbit of Austria. The southern part remained under Ottoman rule for several centuries. With the exception of Albania, the Western Balkans were incorporated into Yugoslavia in 1920. All of them, including Albania, lived under communist rule from the end of World War II until 1990. Apart from Slovenia and Croatia, which joined the EU, each country in the Western Balkans is searching for its destiny. The only option is EU membership, which represents hope and a goal. The process of integration of the Western Balkans into the EU started with Slovenia, as it was recognised that transition and accession are two mutually reinforcing processes, and EU integration is the best way to accelerate and deepen the transition process. Croatia was the second country to join the EU, while Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia are actively involved in the EU integration process.

Although the countries of the Western Balkans aim to integrate into the European Union, not all have similar attitudes towards EU policies. Serbia's contradictory foreign policy is also reflected in its relations with Russia, as it refused to support the EU sanctions regime related to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict (Orraj, 2025). Thus, for a better understanding of the current situation in the Western Balkans, it is necessary to highlight the main aspects of the EU's relationship with the states in the region.

Albania submitted its application for membership of the European Union on 28 April 2009. In October 2013, the Commission recommended without hesitation that Albania be granted the status of candidate country for accession to the Union, which it obtained in June 2014. Given the progress made by Albania, the Commission has repeatedly recommended the opening of accession negotiations with the country. In June 2018, the Council accepted the possibility of opening accession negotiations with Albania in June of the following year, provided that the necessary conditions were met. In March 2020, it finally decided to approve the opening of accession negotiations, pending the fulfilment of a set of conditions. In July 2020, the Commission presented to the Member States the draft negotiating framework (the first to take into account the 'Revised Methodology for the Enlargement of the Western Balkans' published in February 2020). The accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, managed jointly following the positive recommendation shared by the Commission, were officially opened in July 2022, after a particularly lengthy process, mainly due to disagreements between North Macedonia and Bulgaria on identity, language and history.

Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although an SAA with Bosnia and Herzegovina was negotiated and signed in June 2008, its entry into force has been frozen, notably because the country has not transposed a key judgment of the European Court of Human Rights. The Union's revised strategy, which places greater emphasis on the management of economic affairs, resulted in the entry into force of the long-awaited SAA on 1 June 2015. On 15 February 2016, the country submitted its membership application. In May 2019, the Commission published its opinion, including a list of 14 key priorities that Bosnia and Herzegovina needed to fulfil in order to open accession negotiations. One of these priorities is to ensure the proper functioning of the Stabilisation and Association

Parliamentary Committee (SAPC), the parliamentary component of the SAA (key priority 3). On 30 and 31 October 2023, almost eight years after the first unsuccessful PSC meeting in November 2015, a third full meeting of the EU-Bosnia and Herzegovina PSC was successfully held in Sarajevo. This led the Commission to conclude, in its 2023 country report on Bosnia and Herzegovina, that Key Priority 3 had been implemented. Following Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the Union's decision in June 2022 to grant candidate country status to Ukraine and Moldova, the European Council decided to also grant candidate country status to Bosnia and Herzegovina in December 2022. Accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina were officially opened in March 2024, following the Commission's previous positive recommendation earlier this month.

Republic of North Macedonia. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (now the Republic of North Macedonia) applied for membership in March 2004 and was granted candidate country status in December 2005. However, it was unable to enter into accession negotiations for many years, mainly due to its dispute with Greece over the use of the name 'Macedonia'. This dispute was resolved with the Prespa Agreement on the country's new name - the Republic of North Macedonia (or, for short, North Macedonia) - which entered into force in February 2019. Since 2009, the Commission, with the full support of the European Parliament, has consistently recommended the opening of accession negotiations. In June 2018, the Council accepted the possibility of opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia in June 2019, subject to the fulfilment of the necessary conditions. In March 2020, the Council finally decided to approve the opening of accession negotiations without setting any further conditions. In July 2020, the Commission presented the draft negotiating framework to the Member States (the first to take into account the "Revised Western Balkans Enlargement Methodology"). Accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, managed jointly following the positive recommendation shared by the Commission, were officially opened in July 2022, after a particularly lengthy process, mainly due to disagreements between North Macedonia and Bulgaria on identity, language and history.

Kosovo is a potential candidate for membership of the Union. It unilaterally declared independence in February 2008. Five EU Member States (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain), two countries in the region (Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina), as well as the three new candidate countries (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) and two permanent members of the UN Security Council (China and Russia) do not have recognised independence. In July 2018, six years after the publication of a roadmap on visa liberalisation, the Commission confirmed that Kosovo fulfilled all the criteria. Since January 2024, following lengthy inter-institutional negotiations and a final vote by the European Parliament in April 2023, Kosovar citizens have been able to travel visa-free to the Schengen area. Following the conclusion by Belgrade and Pristina of a historic agreement on the normalisation of relations between the two countries in April 2013 (the Brussels Agreement), the European Council decided in June 2013 to open negotiations for an SAA with Kosovo, which entered into force on 1 April 2016. under the auspices of the Union, which should result in a comprehensive legally binding agreement for the normalisation of their relations. Kosovo (together with Serbia) needs to step up its efforts to fulfil its obligations under a renewed agreement concluded in early 2023 to resume the stalled dialogue.

Montenegro, which gained independence in 2006, submitted its application for EU membership in December 2008. It obtained candidate country status in December 2010 and started accession negotiations in June 2012. In line with the Union's 'new strategy' for the accession process, the key chapters on the rule of law — the chapter on judicial reform and judicial freedom² and fundamental freedom² and justice — were addressed very early in the negotiations, in December 2013. All 33 negotiation chapters have been opened, of which only three are now provisionally closed. The last remaining key chapter (on competition policy) was opened in June 2020. However, political unrest and instability in Montenegro have caused its EU integration process to stall in recent years.

Serbia applied for EU membership in December 2009 and was granted candidate status in March 2012, after Belgrade and Pristina reached an agreement on regional representation for Kosovo. Accession negotiations were officially launched on 21 January 2014. The first two chapters, including the one on the normalisation of relations with Kosovo, were opened in December 2015. Key chapters 23 and 24, dedicated to the rule of law, were opened on 18 July 2016. Twenty-two of the thirty-two chapters have been opened so far. have been provisionally closed. "Chapter group 4" – on the environment and connectivity agenda – was opened in December 2021, after two years without opening a new chapter. No new chapters or groups of chapters have been opened since then. Serbia's future integration into the European Union - like that of Kosovo - remains closely linked to the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo under the auspices of the Union, which should lead to a legally binding comprehensive agreement for the normalisation of their relations. Serbia (together with Kosovo) must step up its efforts to fulfil its obligations, stemming from a renewed agreement concluded in early 2023 to resume the stalled dialogue (André De Munter ,2025). The EU accession process of the candidate countries from the Western Balkans includes major difficulties regarding legal criteria of complementarity with the *acquis communautaire* (Corpădean, 2021).

a) Deficiencies in strengthening the rule of law

The rule of law is one of the essential democratic foundations of the European Union, and its respect is a basic condition for the accession of candidate countries. Although the Western Balkan states have legal and political structures, they still do not meet the European Union standards that prevent them from functioning properly (L'intégration des Balkans dans l'UE). In the Western Balkans, the consolidation of the rule of law is a difficult process, affected by the legacy of historical conflicts, political instability and the lack of genuine reforms. The consolidation of the rule of law is influenced and the independence of the judiciary is fragile throughout the region. Courts are often subject to direct or indirect political influence, and judicial councils fail to function as autonomous entities. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Superior Council of Magistracy is criticised by the European Union for its lack of transparency and its links to the political class. In Kosovo, the judiciary is underdeveloped, facing a shortage of human, logistical and financial resources.

The presence of endemic corruption, the lack of independence of the judiciary and political influence over public institutions constitute major obstacles in the European integration process of the states in the Western Balkans region (Nestoraş, 2023). Thus, using the data provided by the European Commission Report (2023) (Annual Activity Report, 2023), the stagnation of reforms in the field of justice in countries such as Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania can be highlighted: in Serbia, concerns about "captured state" and the concentration of political power limit democratic progress; in

Bosnia and Herzegovina, the complex institutional structure prevents the unitary implementation of reforms. The phenomenon of “state capture” deeply affects the Western Balkans. Power is often concentrated in the hands of political elites who control institutions for personal or party purposes. In Montenegro, the Democratic Party of Socialists held power for almost three decades, influencing most state institutions. Freedom House classifies the country as a partial democracy, with significant stagnation in reforms. Serbia is another example of a semi-autocratic state, where the press, judiciary and economy are often instruments of the ruling party.

Corruption remains a structural problem in all Western Balkan countries. Transparency International, in its *2024 Corruption Perceptions Index*, indicates scores below 40/100 for Serbia, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, reflecting a negative public perception of the integrity of public authorities. In Serbia, judicial reforms have been systematically delayed, and appointments to key positions are frequently made on political grounds. Albania has initiated a vetting reform of the judiciary, but the process is slow and the results are mixed, limited by the capacity of institutions to impose effective sanctions. While many countries have adopted legislation in line with the *acquis communautaire*, its application is often arbitrary and inconsistent. Reforms are implemented superficially, to satisfy formal EU requirements, without a real will for structural change. In North Macedonia, although major geopolitical compromises have been made (e.g. changing the country's name), major corruption cases have not been finalized, and the institutions responsible for combating corruption remain weak.

b) National identity and unresolved conflicts

A significant obstacle to the consolidation of the rule of law in the Western Balkans is represented by persistent disputes over national identity and unresolved ethnic or territorial conflicts. These influence both internal stability and bilateral relations between states. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethno-political divisions paralyze central institutions and maintain a climate of constant tension between the constituent entities. Political leaders exploit nationalist rhetoric to the detriment of interethnic cooperation. In Kosovo, the dispute over international recognition and relations with Serbia continues to affect the normalization process, and the lack of a definitive agreement hampers the European ambitions of both parties. In North Macedonia, identity issues were at the heart of the deadlock with Greece over the name of the state. Although formally resolved through the Prespa Agreement (2018), cultural and linguistic tensions persist, affecting internal cohesion. These unresolved conflicts undermine democratic institutions, justify the postponement of reforms and encourage nationalist discourse, often incompatible with European values.

c) Weak governance and incomplete administrative reforms

The quality of governance in the Western Balkans is often undermined by a lack of transparency, limited accountability of public institutions and inefficient management of resources. Administrative reforms have been initiated in all candidate countries, but the results are uneven, fragmented and often reversible (Elbasani, 2013).

Emerging from the devastating wars of the 1990s, the countries of the Western Balkans have been confronted with the remnants of conflict. One of the primary legacies from this period and from the times of the former Yugoslavia was the presence of a public administration system predominantly influenced by Serbian bureaucratic traditions. While this system was adapted to the centralized governance of Yugoslavia, it was not

prepared for the comprehensive and nuanced demands of the EU integration process. Several factors come into play when understanding these administrative shortcomings.

First, the region's reliance on a centralized, Serb-dominated bureaucracy meant that there was limited experience and expertise in managing diverse, decentralized administrative structures. In addition, the war left behind a deep distrust among communities. Building an inclusive public administration system that would respond to the diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural groups in the region became a challenge. Second, post-war reconstruction meant that many countries in the region focused primarily on immediate recovery, reconstruction and reconciliation. Building an administrative system aligned with EU standards was not an immediate priority and therefore lagged behind other recovery efforts. Furthermore, funds that could have been allocated to administrative reform were often redirected to more pressing immediate needs.

Third, the conflict had an impact on public administration's ability and knowledge. Many professionals were either part of a system that was not geared toward EU administrative principles, left the region, or were active in the conflict. As a result, there was a shortage of skilled workers who were acquainted with the exacting standards of EU regulations. In the Western Balkans, public administration transformation is an enormous undertaking. To conform to EU rules and objectives, it necessitates not only structural adjustments but also a shift in mindset, culture, and values. In the Western Balkans, public administration transformation is an enormous undertaking. To conform to EU rules and objectives, it necessitates not only structural adjustments but also a shift in mindset, culture, and values. Furthermore, despite the EU's knowledge of these difficulties, the Western Balkans' inadequate ability for efficient public administration is not fully addressed as a factor contributing to the region's delayed EU integration (Nestoraš, 2023).

In Albania and North Macedonia, public administration reform strategies are developed in cooperation with the EU, but their implementation is slow and monitoring is insufficient. The lack of a coherent meritocracy system in hiring civil servants perpetuates the phenomenon of clientelism and reduces the efficiency of institutions. In Serbia, decentralization is superficial, and local authorities have limited competences and depend on politically controlled financial transfers. At the same time, the lack of digitalization of the administration contributes to excessive bureaucracy and opportunities for corruption. Bosnia and Herzegovina presents a special case, with an excessively complex and ethnically fragmented administrative structure, which makes it difficult to coordinate public policies at the national level. According to SIGMA Reports (OECD/EU) (Sigma Monitoring Reports, 2025), the administrative capacity of public institutions in the region is reduced, and public policies are not formulated on a solid analytical basis. The lack of predictability and consultation of stakeholders affects the quality of regulations (Bieber, 2020). In addition, the budget process is not sufficiently transparent and internal audit is poorly developed. This reduces citizens' trust in the state's ability to deliver quality public services and undermines the legitimacy of reforms.

d) The phenomenon of nationalism in the Western Balkans

Nationalism remains one of the most persistent and destabilizing political forces in the Western Balkans. Although European rhetoric implies reconciliation, regional cooperation and respect for diversity, the realities on the ground indicate a reactivation of nationalist discourses, often politically instrumentalized. These tendencies undermine not only the internal stability of states, but also the credibility of the commitment to

European values (Subotic, 2011). Nationalism is often cultivated and exploited by political parties to consolidate electoral support. Instead of promoting inclusive policies, national leaders frequently resort to patriotic discourses that emphasize ethnic identity and promote a sense of collective victimization. Thus, in Serbia there is the phenomenon of glorification of Serbian nationalism around the myth of Kosovo Polje; In Croatia, historical symbols are often used in political discourse to stimulate national pride, sometimes with revisionist overtones, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, segregated education and separate curricula for Bosniak, Serb and Croat students reinforce identity divisions. In order to consolidate their electoral support, political parties often resort to exploring nationalism. Instead of promoting inclusive policies, national leaders frequently resort to patriotic discourses that emphasize ethnic identity and promote a sense of collective victimization. In Bosnia, entity leaders (e.g. Milorad Dodik in Republika Srpska) constantly use a secessionist discourse, threatening to dismember the country. In Kosovo and Serbia, politicians perpetuate antagonistic narratives related to the region's status, blocking the normalization of relations, and in North Macedonia, identity-related conflicts (with Bulgaria and previously with Greece) are instrumentalized for electoral purposes. Also, one of the key challenges is reconciling national and European identity. In many cases, nationalism is perceived as being in opposition to the values of pluralism and multiculturalism promoted by the EU. This contradiction generates an identity ambivalence among citizens: they support European integration, but reject certain European norms perceived as threats to national traditions.

3. OBSTACLES FOR THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA IN THE EU ACCESSION PROCESS

A bottom-up strategy recognizes how national interest groups focus on Brussels in addition to or instead of the national level. The rise of pro- and anti-EU organizations and parties is also significant. A more challenging area to observe is how top-down pressure causes a change in political conduct that then feeds back to the EU level. The role of the EU as a change agent is evident in the case of many domestic policies, including regional policy. The EU is more of an intervening factor in matters that might have international implications, such as climate policy (Bretherton, Mannin, 2013: 3). There are certain misconceptions regarding Moldova's strategic decision to democratize and implement political, social, and economic reforms in order to secure a European future. Perhaps more difficult than everyone anticipated, the Moldovan route to Europe turned out to be challenging (Putină, Bevziuc, 2014). The gap in development between EU members and non-member states also grows as a result of the expansion of European integration. Therefore, the only practical option for the Republic of Moldova that would guarantee the fulfillment of our requirements and interests on all levels—national, economic, political, and cultural - is membership in the European Union. We run the risk of becoming an isolated state if we keep hesitating in the face of this alternative, which is highly undesirable considering the status of the global economy right now (Iațco, Putină, 2020).

Influenced by the war in Ukraine, relations between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union are reaching one of the highest points of cooperation. Thus, on February 28, Ukraine applied for EU membership, and the next day, on March 1, 2022, MEPs approved with a majority of 637 votes the resolution that offers Ukraine a European perspective. For the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, which together with Ukraine are part of the Eastern Partnership group of countries, this moment serves as the

European perspective and the objective of becoming full members of the EU. In the circumstances of the war in Ukraine, two days away from Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova submitted applications for membership in the European Union. For these countries, the status of candidate country serves as a political shield of protection against Russia, which has never agreed to the rapprochement of the Eastern Partnership states with the EU (Agora, 2022)

The step that brought the Republic of Moldova closer to the EU was the signing on March 3 by President Maia Sandu of the application for accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union (Agora, 2022). Thus, March 3, 2022 is a historic date for the Republic of Moldova, it is the date when the application for accession to the European Union was officially submitted. This step marks a significant change in relations between the Republic of Moldova and the EU, as the Republic of Moldova has also officially started the process of accession to the EU. This evolution of relations will have a significant effect on the EU's requirements for the Republic of Moldova and on the Republic of Moldova's approach to the European Union. Even though the existing Association Agreement between the Republic of Moldova and the EU is very demanding, the application for accession of the Republic of Moldova will raise the requirements to a higher level. The application was submitted under Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which provides that "any European State which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union". Also, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Moldova, of the other part, which recognises the European aspirations and European choice of the Republic of Moldova. Although the Republic of Moldova has made significant steps in its relations with the EU, the state is currently facing a multitude of problems that could compromise the state's European integration aspirations. Thus, among the main problems can be highlighted:

a) Eastern zone of the Republic of Moldova

Approximately three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the achievement of independence, but also in the context of the war in Ukraine, the eastern area of the Republic of Moldova remains one of the main problems. The events of February 24, 2022, or the "special operation" of Russia in Ukraine, conditioned the manifestation of increased interest in the Transnistrian area. The Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine brought the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova back into the spotlight. The eastern area of the Republic of Moldova, "self-proclaimed Transnistrian Moldavian Republic" has an area of 4163 km, which is approximately 12% of the country's territory, and a population of approximately 505153 inhabitants (according to the 2014 census; Horia, 2016). Having its administration: presidency, parliament, and currency, as a result of the conflict of March 2, 1992, the so-called "Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR)" developed the structures of a quasi-state. Concerning the Transnistrian region, the situation is ambiguous: on the one hand, the focus of interest and resources on the invasion of Ukraine has weakened Moscow's financing of the region, on the other hand, Transnistria remains the region with an increased risk of the Russians are opening a new front to invade Ukraine, which will directly affect the Republic of Moldova. Positioned between Moldova and Ukraine, the Transnistrian area represents a geopolitical consequence of the Cold War. For a better understanding of the impact that the Transnistrian area can have on regional security, it is necessary to highlight the main aspects that give this region special attention.

The increased interest of Russia towards the Republic of Moldova also depends on the geographical location. The Republic of Moldova is a country where Western powers meet, and Moscow, most likely, "will remain politically paralyzed in the short or even medium term", claims the American agency Stratfor. The geographic location of Moldova makes it important for Russia, being a traditional invasion route from the Southwest and the Balkan states. It is located near the strategic port of Odessa and the Crimean peninsula, where Russia, until 2014, stationed its fleet on the Black Sea and is part of the energy transit network that connects Russia with Europe and Turkey. With the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, the emphasis changed, the geostrategic role of the peninsula increased, and the geostrategic role of the Republic of Moldova for Russia decreased. The war started by the Russian Federation in Ukraine has once again brought to the attention of the international community the role that the Transnistrian area can play in Russia's strategies. Although there is a decrease in the geostrategic importance of the Republic of Moldova for the Russian Federation, however, Russia, according to the provisions of the Foreign Policy Concept of December 12, 2016 (Article 58), considers Moldova as an area for which Russian Federation shows interest and speaks for the preservation of the status especially of the Transnistrian region (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 2016). In the new version of the *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, adopted on March 31, 2023, the Republic of Moldova is addressed in the context of CIS member states (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 2023).

An important aspect that deserves attention is the activity of some companies in the eastern part of the country. The most famous are the enterprises "Pribor", "Metalorucav", "Kirov Electrical Appliances", the industrial complex "Electromash" located in Tiraspol, and the metallurgical and hydraulic industrial complex in Râbnița, which, under the official cover of production of electrical appliances and household items, they dealt with the illegal production of weapons (until the establishment of the European Union Border Assistance Mission in Moldova and Ukraine - EUBAM). The range of weapons illegally manufactured in these industrial complexes is varied. Thus, among the models of weaponry manufactured illegally in the Transnistrian area, the following can be mentioned: 20-tube multi-launchers, placed on "ZIL 131" and "Ural 365" vehicles (they were exported to conflict areas, such as Abkhazia). Other weapons models are also produced: "Spig-7" and "Spig-9" anti-tank grenade launchers, 82 and 120 mm mines, 50 mm portable mine launchers, "Katran" model. Revolvers of this model are also illegally manufactured: 9mm Pm, 7.62mm Tt, 5.45mm Psm, 7.62mm and 5.45mm, Ak 47 "Kalashnikov" Assault Weapons, 9mm Compact Machine Guns, "Pcela" and "Gnom" Grenade Launchers, "Vasiliov" mines (some of which were sold to the Chechen rebels), "Duga" mobile weapon launchers, Npgm-40 grenade launchers designed for use on Ask 74 machine guns, 82 mm mine launchers, anti-personnel mines Pnd in wooden case, Gp-15 model 40mm grenade launchers (Sartori, 2006). The military base at Cobasna, close to the town of Râbnița in northern Transnistria, is especially noteworthy in this regard. About 42,000 tons of conventional weaponry, ammunition, and combat gear from the ex-Soviet era were kept at the military warehouse in Cobasna, which covered an area of roughly 132 hectares. The town of Cobasna is 2 kilometers away from the border with Ukraine. The ammunition depot at Cobasna in Transnistria preserves the weapons heritage of the former 14th Army of the Soviet Union, but also part of the armaments of the former GDR and Czechoslovakia: more than 20,000 tons of

ammunition are currently stored here. During the Soviet period, the warehouse in Cobasna was known as warehouse no. 1411 artillery munitions, representing the strategic arsenal of the South-West Military District of the USSR. Most of the ammunition was stored here after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), Czechoslovakia, and other former Warsaw Pact countries (Digi 24, 2022)

Experts from the Academy of Sciences of Moldova carried out some analyses and estimates, back in 2005, according to the known data about the content and quantity of ammunition stored on the left side of the Dniester. Thus, according to studies carried out by ASM experts, in the event of a deflagration, the power of the explosion could be equivalent to that of an atomic bomb similar to the one dropped on Hiroshima. A possible explosion of the military warehouse in Cobasna can be compared to the detonation of a nuclear bomb with a capacity of 10 kilotons, which was dropped over the city of Hiroshima in 1945 (Reniță, 2020).

A possible explosion of the warehouses can lead to the destruction of brick walls and reinforced concrete structures in the localities located at a distance of 4.5 kilometers from the epicenter. After the explosion, a crater with a radius of 1.5 kilometers and a depth of 75 meters will be formed. However, given that Cobasna is located in a rural environment, the range of the explosion can reach 40-50 kilometers, including as far as Orhei. Therefore, the effects of the explosion can be compared to the damage caused by an earthquake of 7-7.5 degrees. Also, according to experts' estimates, the explosion of the ammunition depot in the village of Cobasna will lead to an impact of the population, to a humanitarian and ecological catastrophe in the north-eastern region of the Republic of Moldova and on the territory of Ukraine over an area of 500 to 3000 kilometers squares. The recycling and evacuation of the armament is in this case the only possibility to prevent any spontaneous explosion of the munitions in the military warehouses in Transnistria (Reniță, 2020).

At the moment, Moscow has roughly twenty thousand tonnes of ammo in the Transnistrian region. The Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (FACE) and the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit Declaration specified that these arsenals and forces have to be unconditionally removed from the Republic of Moldova territory by 2002. Russia withdrew from the FACE Treaty in 2007 and is currently holding conditions for the full withdrawal of its military forces and ammunition from the Republic of Moldova. This is in contrast to Chisinau, which focuses on the complete and unconditional withdrawal of military forces and ammunition. As a result, the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict has been delayed. Russia has removed some of its conventional arsenals or has been illegally trafficked and traded in different parts of the world. In the composition of the military and paramilitary forces of Transnistria, there are 16 thousand effective, subdivided into 4 motorized infantry brigades deployed in Tiraspol, Râbnița, and Dubăsari, equipped with advanced equipment and technology. The complex has 18 tanks, 107 armored vehicles, 73 guns, 46 anti-aircraft installations, and 173 antiquarian units. The air fleet consists of 9 Mi-8T helicopters, 6 Mi-24 helicopters, Mi-2 helicopters, and An-2, An-26 and Yak-18 aircraft. Officially, there would be around 1200 Russian soldiers in the area. In the context of the conflict in Ukraine, the Kyiv press wrote that at least 5 thousand soldiers would be present in Transnistria (*ibidem*). It should also be mentioned that, currently, the following personnel are located in the eastern area:

1. The Ministry of Defense and the General Staff, the security company, or Tiraspol (about 200 soldiers);

2. 1st Motorized Infantry Brigade, Tiraspol (700 soldiers);
3. 2nd Motorcycle Infantry Brigade (Training Center) or. Bender (600 soldiers);
4. 3rd Motorized Infantry Brigade. Rîbnița 420 soldiers;
5. 4th Motorized Infantry Brigade. Dubăsari 450 soldiers;
6. The independent tank battalion stationed in the village of Vladimirovca (120 soldiers);
7. The independent special destination battalion Tiraspol (100 soldiers);
8. The independent artillery regiment of the village of Parcani (about 200 soldiers);
9. The anti-aircraft artillery regiment of Tiraspol (about 200 soldiers);
10. The independent aviation detachment or. Tiraspol (approx. 150 soldiers);
11. The independent transmission battalion of Tiraspol (about 200 soldiers);
12. The battalion of independent genius in the village of Parcani (about 220 soldiers);
13. Aviation technical base Tiraspol;
14. Base of repair or. Tiraspol;
15. Independent repair battalion or. Tiraspol;
16. The training center of the 4th Infantry Brigade in the village of Afanasievca, about 200 soldiers;
17. Peacekeeping forces Vladimirovca village (450).

Making a calculation, according to the sources cited in 2001, a potential of about 4500 military technical units was concentrated in the eastern area.

Currently, the military formations of the so-called "Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR)" are structured by their own military doctrine no. 686, adopted on February 17, 2016, which provides for the maintenance of units with reduced staff, but capable of tripling their staff in case of need. Thus, each infantry brigade includes deployed command, guard, and security subunits (which ensure the daily activity of the unit), as well as one deployed infantry battalion (which ensures the training of recruits and the permanent formation of the military reserve). In case of military danger, the deployment of units to the states of war is foreseen. The material basis of the unrecognized "PMR" military formations is the combat technique, weapons, equipment, ammunition, and other material sources transmitted from the military units of the 14th Army both during the armed conflict of 1992 and in the following period.

At the endowment of the military formations of the so-called "Ministry of Defense of PMR" are: T-64 tanks - 18 units; armored fighting vehicles - 84 units; BTR-60 - 24 units; BTR-70 - 26 units; BTR-80 - 11 units; BTR-D - 12 units; BRDM - 7 units; BMP - 3 units; MTLB - 1un. Artillery pieces about 10 units: self-propelled howitzers 122-mm type "Gvozdika" - 18 units; anti-tank guns 100-mm MT12 - 16 units; 85-mm guns - 12 units; M120 mine launchers - 45 units; 82-mm mine launchers - 40 one; launch systems for reactive projectiles BM-21 "Grad" - 20 un. Anti-aircraft guns - 49: AZP100 type 100-mm caliber - 10 units, C-60 type 57-mm caliber - 12 units; caliber 23mm type ZU 23-2 - 24 units; "Alazani" - 3 un.; complex medium-range (1-18 km) anti-aircraft missile defense systems of the Osa-2 type; short-range (0.3-5km) Igla-type anti-aircraft defense complexes, about 40 "FAGOT" type anti-tank missile complex units, about 30 units; ammunition with bullets about 20 000 un. The aviation subunits have 6 helicopters - MI-8T; 2 helicopters - MI; 1 plane - AN-26; 4 aircraft - AN-2 (2 under conservation); 2

aircraft - IAK-18 (50), 10 IAK-52 aircraft. The MI-8T helicopters are equipped with installations for launching "NURS" type missiles.

Under the management of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (PMR) also are: the internal troops are intended for the protection of state objects and the performance of various service and combat tasks. The composition of the internal troops is: Special Purpose Battalion "Dniester" deployed in the city of Tiraspol, 2 patrol detachments Pervomaisk and Parcani, 7 patrol militia sections, the "Dniester" Battalion is directly subordinated to the Minister of Internal Affairs of the a.z. MRI The workforce has about 400 people. In the eastern part of the Republic of Moldova, there are weapons: 82 mm mine launchers, anti-tank grenade launchers, machine guns, machine guns, sniper rifles, etc. The total strength of the subunits of the internal troops is subordinated to about 700 people. Another institution that has military forces is the Ministry of State Security of the so-called "Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic". The following components are part of the Armed Forces of the "RMN": the "Delta" special purpose battalion (located in the city of Tiraspol) with a force of 150 soldiers. Also under the management of the "Ministry" are armored cars, grenade launchers, light weapons, etc.

A component of the forces of the "Ministry" is also the independent Cossack Regiment of Border Guards (stationed in the city of Tiraspol) with an effective number of 300 soldiers. The regiment is equipped with infantry weapons and about 20 BTR-60, and BTR-70 armored personnel carriers. Other military forces present in the Transnistrian area are the border guard troops formed by a training detachment (located in the city of Tiraspol), 7 commands (Camenca, Rîbnița, Dubăsari, Grigoriopol, Bender, Tiraspol, Slobozia), 29 border guard pickets and 30 of border control posts. In the Transnistrian area, there is weaponry: armored fighting vehicles, mine launchers, grenade launchers, light weapons, and a military force of about 1,500 people (*ibidem*).

Also, Cossack troops from the Black Sea Region (Черноморское Казачье Войско) are present in the Transnistrian area. The Cossack troops are the main reserve of the "RMN" FA. In the organization "Черноморское Казачье Войско" there are 7 Cossack districts, established according to the territorial principle and which bring together the Cossacks from the nearby localities (towns). The number of Cossacks who can be mobilized reaches the figure of 3000 people (the total number of Cossacks and family members is about 10000 people).

The Territorial Defense Corps (people's Militia and Water Territorial Defense Corps (People's Militia and Civil Defense) (народное ополчение) (formed based on the decree of I. Smirnov of March 17, 1992) and the civil defense (formed in 1992) is the reserve of the Armed Forces of the RMN and is structured in territorial battalions. In peacetime, the popular militia and civil defense have permanent headquarters deployed in the district centers. Battalion deployment is carried out in case of military danger or for concentration and training applications. The battalion headquarters is completed with permanent personnel from the battalion commander to the company commander. The general staff has a staff of about 20 people and has an armament of about 150 machine guns. Also, the staff of the general staff constantly conducts combat training exercises with the commanders of the battalion company (*ibidem*: 28-29).

Even if today the Republic of Moldova is not attacked conventionally, Russia has been exercising actions of hybrid aggression for a long time which, in the last period, is even more evident. There were several provocation attempts from Tiraspol throughout 2022. Thus on April 25, the media in the Transnistrian region reported that the so-called Ministry of State Security in Tiraspol was bombed with grenade launchers, even though

at the time of the attack the building was empty. Later, on the morning of April 26, two explosions rang out in the Grigoriopol district, as a result of which two radio antennas of the "Maiak" center were taken out of operation. An attack on the military airfield in Tiraspol was also announced. Another indicator of security danger was the organization by the Russian military of military exercises and applications with grenade launchers in the Transnistrian region, an announcement made by the Russian Ministry of Defense itself. Meanwhile, the authorities in Kyiv sound the alarm regarding new threats to Ukraine's security coming from the left of the Dniester (Bencheci, 2023).

b) Economic effects

Immediate and medium-term effects of the war in Ukraine on the economy of the Republic of Moldova, according to the director of Expert-Group, Adrian Lupusor:

- the suspension of several supply chains of the Republic of Moldova with food products, including from the basic package;
- suspension of raw material imports for processing industries, for example the furniture industry;
- the continuous increase in the prices of energy resources;
- the need for companies to adapt, the identification of other import sources;
- increased transportation and logistics costs;
- inflationary effects.

The Republic of Moldova was strongly affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Inflation rose from 18.52% in February to 33.55% in August 2022, according to data provided by the National Bank of Moldova. An important aspect of the war in Ukraine is the fact that exports from the Republic of Moldova in 2022 exploded. If in 2021 exports totaled 3.1 billion dollars, in 2022 they increased to 4.3 billion dollars. According to the expert Veaceslav Ioniță, the war in Ukraine brought back to life the railway in the Republic of Moldova, which was practically inactive. The volume of transport services operated by rail in 2006 was 3.7 billion tons/km. A steady decline followed, reaching 0.6 billion tonnes/km in 2020 and rising to 0.7 billion tonnes/km in 2021.

c) Energy dependence

Due to the 80 percent energy dependence of the Republic of Moldova on the Cuciurgan Power Plant in the Transnistrian region, Moscow has kept Chisinau under pressure for three decades. The war in Ukraine, including the energy crisis, has a direct impact on the energy security of the Republic of Moldova, highlighting a multitude of state vulnerabilities and inabilities present in the energy sector.

We highlight the same situation in the case of electricity, maintaining dependence on the Russian Federation through energy exported from the secessionist region (fed with Russian gas), and interconnection with international suppliers would allow for minimizing this dependence, bypassing the region controlled by the Russian Federation. In this sense, the Republic of Moldova and Romania will develop a joint action plan in case of an energy crisis, establishing a series of measures for the supply of electricity and natural gas: providing each other with alternative fuels to produce thermal energy 29 of the systems of central heating and electricity and thermal energy in cogeneration (Ursula von der Leyen o asigură pe Maia Sandu), thus, harmonizing national and European legislation in terms of energy.

The European Commission, in the context of the war started by the Russian Federation in Ukraine, is ready to provide support to Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova,

and Georgia to ensure reliable and sustainable energy, ensuring the emergency synchronization of the electricity networks of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova with the European continental network (REPowerEU).

The Republic of Moldova was connected to the European energy network ENTSO-E (March 2022) (*Republica Moldova și Ucraina*) protecting itself from the perspective of energy security and minimizing the dependent influence on the secessionist region of the country. The beginning of the electrical interconnection between Romania and the Republic of Moldova will be possible after the construction, equipping, and commissioning of a 500Mw Back-to-Back station in Vulcanesti and a 330kV line to Chisinau which will allow the import of a larger amount of electricity from Romania. Also, the 2nd part of the Moldova-Romania electrical interconnection project involves the development of the 400 kV lines Iași-Ungheni-Strășeni and the 400 kV line Bălți-Suceava (Ministerul Afacerilor Externe și Integrării Europene. Energie, 2023).

Although the interconnection to the European energy system is crucial for the development of the country's energy sector, the natural gas market is currently a priority. Thus, the expansion of the Iași-Ungheni-Chisinau gas pipeline is possible by implementing it in parallel with the interconnection carried out on the electricity market in Romania (*Cenușă, 2016*). In this context, the Republic of Moldova will be able to diversify both its natural gas and electricity supply sources. In this way, the Republic of Moldova has the chance to reduce its electricity dependence on the secessionist region and Gazprom's natural gas dependence. In the context of the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis, the international assistance granted to the Republic of Moldova, to overcome the created situation, was crucial to the dependence options presented by the Russian Federation. The integration carried out in the European energy space contributed to the reduction of dependence on the secessionist regime, but also on the Russian Federation. Thus, maintaining relations with European partners in providing security support in the field has accelerated the reorientation of the Republic of Moldova to the European energy system.

d) The social-political dimension

The refugee crisis and the help offered to refugees from Ukraine by citizens and authorities, represent a challenge to society in the Republic of Moldova. Since February 24, 2022, approximately 688,000 refugees from Ukraine have crossed the territory of the Republic of Moldova. Currently, the Republic of Moldova hosts over 80,000 refugees from Ukraine, more than half of whom are children. Thus, on the territory of the Republic of Moldova, refugees from Ukraine have full, free, and non-discriminatory access to medical assistance services. At the same time, the authorities of the Republic of Moldova ensured that the general education institutions in the country offer opportunities for all children from refugee families from Ukraine to participate in the educational process (*Parlamentul Republicii Moldova*).

Analyzing the consequences or effects of the presence of refugees from Ukraine on the Republic of Moldova, it should be noted that they had a positive influence on the Moldovan economy. They, being accommodated on the territory of our country, consumed goods bringing money to the national budget. At the same time, they glorified the HoReCa branch, staying in hotels, motels, and tourist guesthouses. Ukrainian companies glorified the Moldovan railways, but also the transport branch, transporting goods from and to Ukraine.

Analyzing the impact of the war in Ukraine on the Republic of Moldova, it should be noted that it had a positive impact on the political dimension of Moldovan-

European relations. Influenced by the war in Ukraine, relations between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union reached one of the highest points of cooperation. Thus, on February 28, Ukraine applied to join the EU, and the next day, on March 1, 2022, the MEPs approved with a majority of 637 votes the resolution that offers Ukraine a European perspective. For the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, which together with Ukraine are part of the group of countries of the Eastern Partnership, this moment serves as the European perspective and the objective of becoming full members of the EU. In the circumstances of the war in Ukraine, two days away from Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova submitted applications to join the European Union. For these countries, the status of a candidate country serves as a political shield of protection against Russia, which has never agreed to the rapprochement of the Eastern Partnership states with the EU (Agora, 2022a).

The step that brought the Republic of Moldova closer to the EU was the signing on March 3 by President Maia Sandu of the request for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union (Agora, 2022b).

Considering the common values and the close ties between the partners, established in the past by the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Communities and their member states, on the one hand, and the Republic of Moldova, on the other, and which are developing within the European policy neighborhood and of the Eastern Partnership, and recognizing the common desire of the parties to develop, consolidate and further expand their relations. According to the provisions of the Agreement, the common values on which the EU is founded, namely democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as the rule of law, also constitute the very essence of the political association and economic integration provided for in this Agreement. The agreement will pave the way for future progressive developments in EU-Republic of Moldova relations.

Recognizing that the Republic of Moldova, as a European country, has a common history and shares common values with the member states and is committed to implementing and promoting these values, which are a source of inspiration for the European choice of the country. Committing to strengthen respect for fundamental freedoms, human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities, democratic principles, the rule of law, as well as good governance, on behalf of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova, efforts are being made for the development of a democratic and European country, whole and free (CRJM, 2015).

Referring to the provisions of Article 2 of the Treaty of Accession to the European Union (TEU), we can mention that the values on which the EU focuses are: "respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, as well as respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the member states in a society where pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and equality between women and men prevail".

Any potential future EU member state will be assessed against these values. The country's ability to demonstrate its willingness to act on these values will be essential for EU membership. As the EU is, at its core, the largest European peace project of all time, sharing and promoting these common values becomes particularly important in light of the war in Ukraine and other threats to European peace (Chirtoc, 2022). A no less important moment in the strengthening of Moldovan-European relations in the context

of the war in Ukraine was the submission of the European Commission's questionnaire regarding the EU accession request of the Republic of Moldova. After receiving Moldova's request, the Council invited the European Commission to present its opinion on Moldova's request, as the EU's first step in the accession process. To draft such an Opinion, the Commission presented a detailed Questionnaire to the Republic of Moldova. Based on the answers to the Questionnaire, which were elaborated and sent by the Republic of Moldova, the Commission issued its opinion with the following recommendations:

- To recommend the granting of Candidate country status for Moldova and the possibility for Moldova to start accession negotiations.
- To recommend the granting of Candidate status, but only after the fulfillment of specific conditions by Moldova.

The Member States of the EU decided the request for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU, deciding unanimously, based on the Opinion of the Commission. Once the Republic of Moldova received the status of a Candidate country, the date for the opening of EU accession negotiations was set (most likely after the Republic of Moldova fulfilled additional conditions). Accession negotiations will be conducted until the country fulfills all EU accession requirements, in particular the political criteria requirements, as the fundamental values of the EU, as defined in Article 2 of the TEU, are assessed within the political criteria. Once the accession conditions of the Republic of Moldova are agreed upon, the Accession Treaty is negotiated, approved, and signed by Moldova and all EU Member States and the accession date is set. Also, to legitimize this step, the Republic of Moldova will organize a referendum in which its citizens will decide on the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union. Also, the Accession Treaty must be approved by the European Parliament and ratified by the Republic of Moldova, as well as by the national parliament of each EU Member State before it enters into force.

The questionnaire was the first crucial step in the EU accession process, which demonstrated the readiness of the Republic of Moldova to react through prompt and precise answers. Also, the Questionnaire was structured in such a way as to respect the format of the accession negotiations, which are organized in such a way as to include the Copenhagen accession criteria of 1993:

- 1) political criteria: the stability of the institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and the respect and protection of minorities;
- 2) economic criteria: a functioning market economy and the ability to cope with competition and market forces;
- 3) the capacity to assume the obligations arising from EU membership, including the administrative and institutional capacity to effectively implement the entire EU *acquis* (organized in over 30 negotiating chapters).

Thus, on April 11, 2022, in Luxembourg, the Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi, handed to the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, Nicu Popescu, the European Commission's questionnaire regarding the EU accession application of the Republic of Moldova. The answers that will be given to the questions in this questionnaire will represent the x-ray of the current situation in our country, showing the level of preparation for joining the European Union and, at the same time, highlighting the areas where additional efforts are needed. *"Our country is accelerating its European journey. I reiterated that we are part of Europe not only geographically, but also through the identity we carry, the values we*

share, through the Romanian language, the official EU language we speak, and through the common history we have." - said Deputy Prime Minister Nicu Popescu (MAERM, 2022).

The status of a candidate country would also mobilize the authorities to identify real solutions to two big problems that Moldova has in the perspective of accession: the Transnistrian problem and cleanliness in the field of justice. "Completion of the integration will only be possible when the Transnistrian issue is resolved, but this should not prevent us from working on the other files", says MEP Siegfried Mureșan. And Chisinau is tying its hopes regarding the settlement of the Transnistrian dispute to a possible victory of Ukraine in the war launched by Russia against it - a victory that would radically change the outlook of the pro-Russian separatist regime on the left of the Dniester (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2022).

The date of May 19, 2022, was also an important one for the Republic of Moldova. It is the date when the European Parliament adopted the annual report on the implementation of the EU-Republic of Moldova Association Agreement, with 512 votes "for", 43 votes "against" and 39 abstentions. The report includes a call for the European Union to provide more strategic support to Moldova after submitting its application to join the bloc. In the context of a worsening security environment, the text recognizes that the war in Ukraine has disproportionately affected the Republic of Moldova. Its economy has been affected by the loss of import and export opportunities and the rapid increase in energy prices, and the Republic of Moldova has also received the largest number of Ukrainian refugees per population than any other country, putting pressure on public services.

MEPs also draw attention to the need for more strategic aid for the Republic of Moldova, especially by establishing a support group of the Commission for this country, similar to the existing one for Ukraine. The report also emphasizes that the accession applications of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia open a new chapter in their European integration, which should be characterized by strengthened efforts to implement the association agreements and the components of trade liberalization. Last but not least, MEPs express their concern about a series of recent security incidents in the separatist region of Transnistria and condemn them as dangerous acts of provocation committed in a very volatile security situation. They reiterate their support for a peaceful settlement of the conflict in Transnistria, based on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova (Călugăreanu, 2022a, 2022b).

The text of the Resolution states that the Republic of Moldova was disproportionately affected by the Russian war in Ukraine. This is mainly due to the arrival of more than 450,000 Ukrainian refugees since the beginning of the invasion - of which almost 80,000 have remained in the Republic of Moldova - but also due to the decrease in trade and the increase in energy and transport prices. To this end, MEPs are calling for the EU to provide more support to the country, namely through new macro-financial assistance, additional transport and trade liberalization measures, and continued support for refugee management and humanitarian purposes (UCHCR, 2025).

In the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, the Parliament welcomes the official application of the Republic of Moldova for EU membership submitted on 3 March 2022 and states that the EU should grant it the status of a candidate country, by Article 49 of the TEU and "based on merits". Meanwhile, the European Union and the Republic of Moldova should continue their efforts to integrate the country into the EU

single market and to strengthen sectoral cooperation. The MEPs also ask the European Commission to quickly complete the evaluation of the request and to provide full assistance to the Republic of Moldova during this process. They state that, without anticipating the content of the Commission's opinion, the Moldovan authorities are undoubtedly on the right track by adopting key reforms, particularly in terms of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2022).

The resolution also expresses its deep concern about the developments on the territory of the Transnistria region, which recorded a series of "security incidents" in April 2022 considered by MEPs as dangerous provocative acts in an extremely tense security situation. They also reiterate Parliament's support for a "comprehensive, peaceful and sustainable political solution to the Transnistrian conflict", namely based on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova within its internationally recognized borders, as well as the withdrawal of stationed Russian forces there.

The Parliament emphasizes that it is unacceptable for Russia to use gas supplies as a weapon to exert political pressure on the Republic of Moldova, and to influence the country's political trajectory and geopolitical orientation, especially after the recent installation of the country's pro-Western government. MEPs call on the Commission and EU countries to support Moldova in ensuring its energy independence, connectivity, diversification, and energy efficiency, as well as in accelerating the development of renewable energy sources).

Through the "historic" decision taken unanimously by the EU leaders, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova received the status of candidate countries for EU accession. By granting candidate status to Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, the EU enlargement paradigm changed, and the enlargement policy received a new boost, qualifying the decision of the EU leaders as "a big step" and a historic step (Moldova Suverană, 2022)

Also, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia received a new impetus to implement the reforms and projects that are still needed to take the next step in the historic achievement. Granting the European perspective to the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia represents important steps forward. This decision brings hope and confidence in the European future to the people of these countries and represents a great responsibility for their leaders (Agora 2022a).

Although the Republic of Moldova received on June 23, 2022, the status of a candidate country for accession to the European Union (EU), this status does not offer the status of a member state of the EU, as it is necessary for Moldova to fulfill a series of conditions for accession, as well as to apply European legislation in all areas. Experts in the field of international relations and European integration mention that the European path of the Republic of Moldova is difficult and that, in the context of the challenges faced by the EU, but also the countries with candidate status for accession, it may last an indefinite period. The relationship of the Republic of Moldova with the European Union brings security support to Romania even in the context of the war in Ukraine of 150 million euros for the support of Moldova. The assistance consists of non-reimbursable funds of 30 million euros and loans under advantageous conditions of 120 million euros. The Republic of Moldova is the European country that received the largest number of refugees from Ukraine compared to its population. Over 370,000 refugees crossed the border of the Republic of Moldova. Thus, the Plenary of the European Parliament with a

large majority, 558 votes "for" and 10 abstentions and 20 "against" decided to grant macroeconomic assistance (European Commission, 2022). In the context of the war in Ukraine, Oliver Varhelej, the European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement mentioned that the EU has increased the budgetary support offered to the Republic of Moldova. The €6 million support offered in December 2021 to manage the energy crisis is supported by another €75 million. The money was provided to overcome the challenges posed by Russia's military aggression in Ukraine. In addition to managing the crisis, the EU continues to support the long-term resilience of the Republic of Moldova, in particular through the Eastern Partnership Investment Plan, which involves providing 34 billion euros for public and private investments in several key areas: support for SMEs, trade facilitation, energy efficiency (Moldova Suverană, 2022)

4. CONCLUSIONS

The process of accession to the European Union is a complex, multidimensional and profound one, not only in terms of fulfilling the formal criteria, but also in terms of the internal stability of the candidate states. Internal divisions, be they ethnic, political or regional, as well as the low level of social cohesion prove to be major and persistent obstacles that limit the capacity of these countries to implement the reforms required by Brussels sustainably and efficiently.

Thus, the experience of the Western Balkan states highlights how unresolved conflicts, societal fragmentation and chronic political instability can slow down the process of Europeanization, even in the face of a formal commitment to EU values. Similarly, the Republic of Moldova faces its own challenges related to political polarization, the lack of a broad consensus on the direction of the state's development, but also problems of social and geographical integration, especially in the context of the separatist region of Transnistria.

Based on these considerations, European integration cannot be treated exclusively as a technocratic or diplomatic project, but must be understood and approached in depth, as a process of internal transformation, which involves strengthening trust between citizens and institutions, reducing social gaps and promoting a common pro-European identity. Without these foundations, even the most ambitious reforms risk being reversible or not producing sustainable effects. Therefore, for the Western Balkans and the Republic of Moldova to be able to make real progress towards EU accession, a strategic and integrated approach is essential, combining external support with coherent internal efforts to build a cohesive, inclusive and resilient society.

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WASTE MANAGEMENT AS A DRIVER OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

*Michelle NICĂ**

Abstract. This article examines how waste management functions as an overlooked yet consequential driver of European integration in the Western Balkans. Although the region faces chronic deficiencies in waste infrastructure, regulatory enforcement, and public environmental awareness, these challenges intersect directly with EU accession requirements, particularly under Chapter 27 of the *acquis*. Drawing on neofunctionalism, Europeanisation theory, and environmental-governance perspectives, the article argues that waste management generates functional spillovers, administrative alignment, and cross-border cooperation that advance integration even when political progress stalls. Looking at projects such as the transboundary cooperation on the Drina river or the Vinča landfill's modernisation, waste governance represents a strategic entry point for deepening Europeanisation in the Western Balkans, reinforcing regional cooperation, and supporting the long-term credibility of the EU enlargement process.

Keywords: European integration, Western Balkans, Waste Management, Environmental governance

1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

European integration has long been understood as a multidimensional process shaped not only by political and economic developments but also by functional cooperation in sectors that create interdependence among states. Environmental governance has increasingly emerged as one such area, especially in the context of the European Union's evolving climate and sustainability agenda. For the Western Balkans, comprising Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, environmental challenges are particularly acute and structurally intertwined with the region's accession trajectory. Among these challenges, waste management stands out as a domain where domestic shortcomings, regional spillovers, and EU expectations intersect in ways that make the field both a pressure point and a potential catalyst for deeper integration.

Waste generation has grown steadily as urbanization, consumption patterns, and economic activity have increased. Yet waste management systems have not kept pace with these developments, resulting in chronic reliance on landfilling, widespread illegal dumping, rudimentary and even nonexistent recycling practices, and insufficient institutional oversight. These deficiencies have severe consequences for environmental quality, public health, and the region's economic prospects, while also creating transboundary effects that directly affect neighbouring states and EU member countries. As a result, waste management has become a domain where the need for coordinated

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action is not theoretical but immediate and observable. At the same time, the EU has significantly strengthened its environmental *acquis* in recent years, culminating in the European Green Deal and its associated frameworks aimed at achieving climate neutrality, advancing a circular economy, and reducing pollution.

Because the EU enlargement process requires alignment with the *acquis*, environmental reforms, especially in waste management, form a core component of the Western Balkans' accession efforts. This creates both obligations and opportunities: while states must undertake costly and complex reforms, they are also supported by EU funding, technical assistance, and participation in regional mechanisms that build administrative capacity and foster cooperation.

This article examines how waste management can function as a strategically relevant yet underestimated driver of European integration in the Western Balkans. It aims to show how environmental pressures can create functional incentives for cooperation and how real-life initiatives such as a river-basin clean-up collaboration or the modernisation of a dangerous landfill, can deliver results even where other reform areas stall. Although the region faces persistent deficits in waste infrastructure, regulatory enforcement, and public environmental awareness, these challenges intersect directly with EU accession obligations. The study's scope includes all six Western Balkan countries and focuses on how environmental pressures, EU conditionality, and cross-border ecological interdependence shape alignment with EU standards.

The objectives of the article are to identify how waste management generates functional spillovers, encourages administrative Europeanisation, and fosters regional environmental cooperation. The guiding hypothesis is that waste governance serves as a practical entry point for European integration, advancing institutional alignment and cooperation even when political progress is limited. The study draws on both quantitative and qualitative data from academic literature, EU reports, regional data sources, and two illustrative case studies: the Drina River cleanup initiatives and the redevelopment of Serbia's Vinča landfill. The utility of this research lies in highlighting how the environmental sector, especially waste management can offer tangible pathways for supporting the EU accession process. Waste management emerges not as a peripheral issue, but as a strategically important component of the region's European trajectory.

2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding the relevance of waste management to European integration in the Western Balkans requires situating the issue within broader theories of regional cooperation and EU enlargement. Three perspectives are particularly useful: neofunctionalism and its concept of spillover, institutionalist accounts of administrative Europeanisation, and the role of environmental governance in generating interdependence. Together, these frameworks help explain why technical policy areas can become significant drivers of integration.

Neofunctionalism, one of the foundational theories of European integration, argues that cooperation in one sector can generate spillover effects that gradually extend integration into adjacent policy areas and institutions (Dunn, 2012). Integration often begins in domains that are non-political and administrative, but as the web of interdependencies grow, states face pressures to coordinate more broadly and the process itself becomes transformative and integrative (Niemann et al., 2019). Waste management fits this logic closely. It is a technical and heavily regulated sector, marked by strong cross-border externalities: inadequate disposal in one country can degrade rivers, soil,

and air across the entire region. Such problems cannot be addressed through unilateral action alone and therefore create incentives for shared standards, joint monitoring, and forms of delegated authority, just like the dynamics neofunctionalism identifies as functional spillover. In the Western Balkans, these pressures appear in the need for interoperable waste-management systems, cross-border environmental monitoring, and alignment with EU directives. Although the states in the region are not yet EU members, participation in pre-accession instruments links them to EU rules and administrative practices. Waste management thus becomes more than an environmental obligation: it functions as a process channel through which political and administrative ties with the EU deepen over time.

Another useful analytical perspective is the concept of Europeanization, which describes how EU rules and practices become embedded in non-member states focusing on their effects on domestic policy and politics (Radaelli, 2003). Europeanization can be easily visible in the environmental sector because the EU *acquis* is extensive, highly technical, and requires strong administrative capacities for implementation. In the Western Balkans, states must not only transpose EU directives into national legislation but also build or adapt institutions capable of enforcing them: environmental agencies, inspectorates, and municipal waste services. Despite showing commitment in aligning with the EU's environment *acquis*, there are serious delays and incontestable need for action (Belis et al., 2024). Waste management can operate as an entry point for administrative Europeanization, embedding EU governance practices into domestic structures and creating lasting forms of cooperation that support the broader accession process. These reforms can produce integrative effects well before accession. Civil servants adopt EU terminology, planning instruments, and procedural routines; municipalities work with external experts and EU bodies; and regulatory expectations increasingly resemble those in member states.

A third conceptual perspective centres on environmental governance as a driver of cross-border cooperation and European Integration (L. M. Brown, n.d.). Ecological challenges, particularly those involving air, water, and waste, do not conform to territorial boundaries and therefore can incentivize states to participate in joint solutions. This is especially true in regions with shared river basins, connected ecosystems, or overlapping pollution pathways, all of which characterize the Western Balkans. In this framework, waste is understood as part of a broader ecological system in which actions in one country produce consequences for others. Floating waste in rivers, landfill fires that release airborne toxins, and cross-border illegal waste trafficking all create interdependence that cannot be addressed by unilateral solutions. These dynamics necessitate cooperative governance arrangements that facilitate information exchange, shared monitoring, capacity building, and coordinated infrastructure planning. Because waste management is technocratic and materially grounded, it can be less susceptible to nationalist rhetoric or political obstruction. This resilience makes the environmental sector one of the few domains in which consistent regional progress is possible, even when political relations fluctuate.

Bringing these theoretical strands together, several characteristics make waste management particularly suitable as a driver of European integration. It is a technocratic rather than ideologically charged issue, making it less vulnerable to political obstruction. Its impacts can be immediately visible, giving citizens a clear sense of the benefits of reform. Waste management can also have the power to generate natural spillover effects,

necessitating cooperation across related sectors such as water, public health and municipal governance. It also requires long term financial and administrative planning, which aligns domestic processes with EU standards. Moreover, it can build cross border cooperation, reinforcing regional stability and interdependence. These characteristics explain why waste management has emerged as one of the few environmental sectors where the Western Balkans engage in regional cooperation platforms, participate in joint projects, and mobilize EU resources effectively.

3. WASTE MANAGEMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES AND REGIONAL DYNAMICS

Waste management in the Western Balkans reflects a combination of historical legacies, economic constraints, and institutional shortcomings that collectively differentiate the region from most EU member states. While progress has been made over the last two decades, the sector continues to face systemic obstacles ranging from inadequate infrastructure, lack of data, to weak enforcement of environmental regulations, calling for more cooperation inside the region (Belis et al., 2024:59). This section examines these challenges in greater depth, situating them within broader regional patterns while highlighting the ways in which they intersect with European integration processes.

The contemporary waste-management landscape in the Western Balkans cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the region's political and economic trajectory. The dissolution of Yugoslavia and subsequent conflicts of the 1990s created severe disruptions to public administration, environmental services, and municipal governance. This historical context resulted in an infrastructure deficit in numerous domains, among them the environmental sector. As a result, the Western Balkans entered the EU accession process with far weaker environmental systems than most previous enlargement rounds. This context has shaped the pace and complexity of reforms in the waste sector and has amplified the importance of EU assistance.

Waste management typically involves a broad range of stakeholders: environmental ministries, public utilities, inspectorates, local governments, inter-municipal companies, and private contractors. As it can be seen in the Revised Action Plan for Implementation of the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans between 2025-2030, there is a tremendous amount of work and harmonisation left to implement. As stipulated in the revision of pillar 2, the Balkan 6 should adopt Extended Producer Responsibility schemes, align with the minimum standards of the EU Waste Framework Directive, adopt Waste Management Plans with targets and investments in line with the waste hierarchy, raise consumer awareness, aim to stop using single-use plastics, and set up monitoring mechanisms (Regional Cooperation Council, 2025).

One of the defining features of waste management in the Western Balkans is the heavy reliance on landfilling as the primary disposal method. Despite EU requirements to reduce landfill dependency and increase recycling and waste-prevention measures, most Western Balkan countries continue to send the majority of their municipal waste to landfills—many of which fail to meet EU environmental standards (European Environment Agency, 2022). The region faces several interconnected problems such as: insufficient sanitary landfills, overflowing and non-compliant disposal sites, illegal and unregulated dumpsites and very limited recycling infrastructure (European Environment Agency, 2022). This infrastructure deficit reflects decades of underinvestment, but it also

highlights the scale of the reforms required to align with EU standards. The construction of regional landfills, transfer stations, sorting lines, and recycling facilities demands substantial financial resources, mostly beyond the budgets of local governments. This financial dependency reinforces the necessity of EU funding mechanisms such as the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, underlining once again the integrative function of environmental governance.

Waste management reforms also face economic and societal challenges. Municipal waste fees are often too low to cover operational costs, leading to chronic underfunding of public utilities (European Environment Agency, 2022). In many Western Balkan countries, trust in public institutions remains relatively low (Balkan Barometer 2024. Public Opinion, 2024:73), so citizens would often be reluctant to pay higher fees for services they perceive as inefficient or coming from unreliable sources. Furthermore, public perception of environmental issues remains low, with a significant portion of the population perceiving them at the bottom of the list of concerns(Balkan Barometer 2024. Public Opinion, 2024:15). If inquired directly about environmental issues, most respondents' concerns were related to air and water pollution, followed by poor waste management, especially in Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia (Balkan Barometer 2024. Public Opinion, 2024:69).

While awareness campaigns have been implemented across the region, survey data indicate that household waste separation is gravely lagging behind not only compared to European standards, but also to the rest of the world. Kosovo, Montenegro, and Albania rank among the top ten countries globally where respondents report not separating household waste before disposal (World Risk Poll 2024 Report, 2024:12). Furthermore, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and North Macedonia are all listed among the top eight countries where waste is collected but not separated at the source (World Risk Poll 2024 Report, 2024:33) These attitudinal and economic barriers highlight another reason why waste management is relevant to the European integration process: successful reforms require engagement with civil society, private sector actors, and local communities. A multi-level engagement mirrors the participatory governance models promoted by the EU and supports the development of democratic practices in public administration.

Although each Western Balkan country faces domestic obstacles, many waste-related problems have a regional character. Rivers such as the Drina and its tributaries, transport floating waste across multiple Balkan borders, creating visible and often internationally reported environmental incidents (Petkovic, 2025). Landfill fires, often happening in illegal and corruption woven landfills such as the case in Albania's Elbasan and Vlora (Zhabin, 2025), are common in parts of the region, releasing air pollutants that can travel across national boundaries. These shared vulnerabilities reinforce the need for regional cooperation. Environmental challenges do not adhere to political borders, and unilateral solutions are often ineffective.

As such, waste management becomes a natural platform for cooperation, even among governments with political disagreements. This dynamic is particularly important in the Western Balkans, where environmental issues can serve as one of the few areas in which sustained regional collaboration is politically feasible. Cross-border vulnerabilities also increase the relevance of EU involvement. Regional environmental problems directly affect EU candidate and potential candidate states, which in turn affect the Union's own environmental resilience. Therefore, waste management gains

prominence not only as a domestic governance issue but also as a matter of regional stability and EU environmental security.

Taken together, the structural challenges of waste management in the Western Balkans—historical legacies, institutional weakness, underdeveloped infrastructure, economic constraints, and transboundary environmental risks—create a complex landscape in which domestic reforms alone are insufficient. Each of these challenges points toward the necessity of deeper cooperation, stronger institutions, and sustained financial investment. This is precisely where the European Union becomes indispensable. Waste management is not merely an environmental problem but a domain that illustrates the broader dynamics of integration, conditionality, administrative alignment, and regional interdependence.

4. THE EUROPEAN UNION'S ROLE AND THE MECHANISMS OF INTEGRATION THROUGH ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

The European Union has long understood that environmental policy carries a heavy burden in integration. In the Western Balkans, the EU has strategically positioned waste management as a sector through which it can advance both environmental improvements and broader Europeanisation objectives. This section examines the specific mechanisms through which the EU exercises influence—conditionality, capacity-building, financial assistance, policy diffusion, and regional cooperation frameworks—and illustrates how these mechanisms make waste management an important accelerator of integration.

Environmental harmonisation is embedded in the accession process through Chapter 27 of the *acquis communautaire*, which covers environment and climate change (*European Commission*, 2012). The demands of Chapter 27 are among the most extensive and costly in the entire *acquis*, requiring candidate countries to transpose dozens of directives, implement monitoring and reporting systems, and upgrade infrastructure to EU standards. This makes the environment one of the most influential chapters in terms of shaping domestic governance. Waste management is central to this chapter, as it involves the Waste Framework Directive, the Landfill Directive, the Packaging and Waste Packaging Directive, the End-of-Life Vehicles Directive, and related regulations. For Western Balkan governments, compliance with these directives requires comprehensive legislative reforms, long-term planning, and the establishment of functional waste-management systems. Thus, environmental conditionality becomes a powerful driver of reform: governments seeking to advance in accession negotiations must demonstrate credible progress in waste legislation, enforcement, and infrastructure planning.

This dynamic is particularly significant in the Western Balkans, where progress in other policy areas can often be hampered by ideological disputes or governance shortcomings. Because waste-related risks are concrete, visible, and measurable, they can lend themselves more naturally to technocratic forms of governance and empirical assessment. For the EU, this makes waste management a reliable channel for promoting legal approximation and institutional improvements in contexts that might otherwise be politically contentious.

The EU's financial instruments constitute another major mechanism through which environmental integration advances. The Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance can be a key source of funding for environmental projects in the Western Balkans. Window 3 of the IPA III funds between 2021 and 2027 are allocated to green agenda and

sustainable connectivity with a 42% of the total funds, while window 5 is open for cross border waste and energy facilities, albeit with just 3.5% of the total operational budget (EuroAccess, n.d.). In Western Balkan countries, environmental infrastructure development would be impossible without any EU support. Municipal budgets remain constrained, and large scale waste management projects such as the construction of EU-standard landfills or sorting facilities require financial resources that far exceed local capacities. The EU's role as the principal funder not only enables these projects to occur but also ensures that they conform to EU standards. Importantly, EU financial assistance also encourages inter-municipal cooperation. Because many projects require regional coordination to be eligible for funding, local governments are incentivised to collaborate, share administrative responsibilities, and adopt integrated waste-management plans. In this way, EU funding not only builds infrastructure but also reshapes institutional relationships, strengthening multi-level governance in line with EU models.

Administrative capacity is especially relevant in the Western Balkans, where local and national institutions often struggle with weak coordination mechanisms, coherent policy proposals and lags in transparency (OECD, 2024). EU-driven capacity-building can directly address these weaknesses. By strengthening the state apparatus in ways that align with EU practices, capacity-building can contribute to the broader process of accession-preparedness. This mechanism also has the potential to reduce political resistance to reform. When civil servants and municipal managers develop competence and confidence in managing modern waste systems, they become practitioners, not merely implementers, of Europeanisation. Thus, capacity-building contributes to internalising EU norms and making reform sustainable beyond immediate accession incentives.

Because environmental challenges and potential solutions tend to be similar across borders, states in the region face comparable pressures to modernise their systems and align with EU norms. To support this, the EU has established and funded several regional cooperation platforms—including the Regional Cooperation Council, the Western Balkans Investment Framework, and the Environment and Climate Regional Accession Network through which officials can exchange best practices, coordinate reform strategies, and address common implementation challenges related to EU environmental legislation.

Over time, these mechanisms can collectively promote increasing convergence in administrative procedures, professional norms, and policy expectations across the region. The cumulative effect is a form of horizontal Europeanisation, in which Western Balkan states integrate not only through their vertical relationship with the EU but also through peer-to-peer cooperation with one another. This is a regional learning environment structured and incentivised by EU frameworks which can embed European standards more deeply and sustainably within national waste-management systems.

Another reason why the EU could favour waste management as an integrative sector is that it tends to be less politicised than issues such as minority rights, constitutional reforms, or foreign policy alignment. Environmental reforms, especially in waste, are grounded in technical, scientific, and measurable criteria, making them less vulnerable to nationalist rhetoric, identity or political obstruction. Waste management cannot be effectively reformed through symbolic gestures or rhetorical commitments; it requires measurable progress, infrastructure development, continuous financing, and regulatory enforcement. This makes it an ideal platform for embedding European norms

and practices at the core of domestic governance. Because waste systems are long-term and investment-intensive, they naturally create extended relationships between local institutions and EU counterparts. In this sense, waste management has the potential to generate a functional spillover: improvements in one area of environmental governance stimulate reforms in adjacent sectors, such as water management, industrial pollution control, public health, and municipal administration. Over time, these cumulative reforms expand the scope of Europeanisation and strengthen institutional resilience across the governance spectrum. Waste management thus becomes both a driver and a manifestation of deeper integration trends in the region.

5. WASTE-MANAGEMENT-DRIVEN COOPERATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

This section looks at examples in which waste management that not only illustrate the environmental challenges confronting the Western Balkans but has also served as a catalyst for cooperation, administrative reform, and alignment with EU standards. While the region continues to face severe structural obstacles, there are projects which indicate that environmental pressures can drive integrative policy outcomes, supported by EU funding, technical assistance, and regional mechanisms. These examples show how environmental problems, particularly those related to waste, can generate shared interests, provide entry points for institutional cooperation, and reinforce Europeanisation processes.

5.1. Transboundary Cooperation in the Drina River Basin

The Drina River Basin, shared by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia, represents one of the most visible and widely discussed examples of transboundary waste pollution in the Western Balkans. The river regularly accumulates large quantities of floating waste, particularly during periods of heavy rainfall and snowmelt, when a dense carpet of waste from poorly managed or illegal dumps is washed into tributaries before being carried downstream (H. Brown, 2023). Beginning in the late 2010s, the three riparian countries initiated a series of coordinated actions supported by the EU, World Bank, Global Environment Facility and the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (World Bank, 2023). This cooperation resulted in developing a strategic action plan endorsed by the three countries in 2021, an integrated environmental monitoring system, the Drina Task Force was formed as an inter-agency for cooperation, along with small grants, pilot projects and public awareness campaign to protect the basin (World Bank, 2023).

These efforts encouraged administrative convergence with EU waste directives, particularly regarding landfill monitoring and river-basin management. The Drina case demonstrates how transboundary pollution creates unavoidable incentives for cooperation regardless of political tensions among states. It also shows how environmental crises can elevate EU involvement, reinforcing the mutual dependence that underpins European integration in the region. Although initial measures have been implemented, the river continues to experience significant amounts of floating waste, underscoring the ongoing need to advance and intensify cooperative efforts.

5.2. Serbia's Vinča Landfill Redevelopment

A second example illustrates how a project initiated by integration driven reform led to the transformation of Serbia's Vinča landfill to an energy from waste facility. For

decades, Vinča functioned as one of Europe's largest uncontrolled landfills, receiving a large portion of Belgrade's municipal waste without adequate environmental protection (Beo Čista Energija, n.d.). This project was a first of its kind in the Balkan region, as an international cooperation between public and private sectors, Serbian, Japanese and French parties, receiving financial help from the International Finance Corporation, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and also the Austrian Development Bank. Serbia's experience at Vinča demonstrates that even within politically sensitive settings, technical cooperation and regulatory alignment in the waste sector can advance both environmental outcomes and the administrative adjustments required for EU membership. Nevertheless, the project faced substantial criticism in 2019. Analysts argued that private interests ultimately outweighed longer-term sustainability goals associated with EU waste-management standards. The project's emphasis on direct waste incineration—contrary to the EU's preferred hierarchy—required amendments to the landfill's Detailed Regulation Plan to legitimise this approach (Radovanović, 2019). Moreover, Serbia's misapplication of the EU's 2009 Renewable Energy Directive, and its failure to account for the updated Renewable Energy Directive II, enabled the private operator, Beo Čista Energija, to obtain 12-year subsidies for waste incineration (Radovanović, 2019). The company was even granted temporary privileged-producer status before all legal conditions had been met, illustrating the extent to which regulatory discretion favoured the private partner.

5.3. The Integrative Potential of Waste Management

Taken together, the Drina River Basin initiatives and the Vinča landfill, show that waste management is not a peripheral or technical domain but an arena in which tangible forms of cooperation materialise. First, environmental necessity often creates political feasibility: governments find it difficult to ignore visible, transboundary harms caused by unmanaged waste, making environmental cooperation more attainable than cooperation in more politically sensitive fields. Second, EU involvement is structurally embedded throughout the process. Technical assistance, financial mechanisms, and acquis-related conditionality shape national and local policies at every stage, guiding reforms and creating incentives for long-term alignment with European standards. Municipalities gain experience with EU-compatible waste-management models, especially through the development of regional landfills and inter-municipal cooperation structures that require coordination, transparency, and technical expertise.

Finally, waste-management improvements carry significant public visibility, which contributes to democratic legitimacy. Because citizens can directly observe cleaner riverbanks, reduced illegal dumping, or improved waste-collection services, the benefits of alignment with EU norms become more concrete and tangible than in many abstract or highly technical policy areas. These case studies therefore illustrate that waste management is not only an environmental concern but also a meaningful driver of Europeanisation, capacity-building, and regional cooperation in the Western Balkans.

6. WHY WASTE MANAGEMENT MATTERS FOR THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Waste management occupies a unique position within the broader landscape of European integration in the Western Balkans. Although it is sometimes viewed as a technocratic or low-politics policy area, its strategic relevance becomes clear when examined through the lens of institutional capacity-building, regional stability, public

legitimacy, and policy convergence. This section synthesises the preceding analysis to demonstrate why waste management, more than many other environmental domains, can serve as a catalyst for integration and why it will continue to shape the trajectory of EU–Western Balkans relations in the coming years.

One of the core arguments emerging from this study is that waste management serves as a litmus test for readiness to join the European Union. Unlike domains where legislative compliance alone may suffice, waste management requires the full spectrum of public-administration competencies: long-term planning, inter-municipal coordination, financial management, monitoring, enforcement, and public communication. Success in waste governance thus provides a reliable indicator of a state's institutional maturity. For the EU, this makes the waste sector a valuable diagnostic tool. Progress in implementing the Waste Framework Directive or constructing compliant landfills signals that a candidate country can plan strategically with sustainability in mind, absorb EU funds effectively, and maintain regulatory discipline.

Unlike policy areas where the benefits of Europeanisation are abstract or long-term, the waste sector can produce visible, concrete outcomes that citizens and local governments can directly experience. Improvements such as cleaner public spaces, the closure of illegal dumpsites, new recycling infrastructure, and reduced river pollution serve as material evidence of what EU alignment can deliver. This tangibility is significant in the Western Balkans, where public scepticism toward government institutions and enlargement promises remains widespread. This generates bottom-up legitimacy for the accession process, a dynamic that is often lacking in domains associated with constitutional reform, judicial restructuring, or foreign policy alignment. Waste management thus represents a rare domain where the EU's influence is simultaneously technical, political, and socially visible.

Environmental issues, including waste pollution, frequently transcend political borders and challenge traditional conceptions of sovereignty. Transboundary rivers, shared mountain ecosystems, and cross-border waste flows create pressures that no single state can resolve alone. When floating waste accumulates at the Visegrad hydropower reservoir or landfill fires in one country generate pollution that drifts across borders, governments are forced to engage in dialogue. Environmental urgency can therefore soften political resistance and create openings for pragmatic collaboration.

Waste management is not only an environmental challenge but also a pivotal component of the broader transition to a circular economy. For Western Balkan states, aligning with EU waste directives requires investments in recycling systems, extended producer responsibility schemes, green technologies, and environmental services. These reforms catalyse economic modernization, contributing to the development of new markets and employment opportunities. The shift toward circular-economy principles—such as waste prevention, reuse, and resource recovery—supports broader EU environmental strategies, including the European Green Deal. Through this alignment, Western Balkan countries gain access to European value chains, funding opportunities, and technological innovations. Waste management becomes a gateway for integrating regional economies into the EU's evolving green market model.

Municipal authorities are central actors in waste management, making it one of the policy areas most directly connected to everyday governance. Reforms in this sector therefore have a pronounced impact on local-administration quality. When municipalities adopt EU-style waste-collection systems, introduce transparent tariff structures, or professionalise their public utilities, they become more efficient and accountable

institutions. This has broader implications for Europeanisation. Through waste-related reforms, local governments adopt practices that align with EU principles of subsidiarity, transparency, and participatory governance. Citizen engagement increases as households become responsible for waste separation, recycling, and adherence to new rules. Public awareness campaigns and community-based initiatives—often supported by the EU—strengthen civic responsibility and environmental consciousness. These changes contribute to the democratisation of governance practices at the local level, supporting long-term capacity-building. Waste management thus reinforces not only technical compliance with EU directives but also the social foundations of integration.

The discussion above suggests that waste management is a sector in which the strategic interests of the EU and Western Balkan states converge. For the EU, ensuring environmental security in its neighbourhood reduces cross-border risks and supports the credibility of its Green Deal ambitions. For Western Balkans countries, improving waste governance enhances public health, economic sustainability, and administrative capacity—all of which are prerequisites for successful EU accession. This convergence creates a mutually reinforcing dynamic: the EU offers financial and technical support, while Western Balkan governments gain incentives to strengthen institutions and align with the *acquis*. Waste management becomes both a means and an end of integration—a sector where Europeanisation is simultaneously a practical necessity and a pathway toward achieving long-term accession goals.

7. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that waste management, often seen as a technical policy field, functions as a meaningful driver of European integration in the Western Balkans. By examining regional trends and concrete cases such as the Drina River Basin cooperation or the Vinča landfill's transformation, the analysis demonstrates that environmental governance produces tangible outcomes that directly support the EU accession process. The findings support the hypothesis that waste management operates as an effective driver of European integration in the Western Balkans. Across the region, environmental pressures and EU requirements create spillover dynamics, while alignment with EU waste directives strengthens administrative structures. The case studies demonstrate that even amid political sensitivities, environmental projects can foster institutional convergence, regional cooperation, and improved governance.

The requirements of EU waste legislation strengthen administrative capacity, improve regulatory compliance, and create structured incentives for long-term policymaking—key indicators of accession readiness. Because waste pollution is inherently transboundary, the sector pushes governments toward cooperation even when political relations are strained. EU-funded platforms and regional initiatives facilitate shared learning, harmonisation of standards, and joint planning, contributing to a form of horizontal Europeanisation within the region. Importantly, the visible results of improved waste management—cleaner environments, better services, reduced dumping—make the benefits of EU alignment concrete for citizens, helping to build public trust in the enlargement process.

Overall, the evidence suggests that waste management is not merely an environmental responsibility but a strategic entry point for advancing integration, strengthening institutions, and fostering regional cooperation. In a context where political progress toward EU membership is often uneven, the environmental sector—and waste

governance in particular—offers a rare and practical pathway for sustained, measurable convergence with European standards.

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LESSONS ON EUROPEAN INTEGRATION THROUGH EUROPEAN FUNDS: THE CASE OF CROATIA

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Abstract. This article examines Croatia's trajectory toward European Union (EU) integration through the lens of European funding absorption, economic convergence, and political alignment. Although a latecomer compared to Central European states, Croatia rapidly progressed to full membership, adopting the euro in 2023 and joining the Schengen Area the same year. The analysis emphasizes the interplay between institutional readiness, cultural alignment, regional diplomacy, and the role of civil society. Drawing from comparative data, academic sources, and policy documents, the article explores how Croatia's unique historical positioning—bridging Central Europe and the Western Balkans—has shaped its integration outcomes. The study also highlights internal vulnerabilities such as corruption, demographic decline, and uneven development, arguing that EU accession remains a necessary but insufficient condition for deep structural transformation. Lessons from Croatia offer a nuanced perspective for other Southeast European states navigating accession or post-accession fatigue.

Keywords: Croatia, European integration, EU funds, Eurozone, Schengen Area, civil society, Southeast Europe

1. INTRODUCTION AND GEOPOLITICAL SETTING

Croatia's path toward full European Union membership has been both emblematic and exceptional. As the first country to join the EU following the 2004–2007 enlargement wave, and the only post-Yugoslav state to achieve full integration, Croatia's case invites renewed scrutiny of what it means to "belong to Europe" in both symbolic and institutional terms. Since submitting its formal application in 2003 and joining the EU in 2013, Croatia has successfully entered the Eurozone (2023) and the Schengen Area (2023), placing it among the most advanced post-socialist states in terms of legal and macroeconomic integration.

Yet these achievements conceal a complex reality. Croatia's accession negotiations were the longest in EU history, driven by concerns over corruption, war legacy, and administrative capacity. Furthermore, while the country has successfully accessed over €15 billion in EU funds since 2013, absorption has been uneven, and regional disparities persist. The central question is not only how Croatia joined, but what it has gained—and what challenges remain.

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This paper argues that Croatia's integration reflects a layered interplay of economic pragmatism, cultural identity, and strategic diplomacy. The study is structured thematically, beginning with an overview of the accession process and funding instruments, followed by an analysis of Eurozone and Schengen accession. It then explores the roles of civil society, decentralization, and cultural positioning, before turning to persistent vulnerabilities such as demographic decline and governance deficits.

By positioning Croatia as a bridge between the Western Balkans and the EU core, this article highlights how formal accession is only one stage of a longer and more uncertain transformation. The Croatian case offers valuable lessons for countries like Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Moldova—as well as for the EU itself, as it reconsiders the depth and pace of future enlargements.

2. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL ANCHORING

2.1. Evidence streams

- Document analysis: 42 EU legal acts (2004-2025); all Convergence and Cooperation & Verification Mechanism (CVM) reports on Croatia; Eurostat regional files.
- Secondary statistics: World Bank World Development Indicators; ECB Statistical Data Warehouse; Transparency International CPI; UNWTO tourist flows; NATO defence-spending tables.
- Parliamentary discourse: 220 Sabor plenary transcripts (2001-2013) coded for identity frames by the Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO, 2023).
- Process tracing: four “critical junctures”—Pelješac Bridge financing decision (2017), Krk LNG terminal inauguration (2020), Council vote on Schengen (8 Dec 2022), EC/ECB green-light for Bulgaria’s euro adoption (4 Jun 2025).

2.2. Theoretical lenses

- Europeanisation via conditionality (Grabbe 2006: 14; Elbasani 2013: 89) explains how incentives shape legal transposition and institution-building.
 - Post-functionalism identity politics (Hooghe & Marks 2009: 14) highlights how culturally resonant frames accelerate or obstruct compliance.
 - Good-governance traps (Mungiu-Pippidi 2016: 4) diagnose why corruption and regional disparity persist after accession.

3. FROM CONDITIONALITY TO MACRO-CONVERGENCE

3.1. Benchmarks and negotiations

Croatia began accession talks in October 2005, opening 35 *acquis* chapters—29 subject to opening and closing benchmarks. These required demonstration of sustained anti-corruption investigations (Chapter 23) and protection of minority rights (Chapter 24) before the European Council would allow final closure. The “benchmark double-lock” lengthened negotiations to eight years but embedded durable institutions: the USKOK anti-corruption bureau gained investigative autonomy; a Vocational Training Centre for minority police recruits opened in Bjelovar.

3.2. Rule-of-law outcomes

According to USKOK data, convictions for “abuse of office” rose from 12% (2004–2008) to 45% (2011–2013), as trials of high-profile figures—including former

Prime Minister Ivo Sanader—initially bolstered public trust. However, by 2022, the conviction rate had dropped to 31%, illustrating a loss of reform momentum commonly observed after EU accession, when conditionality weakens and incentives lose their effectiveness (Sedelmeier, 2011: 6). Brussels now relies on the Rule-of-Law Conditionality Regulation (2021) and Recovery and Resilience Facility milestones to sustain pressure.

3.3. Administrative capacity and fund absorption

The Central Finance and Contracting Agency (CFFCA) merged pre-accession (IPA) and cohesion procedures, digitalising tenders through the EOJN portal. Payment cycles shrank from 230 days (2013) to 96 days (2020), propelling Croatia to an 82 % absorption rate in the 2014-2020 budget period—easily outpacing Romania and Bulgaria.

4. ECONOMIC READINESS AND EURO-ZONE ACCESSION – A DEEP DIVE

Croatia's adoption of the euro on January 1, 2023, marked a significant milestone in its European trajectory, positioning it as the 20th member of the Eurozone. While the timeline appeared rapid, the country's transition was the result of years of structural reforms, fiscal discipline, and strategic alignment with European Central Bank (ECB) convergence criteria.

4.1. Macroeconomic Fundamentals and Monetary Policy Convergence

Croatia's path to euro adoption was facilitated by a high degree of informal euroization: by 2020, over 65% of bank deposits and nearly 90% of corporate loans were denominated in euros. This significantly reduced the risks and public apprehension surrounding currency transition. Moreover, Croatia entered the Exchange Rate Mechanism II (ERM II) in July 2020, committing to maintain its currency exchange rate within a ±15% fluctuation band. In practice, the kuna remained tightly pegged at 7.53450 HRK per euro, demonstrating stability well within the expected thresholds (ECB, 2022).

The country consistently met the Maastricht criteria:

- Inflation remained moderate (4.8% annual average in 2022), within the reference value.
- Fiscal deficit declined below 3% of GDP before the COVID-19 crisis and returned to compliance shortly thereafter.
- Public debt dropped from 84% of GDP in 2015 to 68% by late 2022, following sustained fiscal consolidation (IMF, 2023).

These indicators demonstrated not only formal compliance but also resilience in the face of external shocks.

4.2. Post-Adoption Impacts and Strategic Benefits

The euro changeover brought tangible macroeconomic and political benefits:

- Elimination of currency risk enhanced investor confidence and reduced costs for cross-border transactions.
- Improved credit ratings from Moody's and Standard & Poor's followed shortly after adoption.
- Deeper market integration enabled Croatian firms to operate with reduced transaction costs and lower administrative burdens across the EU.

Critically, inflation fears linked to the euro were largely unfounded. A 2023 ECB blog reported that while food and service prices rose marginally, the overall inflation differential attributable to the euro changeover was limited and temporary.

However, Croatia also faced trade-offs. By relinquishing monetary policy autonomy, it had to strengthen fiscal tools and enhance labor market flexibility. The government introduced compensatory mechanisms—such as inflation-adjusted pensions and subsidies for vulnerable groups—to mitigate the short-term distributional impact of currency transition.

4.3. Bulgaria's Upcoming Accession

Croatia's experience now serves as a reference for Bulgaria, which, according to the European Commission (2024), meets the four Maastricht criteria and is preparing to adopt the euro on January 1, 2026. This shift may rebalance monetary dynamics in Southeast Europe and reinforce Croatia's role as a regional economic model.

5. SCHENGEN INTEGRATION AND REGIONAL MOBILITY – INFRASTRUCTURE MEETS DIPLOMACY

Croatia's entry into the Schengen Area on January 1, 2023, consolidated its position within the EU's core institutional architecture. The accession came after years of investment in border management and legal harmonization, and positioned Croatia as a transit and security hub for both tourism and logistics.

5.1. Administrative Preparation and Technological Upgrades

Croatia's path to Schengen membership was paved by significant investments:

- Over €300 million in funding (via ERDF and the Internal Security Fund) was allocated between 2016 and 2022 to upgrade border infrastructure.
- More than 6,000 smart surveillance cameras, biometric passport scanners, and EUROSUR-compliant monitoring systems were installed along borders with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.
- Air and sea ports, especially in Zagreb, Split, and Dubrovnik, underwent major digitization to comply with Schengen Entry/Exit System (EES) standards.

These upgrades enabled Croatia to meet the stringent conditions laid out in the 2019 Schengen Evaluation Report, earning political support from key EU states.

5.2. Economic Spillovers and Cross-Border Efficiency

Schengen membership has already produced measurable outcomes:

- Tourism flows increased by 18% during the spring and fall of 2023, especially from Slovenia, Austria, and Germany, with over 2.5 million additional overnight stays.
- Logistics efficiency improved: the average customs processing time for freight trucks decreased by over 50% on routes connecting the Port of Rijeka with Hungary and Austria.

These developments highlight Croatia's transformation from a peripheral border state to an internal mobility hub, reinforcing its maritime and trade significance.

5.3. Regional Leadership and Diplomatic Leverage

Beyond technical compliance, Croatia leveraged Schengen entry to strengthen its diplomatic clout. It has advocated for Schengen enlargement to include Romania and Bulgaria, whose land borders were finally opened in January 2025.

Croatia now acts as a “Schengen gatekeeper” for the Western Balkans, playing a strategic role in EU external border policy and regional stabilization. This status also carries responsibilities—particularly in managing asylum flows and cross-border crime—which will test Croatia’s institutional robustness and solidarity within the EU framework.

6. CULTURAL IDENTITY AND RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

Catholicism’s political significance in Croatia predates the modern state: the seven-century-old Zagreb Archdiocese long framed Croatia as a frontier of Latin Christendom vis-à-vis the Ottoman and later Habsburg empires. That self-image was revitalised after 1991, when Cardinal Franjo Kuharić urged a “moral reconstruction in European partnership.” Two papal visits (John Paul II in 1994 and 1998) were broadcast live and drew over 700,000 participants—roughly one-sixth of the national population—embedding EU aspirations into popular religiosity.

Quantitative discourse analysis (IRMO, 2023) shows that during the 2011–2013 negotiation sprint, references to kršćanska Europa (“Christian Europe”) appeared in 41% of parliamentary speeches, up from just 9% in 2001. Diplomatically, shared Catholic heritage fostered normative alignment with Austria, Poland and Slovakia—countries that often co-sponsored position papers on social policy, education, and environmental regulation during Council negotiations.

However, this symbolic capital also produced internal tensions. The 2013 constitutional referendum defining marriage strictly as heterosexual was framed by proponents as a “European Christian value” defense, while critics saw it as a backlash against EU rights norms. President Josipović’s 2014 Life Partnership Act—legalising same-sex civil unions—was an attempt to harmonise Croatia’s legal framework with EU standards, while appealing to the inclusive social teachings of Catholic doctrine. This illustrates a Janus-faced identity: religious affinity can accelerate alignment, but may also complicate liberalisation.

Cross-confessional programs funded by Erasmus+ now run in Vukovar and Rijeka, fostering dialogue between Catholic and Orthodox youth. Religion thus remains both a political resource and a normative tension point in Croatia’s post-accession governance.

7. CIVIL SOCIETY AND DECENTRALISED GOVERNANCE

Croatia’s civil society has matured substantially under EU influence, though not evenly. According to the Balkan Civil Society Development Network (2022), Croatia scores 56/100 on civic space—higher than Romania or Bulgaria but trailing behind Slovenia. The growth of NGOs has been geographically uneven, concentrated heavily in Zagreb and coastal regions, with many rural areas left underserved.

EU funding has proven transformative. The European Social Fund’s Operational Programme for Human Resources allocated over €1.1 billion between 2014 and 2020, with a dedicated share for NGO capacity building. More than 8,000 NGO staff were trained in EU project management, while 63 Local Action Groups (LAGs) under the LEADER/CLLD program implemented rural revitalisation projects.

Yet, critical issues remain. Nearly 42% of CSOs report that over 80% of their funding comes from short-term grants, undermining sustainability. Watchdog organisation GONG documented that 18% of EU-funded local projects were awarded to NGOs linked to political figures, raising concerns about clientelism.

On decentralisation, counties like Istria and Primorje-Gorski Kotar have embraced participatory budgeting and smart specialisation strategies. Istria's Maker-Space for youth innovation, co-funded by the ERDF, has attracted over 12,000 visitors. Meanwhile, counties like Sisak-Moslavina struggle due to administrative deficits; a post-earthquake ERDF package in 2020 was delayed by over a year due to procurement bottlenecks.

As Corpădean (2018: 99) observes in the case of Montenegro, EU funding only becomes a tool of democratic consolidation when accompanied by genuine local ownership and political will. Croatia's regional disparities in CSO capacity reflect a similar duality: while some regions internalize EU norms and innovate with decentralised governance, others remain vulnerable to elite capture and clientelist practices.

A relevant parallel can be drawn with the trajectory of the Republic of Moldova, where—as shown by Șoproni and Petrilă (2025: 204)—civil society has actively contributed to socio-economic inclusion through EU-funded initiatives promoting employment, social enterprise, and local service development. These efforts, while externally supported, illustrate the role of NGOs in advancing integration and participation at the subnational level.

Thus, EU funding is a lever for empowerment—but only when local institutions possess adequate capacity and political independence.

8. TOURISM, SPORTS & SOFT POWER — A MULTI-LAYERED PORTFOLIO

Tourism accounts for nearly 20% of Croatia's GDP and represents its most recognisable soft-power tool. In 2023, Croatia recorded 22 million tourist arrivals—surpassing its pre-COVID peak. The “Digital Nomad Visa” (2021) was a strategic innovation, attracting over 12,000 remote workers annually, primarily from North America and Western Europe.

Cultural diplomacy initiatives also play a role. Dubrovnik's UNESCO-funded Visitor Management System uses AI to balance cruise ship arrivals, boosting per-visitor revenue while preserving heritage sites. Croatia also leveraged film tourism: HBO's Game of Thrones, shot in Dubrovnik and Split, brought in €180 million in local spending, leading to new ERDF co-financing for creative industries.

In sports, Croatia continues to punch above its weight. The national football team's consistent performance—including a second-place finish at the 2018 FIFA World Cup—elevates the country's international profile. Other sports, such as water polo and sailing, strengthen Croatia's brand as a maritime and athletic nation.

However, mono-dependence on the Adriatic coast creates vulnerabilities. Climate forecasts predict excessive summer heat by 2040, potentially deterring peak-season tourism. In response, the National Recovery Plan has earmarked €300 million to develop inland cultural routes and thermal spa networks, diversifying both geography and seasonality.

9. COMPARATIVE OUTLOOK: ROMANIA AND BULGARIA — LESSONS AT CROATIA'S FLANKS

9.1. Cohesion Policy Uptake and Governance Quality

Romania contracted € 75 billion under the 2014-2020 EU budget and spent roughly 72 % of allocations by December 2023, up from 45 % two years earlier. Yet systemic weaknesses remain. The European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) opened 11 investigations in 2022—mostly procurement-rigging in road construction and IT tenders. The European Court of Auditors (ECA 2023★) notes that half of the irregularities stem from “in-house” contracting without genuine competition.

Bulgaria, rocked by anti-corruption protests in 2020-2021, redesigned its Public Procurement Act, introduced an e-invoicing platform (BGS2P) and trimmed the VAT-gap from 16 % (2019) to 14 % (2023) (European Commission VAT Gap Study 2024★). Absorption rose to 68 %. Political instability, however—five elections in three years—delayed large-scale transport tenders, leaving € 1.7 billion in 2014-20 allocations for late re-programming.

These governance disparities reaffirm the lessons learned from Poland’s earlier success. As Petila (2018) emphasizes, Poland’s superior cohesion performance derived not merely from administrative capacity, but from early investments in interregional solidarity, pre-accession training, and structural cooperation between state agencies and non-state actors. Romania and Bulgaria, though improved, still trail these standards—especially in aligning fiscal discipline with local development outcomes.

9.2. Euro Adoption as a Governance Stress-Test

The ECB/EC Convergence Report of June 2025 confirmed Bulgaria’s compliance with all four Maastricht criteria: HICP inflation averaged 3.9 %, the fiscal deficit 1.6 % of GDP, and lev stability remained within the ERM II fluctuation band. Still, public-sector readiness is under scrutiny. Croatia’s National Bank (CNB) estimates that minting and logistics cost its own change-over € 0.5 billion; Sofia’s larger cash economy could push costs higher, testing Bulgaria’s €/BGN Cash Change-over Masterplan.

Romania, despite stronger GDP growth (4.7 % in 2024) and higher absorption, postponed its euro target date to 2029. The Fiscal Council warns that twin-deficits—budget and current-account—breach Stability-and-Growth thresholds. The contrasting strategies sharpen Croatia’s role as euro mentor: Zagreb’s Kuna/EUR “dual-display playbook” has been translated into Bulgarian and Romanian for retailer training.

9.3. Schengen Enlargement and Competitive Spill-overs

The full land, sea and air accession of Bulgaria and Romania to Schengen on 31 March 2025 ends Croatia’s brief monopoly on visa-free entry points between the Black Sea and the Adriatic. Logistic simulations by the South-East Europe Transport Observatory (SEETO 2024★) forecast a 12 % shift in container traffic from Rijeka/Koper toward Constanța and Burgas by 2028, assuming rail upgrades along Corridor IV. Croatian ports therefore push value-added services—cold-chain logistics, LNG bunkering, bonded warehousing—to retain market share.

Tourism competition will intensify, too. Bulgaria’s Black Sea resorts clocked 5.6 million international arrivals in 2023, Romania’s Danube Delta 1.5 million. With Schengen land borders removed, self-drive tourism from Poland and Hungary can reach those destinations without delays—pressuring Croatia’s inland diversification strategy (thermal spas, cultural routes) to accelerate.

10. ENDURING CHALLENGES AND STRUCTURAL DUALISM — DEEPENING THE DIAGNOSIS

10.1. Corruption and Judicial Independence

Croatia's TI-CPI score stagnates at 50/100 (2022)—unchanged since 2017. High-profile cases, such as the Mamić tax-evasion saga, expose judicial bottlenecks: appeals lasted eleven years, feeding perceptions of impunity. The European Commission's 2024 Rule-of-Law report flags scarce use of plea bargains and weak asset-recovery (only 18 % of frozen assets confiscated in 2022). A Supreme Court e-filing pilot—financed via the RRF—aims to halve backlog by 2026; disbursement of € 164 million in digital-justice funds depends on meeting that target.

10.2. Demography and Labour-Market Strain

Fertility holds at 1.45, well below the 2.1 replacement rate. Net emigration of –12 000 in 2023 continued a trend that drained 9 % of the workforce since accession. The World Bank (2023) projects a 250 000 labour shortfall by 2035, equating to 15 % of projected vacancies. The government now pilots circular-migration accords with India, the Philippines and Egypt (9 000 seasonal permits in 2024) and funds a € 2 500 return-bonus for diaspora ICT workers

10.3. Territorial and Digital Gaps

Gross Value Added per capita (2022) stands at 140 % of the EU-27 average along the Adriatic but just 55 % in Slavonia. Broadband coverage reveals the same fracture: 62 % household penetration in Slavonia versus 95 % on the coast (Eurostat regional ICT, 2024★). Energy poverty rates exceed 20 % in inner Pannonian counties. EU cohesion policy 2021-27 earmarks € 1.8 billion for “Slavonia, Baranja & Srijem” under a performance reserve: disbursement hinges on achieving 90 % broadband and 120 km/h rail upgrades by 2026.

10.4. Policy Feedback Loop

These patterns confirm what Vachudova (2014: 130) observed in her assessment of the Western Balkans: while EU leverage can successfully impose formal compliance with *acquis* requirements, genuine transformation depends on the presence of domestic coalitions capable and willing to sustain reform. In Croatia, structural divides persist despite formal alignment. Central ministries continue to monopolize access to Cohesion and Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) funds, while subnational authorities in lagging regions face chronic deficits in administrative capacity—particularly in terms of certified engineers and EU-compliant auditors—thereby limiting their ability to build and manage viable project pipelines. This uneven absorption landscape has prompted civil-society watchdogs such as GONG and the Croatian Journalists' Association (HND) to propose innovative accountability mechanisms, including a territorialised performance veto. According to this logic, infrastructure projects in wealthier counties would be temporarily halted if underperforming, lower-income regions consistently fall short of spending thresholds—thus repurposing EU funds as tools not only for convergence, but also for distributive fairness and institutional balance.

These disparities also echo broader regional patterns in EU neighbourhood policy. Poiană and Petrilă (2023: 210), in their analysis of Ukraine's democratic resilience, note that even with sustained EU support, governance bottlenecks and weak

local coalitions hinder the emergence of effective project ownership. Croatia's low-income counties risk a similar fate if absorption mechanisms remain centralised and under-professionalised, particularly in the face of growing demographic and fiscal asymmetries.

These structural shortcomings have also been linked to broader patterns observed in EU candidate and neighbouring states. Ciot (2023: 225; 2024: 160) highlights that civil society plays a dual role in the accession process—not only implementing projects but also mediating European values and institutional practices locally. However, this role depends on legal clarity, administrative maturity, and shared normative frameworks. In many peripheral regions of Croatia, such prerequisites remain fragile, which limits the transformative impact of EU leverage.

Moreover, internal divisions within civil society can obstruct integration efforts. As shown by Dolghi, Mărcuț, and Polgár (2025: 71), in the Moldovan case, civic actors are often divided along East–West allegiances, which shape perceptions and loyalties and hinder the formation of cohesive coalitions. Croatia's post-conflict regional dynamics—marked by divergent local identities and contested narratives—may produce similar obstacles to civic unity, especially when European initiatives are perceived as exogenous or politically biased.

Brie and Solcan (2025: 158) argue that identity politics continues to shape civic participation in post-socialist societies, where societal cohesion requires more than institutional reforms. Their research underlines the importance of symbolic inclusion and regional belonging. For Croatia, this suggests that future integration efforts must not only enhance absorption capacity but also address the deeper social foundations of trust and inclusion in disadvantaged areas.

11. FUTURE OF INTEGRATION IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE — STRATEGIC SCENARIOS

Croatia now plays a bridging role in the EU's Western Balkans strategy. The European Commission's 2023 Growth Plan for the Western Balkans offers €6 billion in funding, contingent on progress in alignment with the EU Single Market. Croatia supports coupling this with governance reforms—particularly in public procurement and judicial transparency.

Three plausible scenarios emerge:

1. **Fast-Track Convergence:** Countries like Serbia and Albania make rapid regulatory progress, enabling sectoral integration and customs facilitation by 2027. Croatia could serve as a logistical hub for North-South trade via the Adriatic-Ionian Corridor.

2. **Stalled Hybrid:** Political instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina or Serbia's relations with Kosovo could stall enlargement, reducing Croatia's influence and shifting EU focus to micro-level cooperation.

3. **External Fragmentation:** Rising influence from China's Belt and Road Initiative or Russian-backed energy investments could deepen divides. Croatia may respond by forming mini-lateral partnerships with Italy, Slovenia, and Greece on maritime and energy security.

Croatia has the opportunity to become a policy innovator—especially in customs modernisation, Schengen implementation, and cross-border cyber infrastructure.

12. GEOPOLITICAL OUTLOOK: ENERGY, SECURITY, DISINFORMATION — A DEEPER DIVE

Croatia's geopolitical role has evolved post-accession, especially in energy and digital security. The expansion of the Krk LNG terminal—planned to double capacity by 2027—has transformed Croatia into a strategic player in Europe's gas diversification. The country is also part of a planned Adriatic hydrogen corridor connecting Greece, Albania, and Slovenia.

Defence spending now exceeds 1.9% of GDP (NATO, 2024), with investments in French Rafale jets and Black Hawk helicopters aimed at enhancing regional deterrence. A new cybersecurity command in Osijek, co-financed through the RRF, hosts training for Bosnian and Serbian specialists.

In information warfare, Croatia's 2024 Media Literacy Strategy led to a 35% decline in Facebook disinformation reach, although Telegram and TikTok remain vulnerable. The EU's Code of Practice 2.0 now includes Croatian fact-checkers as moderators for regional content.

These developments indicate Croatia's shift from passive integration to proactive regional security actor.

13. DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT AND ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION IN THE POST-ACCESSION ERA

Croatia's path toward European integration has been marked not only by institutional transformation but also by evolving patterns of democratic participation. A key indicator of the societal impact of EU accession is voter turnout—particularly in European Parliament (EP) elections—which reflects both political engagement and the perceived legitimacy of European institutions.

In the immediate aftermath of EU accession in 2013, Croatia's participation in the EP elections (held just months later) stood at only 20.8%, one of the lowest turnouts in the EU. This trend continued in 2019, with a turnout of 29.9%, compared to the EU average of 50.6% (European Parliament, 2019). The gradual decline in voter turnout across post-communist Europe has been widely interpreted as indicative of a deepening disconnect between citizens and the evolving European political architecture. Initial phases of democratic transition were characterized by high levels of political enthusiasm and civic mobilization, which have since been replaced by growing disillusionment in the face of economic hardship, institutional volatility, and limited responsiveness of political elites (Kostadinova, 2003: 743–745). These developments challenge assumptions about the depth and sustainability of Europeanization beyond formal institutional alignment (Sedelmeier, 2011: 6).

The post-accession decline in civic enthusiasm parallels what Gherghina and Mișcoiu conceptualize as “mythological fatigue”—a symbolic exhaustion following the fulfillment of grand narratives such as the “return to Europe.” As noted in Gherasim-Proca's (2013: 185) review, this phenomenon reflects the fading of political energy once accession goals are met, revealing the growing tension between the idealistic promises of integration and the persistent inequalities of everyday governance.

Domestic elections have also been marked by fluctuating turnout. Presidential and parliamentary election participation peaked in the 1990s during the state-building years but has declined steadily since, with turnout below 53% in the 2020 parliamentary elections (Croatian State Electoral Commission, 2020). In local elections, particularly in underdeveloped regions such as Slavonia, participation remains below national

averages—fueled by political disenchantment, economic marginalization, and youth emigration.

Despite these numbers, civil society and new political actors have played a growing role in revitalizing public discourse. NGOs such as GONG (Citizens Organized to Oversee Voting) and Platforma 112 have promoted democratic accountability and transparency. Anti-corruption protests in Zagreb (2016, 2021) reflect the civic pushback against elite capture and stagnation, dynamics that persist in many post-accession states (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2016: 3).

European funding has also indirectly encouraged civic engagement through programs like Europe for Citizens and the European Social Fund, which supported local participatory projects and youth dialogues on democratic values. According to a 2022 Eurobarometer report, 61% of Croatians under 30 expressed trust in the EU, while only 38% trusted national parties—highlighting a generational split and the potential for more pro-European youth activism.

Finally, Croatia's media landscape remains polarized, and disinformation continues to affect trust in democratic processes. The European University Institute's Media Pluralism Monitor (2022) flagged concerns regarding editorial independence and political clientelism in public broadcasting, which can reinforce cynicism and voter apathy.

These dynamics underscore the complexity of democratic consolidation in a new member state. While Croatia has institutionalized core democratic structures, challenges remain in bridging the gap between formal political participation and meaningful civic engagement. The EU's role in fostering long-term democratic culture, particularly among youth and marginalized groups, will be crucial in the coming decade.

14. CONCLUSION

Croatia's path to European Union membership demonstrates both the promise and complexity of post-accession transformation. As the newest full EU member to adopt both the euro and Schengen membership, Croatia has symbolically and institutionally bridged the divide between the Western Balkans and the European core. This success is due to a convergence of factors: geopolitical positioning, cultural and religious affinity with Central European states, sustained elite consensus, and strategic use of EU pre-accession instruments.

European funding—both before and after accession—has played a critical role in transforming public infrastructure, enhancing institutional capacity, and fostering regional development. Croatia's absorption rates, while initially modest, have steadily improved, and innovative uses of EU funds in coastal and decentralized regions illustrate the potential of cohesion policy to serve not only economic, but also democratic goals.

Nonetheless, the Croatian case also reveals the limits of Europeanization. Structural dualisms—geographic, demographic, and institutional—persist. While the Adriatic coast thrives, the eastern and central regions lag behind in terms of digitalization, infrastructure, and social capital. The country continues to grapple with corruption at multiple levels, and although progress has been made in public procurement and judicial reform, public trust in institutions remains fragile.

The democratic sphere offers a mixed picture. While formal democratic institutions are well established, voter turnout remains low, especially in European Parliament elections—suggesting a disconnect between citizens and both national and EU-level politics. At the same time, Croatia has seen the rise of civil society

mobilizations and a new wave of youth activism, often oriented around issues like transparency, climate, and social equity. EU programs have supported this bottom-up engagement, but structural challenges—media partisanship, political clientelism, and a limited consultative culture—continue to hinder deep democratic consolidation.

Comparative insights from Romania and Bulgaria further illuminate Croatia's position. While all three countries have made progress in European integration, Croatia has moved faster in formal terms—adopting the euro and joining Schengen earlier. Yet this relative speed must be balanced against ongoing vulnerabilities, including demographic decline and internal inequality, which threaten the sustainability of Croatia's development model.

Looking ahead, Croatia stands at a crossroads. The tools of European integration—legal convergence, financial support, market access—have largely been deployed. The remaining challenge is societal consolidation: fostering inclusive growth, deepening democratic participation, and cultivating resilience in the face of internal and external shocks. If Croatia can pair its institutional achievements with meaningful civic renewal and equitable development, it may yet offer a compelling model for the Western Balkans and beyond.

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

*Reza TAVALLA**

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

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

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

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

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

METHODOLOGY

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

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

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

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

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

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

ROMANIAN CASE STUDY: COMMUNICATIVE DESIGN OF NATIONALIST CONTENT

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

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

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

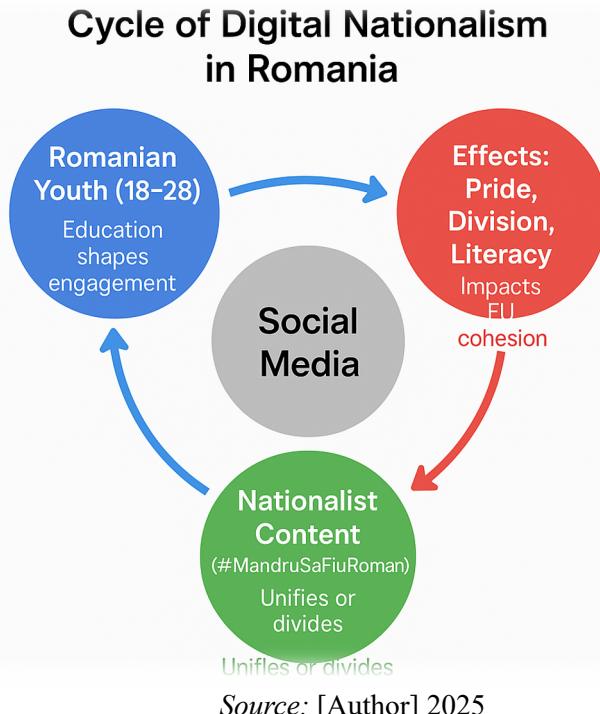
But such pride is tempered by powerful countercurrents. Suzi (Bachelor's) summarizes a common concern: "Western ideas dominate online, eclipsing our traditions." Gina Bercaru's exasperation, shared by Suzi, alludes to globalized expressions—frequently Americanized music, for example, or styles of living—that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

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

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

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

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

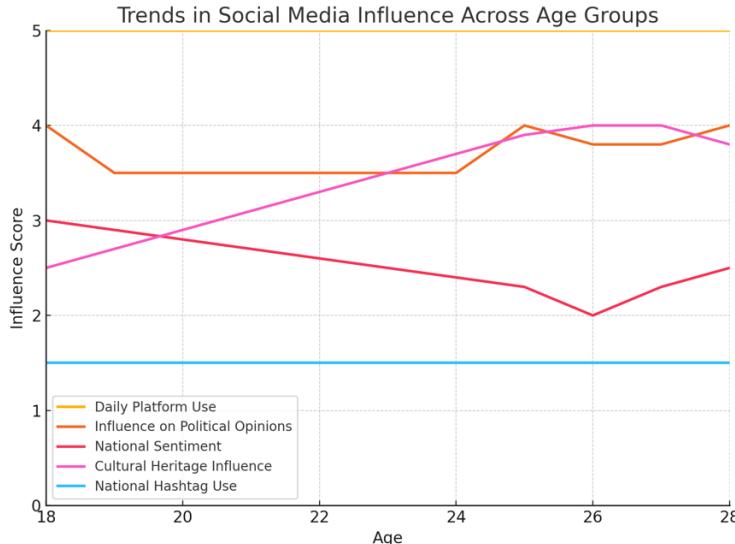


Posts like Dragomir Denisa’s (November 2022), evoking the Romanian anthem’s emotional resonance abroad, or Claudiu Târziu’s call to “love this country unconditionally,” exemplify symbolic convergence, where shared narratives foster group identity (Bormann 1985). Yet, hashtags also reveal polarization.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

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

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

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



Source: [Author] (2025)

Table 1. Key Themes from Romanian Interviews

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

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

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

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

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

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

The following is the best answer given the above information:

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

LESSONS FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS: DIGITAL NATIONALISM AND EU ACCESSION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

QUANTIFYING DIGITAL NATIONALISM: A MATHEMATICAL MODEL FOR SOCIAL MEDIA EFFECTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

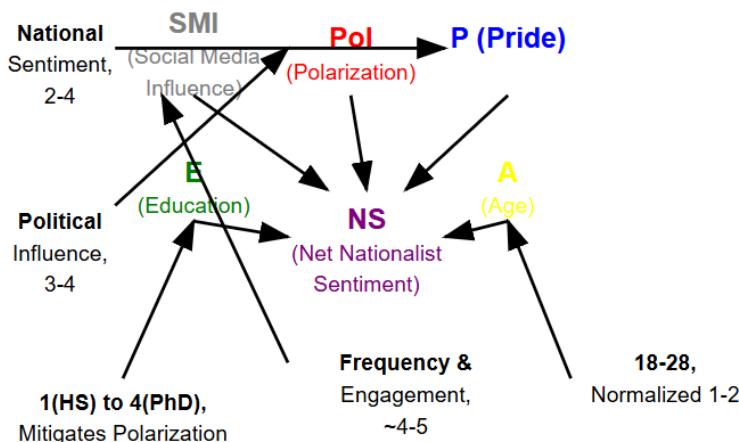
E (Education): Assigned weights based on literacy trends: high school = 1 (e.g., Bianca Roman, susceptible), Bachelor’s = 2 (e.g., Suzi, mixed), Master’s = 3 (e.g., Deisia Maria, balanced), PhD = 4 (e.g., Elena Caracior, critical). Education mitigates polarization’s negative impact ([Author] 2025).

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

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

Components of the Nationalist Sentiment Formula

$$NS = SMI \times (P - Pol) \times (E / 2)$$



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

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

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

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

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

IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

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

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

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

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

ENHANCING THE MATHEMATICAL MODEL: DEFINITIONS, VALIDATION, AND APPLICATIONS

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

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

DEFINING THE VARIABLES WITH PRECISION

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

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

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

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

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

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

Theoretical Justification for the Model's Structure

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

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

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

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

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

Expanding the Model: Analysis of All 16 Participants

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

Participant Scores Table

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

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

Key Patterns:

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

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

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

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

Validation and Comparison

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

Practical Applications

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

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

Comparative Research: Adaptable to other EU contexts.

Integration with Qualitative Insights

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

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

SIMPLIFIED EXPLANATION OF THE MATHEMATICAL MODEL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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II. CO-OPERATION AND PUBLIC POLICIES TOWARDS THE EU

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BOOSTING COOPERATION IN THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS: EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE AS A MODEL FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

Dan APĂTEANU*

***Abstract.** This article investigates how East Central Europe's (ECE) successful—though uneven—experience of European Union enlargement can help reinvigorate the Western Balkans' stalled accession process. Through a comparative review of more than two dozen academic and policy studies, it distils four interlinked lessons. First, credible and phased EU conditionality must be coupled with early “integration dividends” that keep domestic publics and reform coalitions motivated. Second, the rule of law agenda should tackle state capture up front, empowering watchdog institutions and civil society before the EU's leverage wanes. Third, regional cooperation—modelled on the Visegrád Group and now advanced through CEFTA, the Common Regional Market and the Berlin Process—acts both as rehearsal for, and condition of, EU membership. Finally, reconciliation and transitional justice initiatives are indispensable to durable stability and should be treated as core accession benchmarks. The article concludes that a coordinated regional approach, backed by a consistent EU commitment, remains the most viable path to completing Europe's unification and delivering lasting prosperity to the Western Balkans.*

Keywords: European integration, Western Balkans, EU enlargement, Regional cooperation, EU conditionality

1. INTRODUCTION

The prospect of EU membership has long been seen as the Western Balkans' path to peace and prosperity, especially since the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit declared the region's future to lie in the EU. In contrast to the stalled accession of the Western Balkans, the 2004–2007 enlargement in East-Central Europe (ECE) demonstrated the transformative power of EU integration, cementing democracy and fostering regional cooperation. The Visegrád Group exemplified how coordinated efforts could accelerate accession and sustain momentum. However, the ECE experience also revealed an enduring East–West divide in governance and economic development, offering both achievements and warnings.

Today, nearly two decades after Thessaloniki, only Croatia has joined the EU, while the rest of the region faces prolonged candidacies, weakening trust in the EU and fueling reform fatigue. Although public support for accession remains high, frustration with the slow pace has grown. Meanwhile, internal EU challenges—financial crises, Brexit, and enlargement fatigue—have eroded the Union's appetite for expansion, undermining its transformative leverage.

This paper explores how ECE's experience can inform Western Balkan integration. It asks which policies, reforms, and regional initiatives might be adapted, and

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what pitfalls must be avoided. Drawing on several studies, it distills lessons across several domains: EU conditionality, governance reforms, regional cooperation, and reconciliation. Ultimately, the paper argues that a coordinated regional approach, combined with sustained EU commitment, can help unlock the region's stalled accession and ensure a smoother path toward full European integration.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: EUROPEANIZATION, CONDITIONALITY AND REGIONAL COOPERATION

2.1. EU Enlargement as Transformation

The expansion of the EU into post-communist Europe has been studied as a powerful driver of political, economic, and legal transformation – a process often termed “*Europeanization*” (Economides & Ker-Lindsay, 2019:3). In the cases of Central and Eastern Europe, EU accession provided a *credible incentive framework* that guided reforms and helped consolidate democracy. The *Eastern enlargement of 2004–2007* is widely seen as a success in anchoring previously authoritarian states to European norms. However, with the benefit of 20 years of hindsight, scholars have also identified shortcomings. Volintiru *et al.* (2024) note that an East–West gap in the EU remains “*highly salient*,” pointing to *economic inequalities and democratic backsliding* in some new member states (Misik & Brusis, 2025:4). Earlier scholarship emphasized income convergence – and indeed the EU’s cohesion funds and internal market access enabled strong growth in many ECE countries in the 2000s. But subsequent research highlights that *political divergence* has emerged as well: challenges such as populism and illiberal governance have surfaced in Hungary, Poland, and others. This has led to critical reflections on the enlargement process. One strand of literature argues that the EU was “*not thorough or consistent enough*” in enforcing democratic criteria before admitting CEE states, thereby allowing resilient illiberal tendencies to later flourish. The lesson drawn is that *front-loading and rigorously monitoring key reforms (judicial independence, anti-corruption, minority rights)* is vital – a lesson directly relevant to the Western Balkans, where these issues are even more acute (Nechev, 2022:2).

2.2. EU Conditionality and Compliance

The principal tool the EU wields in candidate countries is *conditionality* – the requirement to adopt EU laws and meet governance standards as a condition for progress in accession. Studies on pre-accession in the Western Balkans underscore both the promise and limits of conditionality. On one hand, “*pre-accession Europeanization*” has brought tangible changes: for example, in Serbia and Kosovo the EU’s influence (through instruments like the Stabilisation and Association Agreements and missions such as EULEX) has prompted legal and administrative reforms. On the other hand, authors like Richter and Wunsch (2020:41) argue that in a context of *state capture*, EU conditionality alone has “*limited impact*” – and can even *entrench corrupt networks* by empowering incumbent elites. Their analysis of the Western Balkans suggests three problematic linkages between EU conditionality and governance: (1) external pressure for simultaneous political and economic reforms opened avenues for business oligarchs to create clientelistic networks (e.g. rapid privatizations benefitting insiders); (2) the top-down nature of EU-driven reforms sometimes *weakened domestic accountability*, sidelining local civil society and opposition voices; and (3) as long as leaders deliver formal compliance, the EU often *deals with* (and inadvertently legitimizes) those very leaders, even if they manipulate institutions or curb media freedom. Empirical evidence

from Serbia's EU trajectory supports these claims – despite meeting many EU technical benchmarks, Serbia has experienced *democratic backsliding* and concentration of power, suggesting that “*formal progress towards membership and high-level interactions with EU officials legitimize corrupt elites*” in the absence of deeper societal change. This line of critique – often encapsulated in the term “*stabilitocracy*” – holds that the EU has been too lenient with Balkan strongmen as long as they ensure regional stability, thereby undermining the transformative agenda. In response, the EU has tried to recalibrate its approach: the 2018 EU *Western Balkans Strategy* and the revised 2020 accession methodology put a much stronger emphasis on the *rule of law, judicial reform, and anti-corruption* as foundational chapters that can halt overall negotiations if progress stalls. Hoxhaj documents how the EU's new enlargement package explicitly made the fight against organized crime and corruption “*cornerstones*” of the process, learning from the lesson that *post-accession backsliding* in CEE (e.g. Poland's and Hungary's constitutional troubles) must not be repeated in the Balkans (Hoxhaj, 2021:143). Nevertheless, Hoxhaj caution that without genuine local political will – still lacking in what they describe as “*semi-autocratic systems*” – even strengthened conditionality may struggle to produce lasting change. This suggests that EU leverage has to be paired with bottom-up demand for reform, a theme we will revisit when examining *captured states* and *captured societies*.

2.3. State Capacity, Absorption, and State Capture

A recurrent theme in the literature is the *administrative and absorption capacity* of candidate countries – essentially, their ability to implement and “*absorb*” the *acquis* (the EU's legal norms) and to effectively use EU funds and opportunities. East-Central Europe faced enormous capacity-building challenges during the 1990s and early 2000s, from overhauling communist-era administrations to training judges in EU law. With extensive EU technical assistance (PHARE, twinning programs) and political will from domestic reformers, most ECE countries managed to sufficiently strengthen their institutions by 2004. The Western Balkans inherited an arguably even more difficult starting point – weaker states emerging from socialist Yugoslavia or autarkic Albania, many also *damaged by war*. Two recent studies in *Regional Science Policy & Practice* (Qorraj *et al.*, 2024:5; Qorraj *et al.*, 2025:7) analyze *absorption capacity on both sides*: the capacity of the EU to integrate new members, and the capacity of Western Balkan states to meet membership obligations. They conclude that the *delay in WB enlargement is due to a double-sided capacity gap* – on the EU side, institutional fatigue and internal crises (Brexit, financial instability) have limited the Union's “*absorption capacity*” to take in new members; on the WB side, “*limited absorption capacity is reflected by a failure to fulfill EU standards and difficulties in benefiting from EU assistance due to weak institutions and lack of political will*”. In other words, reforms on paper often outpace actual implementation in the Balkans, and even available EU funds (e.g. IPA pre-accession aid) sometimes go underutilized or have limited impact due to administrative bottlenecks. This aligns with findings by Kmezić (2020:1) that “*the transformative power of the EU is too weak to positively impact democratic and economic setbacks*” under current conditions – institutions may tick the boxes for Brussels, yet governance quality stagnates.

A particularly pernicious aspect of weak state capacity is *state capture* – where public institutions are hijacked by private interests and networks (often political-party based) for corrupt gain. The Western Balkans literature is replete with analyses of state

capture, describing environments in which ruling elites manipulate levers of power (judiciary, media regulation, public procurement) to entrench themselves. This problem is not entirely foreign to East-Central Europe (e.g. oligarchic influence in Bulgaria or Slovakia's judiciary scandals), but it is more systemic in parts of the Balkans. As noted, EU conditionality can unintentionally abet state capture if it bolsters incumbent legitimacy without breaking patronage chains. Some authors have introduced the concept of "*captured societies*", extending the idea of state capture to the societal level. In a captured society, informal patron-client ties and party loyalties pervade not just state institutions but also civil society organizations, media, and the private sector. *Cvetičanin et al. (2023:42)* argue that the Western Balkans exhibit elements of societal capture, whereby even NGOs or independent media may be co-opted into political networks, making bottom-up pressure for reform weak. This underscores a lesson from Central Europe: while EU integration requires adopting formal rules, it also crucially needs *norm internalization and genuine pluralism*. In Poland and Hungary, the erosion of checks and balances after accession revealed that formal compliance during candidacy did not guarantee deep-rooted liberal democracy. For the Balkans, then, studies urge a focus on *empowering independent institutions and civil society before accession* – to avoid importing unresolved governance pathologies into the EU.

2.4. Policy Transfer in Specific Sectors

Several works examine how particular policy domains from the CEE accession "toolbox" have been transferred (or not) to the Western Balkans. For instance, *minority rights protection* was a significant accession criterion for CEE countries, influenced by ethnic conflicts in the 1990s. Sasse (2012:17) observes that EU conditionality in Central Europe led to improved minority-language rights and anti-discrimination laws, benefiting groups like Hungarian minorities in Slovakia and Romania. These became part of the "*Copenhagen political criteria*" and were largely sustained after accession, giving minorities greater confidence under a supranational legal umbrella. In the Western Balkans, minority rights and inter-ethnic reconciliation are even more central (given the legacy of Bosnia's war, Kosovo's status, etc.). The EU has insisted on power-sharing and minority protections in peace agreements (e.g. the Ohrid Framework in North Macedonia, the Ahtisaari Plan in Kosovo). However, research notes uneven implementation – e.g. segregation in schooling persists in Bosnia, and Roma communities across the Balkans remain marginalized. Lessons from CEE suggest that *legal frameworks* (minority language use, representation quotas, cultural rights) can be transplanted, but *trust-building* takes longer. Cross-border cooperation programs have been one tool: by linking minority communities across new EU external borders (for example, Hungarian communities in Vojvodina, Serbia, with those in Hungary proper), European integration reframes ethnic ties as a bridge rather than a threat. Such initiatives, supported by EU funding, echo similar ones in CEE (e.g. Polish-German and Hungarian-Slovak reconciliation projects) and are seen as confidence-building measures that the Western Balkans should deepen.

Another sector is *environmental governance*. EU accession demands extensive alignment with environmental directives – a notorious challenge due to costly infrastructure (water treatment, waste management) and the need for new regulatory institutions. *Reforming Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) systems: Lessons from CEE* (Dusik & Sadler, 2012:8) found that Central European countries initially struggled to implement the EU's SEA Directive, often treating it as a box-ticking exercise

with weak public consultation. Over time, however, compliance improved as capacities grew and EU oversight continued post-accession. For the Western Balkans, these lessons have led to earlier intervention: EU projects have trained Balkan officials in environmental impact assessment and provided investment for infrastructure upgrades. Nonetheless, as Berisha and Cotella (2024:12) show in the realm of *spatial planning*, Europeanization in candidate countries is not automatic. They document how “*despite pervasive European influences, the evolution of spatial planning in the Western Balkans remains tethered to historical paths*,” with local planning cultures sometimes resisting participatory practices encouraged by the EU. Weak enforcement and low public awareness meant that EU spatial planning principles (integrated regional plans, stakeholder engagement) often became “*rather discursive policy interventions*” – adopted in strategy documents but not in day-to-day decision-making. This reflects a broader point in the literature: *policy transfer requires domestic ownership*. Where CEE countries treated EU norms as purely external impositions, reforms tended to be superficial; where domestic coalitions embraced them (e.g. Baltic states on environmental protection, or Slovenia on minority rights), changes were more durable. Western Balkan states thus need to cultivate internal champions for reforms – learning not just the letter of the *acquis* but the spirit, through twinning with CEE counterparts, study visits, and civil society networks spanning East and West.

2.5. Regional Cooperation as an Accession Driver

A distinct body of work focuses on *regional cooperation mechanisms*, positing that countries that work together regionally are better prepared for EU membership. Petričušić (2005:15) famously argued that “*the necessity of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans is [paramount]*,” and that the EU’s insistence on such cooperation should be seen as an opportunity, not a threat. Unlike the Central Europeans, who each largely followed their own timetable (with the Visegrád states synchronizing to some extent, but still evaluated individually by the EU), the Western Balkans were from the start grouped under the *Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP)*. The SAP explicitly linked progress to regional stability and good-neighborly relations: for instance, Article 5 of the EU’s 1999 SAP framework stressed that each country’s advance would also consider its cooperation with neighbors (e.g. on refugee returns, border disputes, trade). Petričušić noted that despite an official policy of “*own merits*” (each applicant judged on its achievements), in practice the Western Balkans have been treated with a “*more regional approach*” than Central Europe. The unresolved status of Kosovo, or the inter-ethnic governance in Bosnia, are not just bilateral issues but regional ones affecting the EU path of multiple states. Therefore, the EU has promoted initiatives like the *Stability Pact (1999)*, succeeded by the *Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)*, and the *Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA-2006)* among Western Balkan economies, as preparatory steps for EU entry. The logic is simple: *cooperation begets stability, and stability begets faster integration*. Empirical evidence backs this: Western Balkan countries with higher levels of regional trade and diplomatic engagement tended to progress more in EU negotiations than those mired in disputes.

Recent analyses by Baliqi (2021:23) and Kmezić (2020:1) take this further, arguing that “*there is no European integration without regional cooperation; in turn, there is no regional cooperation without dealing with the past*.”. Here, *transitional justice and reconciliation* are brought into the equation. Baliqi points out that the slow pace of EU accession has contributed to a “*loss of trust in state institutions, reinforced*

nationalistic sentiments, and increased youth emigration” in the Balkans. To break this cycle, the countries themselves must collaborate on addressing the legacies of conflict – e.g. jointly supporting war crimes prosecutions, truth commissions, missing persons searches – which can build mutual trust and strengthen their case for EU membership. The EU’s role, he contends, should be to act “unitedly and more determined” in resolving bilateral disputes like Serbia–Kosovo relations, and to *prioritize support for regional transitional justice initiatives* as part of the integration strategy. This view aligns with the EU’s own rhetoric: the European Commission has described regional cooperation and good-neighborly relations as essential criteria, even creating a “*Berlin Process*” (since 2014) where Western Balkan leaders meet annually (with supportive EU states) to advance connectivity and reconciliation projects.

In sum, the literature surveyed provides a multifaceted understanding of how East-Central Europe’s EU integration experience offers both *positive models and cautionary tales* for the Western Balkans. The key themes can be distilled as follows: (a) *Policy transfer and conditionality*: The “*accession toolbox*” of legal and institutional reforms can travel, but must be adapted to local conditions and rigorously enforced – especially in rule of law and anti-corruption, where earlier enlargements taught the EU to be stricter. (b) *State-building and capacity*: Building effective, transparent institutions is fundamental; ECE showed that even after membership, weak institutions can impede full convergence, so the Balkans must tackle state capture and strengthen administrative capacity pre-accession. (c) *Public attitudes and social reconciliation*: Popular support is high but fragile – maintaining it requires delivering early tangible benefits (like visa liberalization, infrastructure) and addressing nationalist narratives. CEE’s success in reducing some historical animosities (e.g. Poland-Germany) through integration suggests the Balkans can also reframe regional relations via the EU framework. (d) *Regional cooperation as catalyst*: The Visegrád countries’ coordination and the Baltic states’ cooperation facilitated their EU entries; similarly, Western Balkan cooperation (through CEFTA, RCC, and joint projects) is seen as both a requirement of and rehearsal for EU membership. We now turn to a more focused comparison of the East-Central European and Western Balkan experiences, to identify specific lessons in each of these areas.

3. FROM EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE TO THE WESTERN BALKANS: COMPARATIVE ACCESSION EXPERIENCES

3.1. Convergence and the East–West Divide in the EU

The countries of East-Central Europe (ECE) that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007 have undergone profound changes, but their experience also reveals the *limits of EU-driven convergence*. Economically, many new members enjoyed an “*accession boom*” – a period of high growth as they gained access to the single market and EU structural funds. For example, Poland and Slovakia saw GDP per capita rise significantly faster than the EU average in the decade after 2004, narrowing the gap with Western Europe. This prosperity, as Belloni (2009:340) and Sanfey & Milatovic (2020:3) note, reduced social tensions, as competition for scarce resources, which often exacerbates ethnic tensions, was less acute when economies were growing, thereby indirectly aiding minority integration and social peace. Indeed, observers often credit the EU’s cohesion policies with stabilizing new democracies by “*locking in*” economic expectations and giving even rural or poorer regions a stake in the European project (Medve-Balint et. al, 2025:5).

However, the recent scholarship cited earlier (Volintiru *et al.*, 2024:783) urges a nuanced view – while income levels have risen, *full convergence remains “intractable” in some areas*. Political developments have in some cases diverged from EU ideals: Hungary’s government, for instance, has been accused of undermining checks and balances and espousing an illiberal ideology contrary to EU values. The *very perception of an East–West divide* – a notion that the “new” Eastern members are different or lagging – has itself become “*politically consequential*”, fueling resentment and Euroscepticism if not addressed. This is a cautionary tale for Western Balkan entrants: joining the EU is not a panacea that automatically erases historical divisions or guarantees liberal democracy. As Kmezić (2020:1) argues, the current enlargement approach “*seems to be slowing down integration rather than accelerating it*”, partly because the *transformative power of the EU has weakened* in the face of internal and external shocks. In practical terms, this means Western Balkan states must over-prepare – not only meeting the minimum criteria but building resilience so that once in the EU, they continue on a positive trajectory rather than regressing.

One concrete lesson is the importance of *post-accession mechanisms*. The EU largely relied on pre-accession conditionality to shape CEE reforms and had limited tools after entry – save for the exceptional Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) imposed on Bulgaria and Romania for judiciary reforms. The mixed outcomes in ECE have led to calls for a more continuous monitoring (some suggest extending CVM-like regimes or staged accession with gradual rights). For the Western Balkans, this debate implies that *accession might be more gradual or conditional*: e.g. recent ideas include a “*phased accession*” where countries enter the single market early but full institutional membership comes later, tied to governance benchmarks. Such innovations aim to keep *momentum and oversight*, addressing the time-inconsistency problem where reforms could stall after the carrot of membership is delivered. In summary, East-Central Europe’s path shows the *rewards of integration (growth, stability)*, but also that *deep convergence* – in governance quality, democratic culture – is a generational project, not fully achieved even after 20 years. The Western Balkans, being on average less developed and with more recent conflicts, will likely need even more sustained support and vigilance to avoid an entrenched two-tier EU.

3.2. Governance, Rule of Law and State Capture

During the Eastern enlargement, governance and rule of law issues (e.g. corruption in Romania, mafia networks in the Baltics) were present, but the EU relied on future improvements, driven by the favorable geopolitical context. In hindsight, democratic backsliding prompted a tougher EU stance toward the Western Balkans. State capture is more severe in the Balkans: while most ECE states managed to build semi-autonomous institutions during transition, Western Balkan countries emerged from war and sanctions with entrenched smuggling and political-criminal networks (Kotras, 2020:7). Reports from the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network show that in Bosnia and Herzegovina, entire sectors remain under ethnically based patronage networks—a dynamic less common in countries like Poland or Czechia at accession.

ECE offers both positive and cautionary examples. Estonia and Slovenia made real anti-corruption gains pre-accession, whereas Bulgaria and Romania entered with persistent clientelism, requiring post-accession monitoring via the CVM—and Bulgaria still faces EU criticism in 2025 (Vachudova, 2019:91). Learning from this, the EU now opens and closes Chapter 23 last in the Balkans, aiming to front-load the hardest reforms.

Regional accountability is also encouraged—for example, Croatia is urged to share rule-of-law experience with neighbors.

Despite many action plans, the gap between formal compliance and real reform persists—described as “decoupling” by Richter & Wunsch (2020:41). One solution from the ECE playbook is to strengthen independent watchdogs early on. As in 1990s Hungary and Poland, Serbia and North Macedonia have created agencies like the Anti-Corruption Agency or Special Prosecutor’s Office, though their impact depends on political support. The EU’s support of Romania’s DNA post-2007 illustrates how external backing can make a difference.

Albania’s vetting of judges, launched in 2016 with EU and U.S. support, recalls CEE measures like Czech lustration or Baltic judicial tests. Though courts are now understaffed, the reform is hailed as a model, with similar processes considered in Bosnia and Montenegro. If sustained, it may become a flagship example of effective EU-backed governance reform.

In summary, when comparing governance issues, the Western Balkans might actually need to *exceed* the standards once expected of East-Central Europe in order to convince a now more cautious EU. The concept of “*strict but fair*” conditionality is frequently invoked: strict in that no compromises on core rule-of-law benchmarks are made (a reaction to earlier leniencies), but fair in offering support and acknowledging incremental progress. The literature suggests that this balance is delicate—if conditions are overly strict or seen as ever-shifting, domestic goodwill erodes; if too lenient, real change won’t occur. Therefore, lessons from both the successes and failures of ECE’s integration are guiding the Western Balkans’ approach to governance reform on the road to Brussels.

3.3. Regional Cooperation and Reconciliation: Visegrád to Berlin Process

One of the clearest lessons from East-Central Europe is the power of regional cooperation in accelerating EU integration. The Visegrád Group (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia) coordinated on reforms, negotiations, and infrastructure, which helped synchronize their accession and foster collaboration within the EU. By contrast, the Western Balkans began the 2000s with mistrust and asymmetry—some, like Croatia, feared being delayed by neighbors. As Petričušić (2005:15) noted, early resistance to the EU’s “regional approach” stemmed from fears of collective punishment. Over time, however, cooperation came to be seen as preparation rather than constraint.

The region now hosts overlapping initiatives: the RCC, CEFTA, SEECP, and the Berlin Process, alongside EU-funded cross-border cooperation (CBC) programs that build grassroots ties and reduce animosity. These mirror earlier INTERREG and Euroregion efforts in Central Europe. Still, unresolved disputes—Serbia-Kosovo, Bulgaria–North Macedonia—have hampered deeper cooperation. The EU’s precedent of conditioning accession on dispute resolution, as in Croatia–Slovenia, set a model. The 2018 Prespa Agreement between North Macedonia and Greece, hailed by scholars, illustrates how EU incentives can resolve long-standing conflicts.

Yet challenges persist. Kmezić (2020:3) and Balíqi (2021:23) call for stronger EU mediation and warn against letting disputes stall enlargement. They advocate a dual track: maintaining accession incentives while promoting compromise. Petričušić’s view that cooperation should be an “incentive” still holds true. Initiatives like the Danube Region Strategy show how current EU members and candidates can align on shared goals. Ultimately, regional cooperation is not optional—it’s a rehearsal for EU

membership, building habits of policy alignment and consultation essential for success in Brussels.

East-Central Europe's model of regional cooperation – exemplified by Visegrád and various cross-border initiatives – demonstrates both the *practical benefits* (speaking with a stronger voice, solving shared problems, building trust) and the *symbolic power* (signaling a break from the divisive past) of such collaboration. The Western Balkans have embraced this logic more slowly, but momentum is building through structures like the Berlin Process and RCC. The success of these efforts will directly affect the pace of EU integration: as one EC report put it, "*the road to Brussels runs through the region.*" In the next section, we translate these comparative observations into concrete recommendations for boosting Western Balkan cooperation and EU integration, effectively harnessing the lessons learned from the East-Central European accession wave.

4. LESSONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WESTERN BALKAN INTEGRATION

Drawing together insights from the literature and comparative analysis, we identify several key lessons from East-Central Europe that can inform strategies to *boost cooperation and accelerate EU integration* in the Western Balkans.

4.1. Credible Conditionality with Early Integration “Dividends”

One takeaway from the CEE enlargement is that EU conditionality works best when coupled with *credible rewards*. In the early 2000s, the reward of membership was near-certain for reformist CEE states, creating a powerful incentive. For today's Western Balkans, the path seems more open-ended, risking reform fatigue. The EU should therefore offer *tangible interim dividends* to keep the momentum. This could include phasing in access to certain EU programs and funds *before full membership*. For example, Western Balkan countries might join the *Schengen Area or common market sectors* gradually as they meet benchmarks, rather than waiting for the final accession date. Such incremental integration – a concept already floated in new EU proposals – would mirror how East Germans effectively joined many West German systems even before formal unification. It provides citizens and businesses early proof that the painful reforms yield benefits, thus shoring up public support. The literature by Kmezić (2020:1) supports this approach, suggesting that the current all-or-nothing model is “time-inconsistent” and slows down transformation. Early rewards might include expanded visa-free mobility (important as *5 out of 6* WB countries now have it, with Kosovo just granted in 2024), greater student and labor exchange quotas, and integration into EU transport and energy networks (the EU is already funding “connectivity” projects under the Berlin Process). *Lesson: Maintain credibility* by visibly moving goalposts closer when justified – this was crucial in ECE (e.g. early NATO entry, aid flows, fast-track memberships) and can be replicated.

4.2. Zero Tolerance for State Capture: Strengthen Checks and Balances Pre-Accession

East-Central Europe's experience, particularly the backsliding cases, teaches that any *latent governance pathologies must be tackled before EU entry*, because afterwards the EU's leverage drops. For the Balkans, this means the EU should continue its strict focus on rule-of-law benchmarks, even if it causes short-term friction with local elites. Richter

& Wunsch (2020) bluntly conclude that the EU's past leniency "*contributed to consolidation of detrimental governance patterns*". The revised conditionality (opening Chapters 23/24 first, etc.) is a step in the right direction. We recommend expanding on this by embedding *integrity and transparency requirements* across all negotiation chapters – for instance, in public procurement (Chapter 5) insist on e-procurement systems and independent oversight agencies; in judiciary (Chapter 23) require not just legal changes but a track record of prosecutions of high-level corruption *before* closing the chapter. This was not done for some CEE states, which is why figures implicated in corruption (or even organized crime ties) sometimes evaded justice until after EU entry, if ever. Additionally, the EU should bolster *independent media and civil society* as watchdogs. In CEE, EU funds and political support helped create a vibrant NGO sector that monitored governments (though later some governments pushed back). In the Balkans, the EU can increase funding to local investigative journalism (similar to how it funds cross-border media projects via the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network) and protect NGOs from harassment by making their treatment part of the political criteria. The concept of "*societal capture*", wherein entire societies are enmeshed in patronage, implies that reforms can't just be top-down – they need public demand. Thus, a lesson is to nurture a culture of *civic activism and accountability* during accession, as was seen in parts of ECE (e.g. the strong anti-corruption movements in Romania and Slovakia in the 2000s were partly enabled by EU normative pressure). *Recommendation:* The EU could even tie specific funding (say, parts of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance) to the *involvement of civil society in monitoring reforms*, echoing how participatory budgeting and oversight are encouraged in EU budget support worldwide.

4.3. Regional Cooperation as a Conditional and a Facilitator

The EU should continue to use regional cooperation both as a *yardstick* and a *means* of progress. As a yardstick, it must be clear that attempts to *obstruct neighbors' EU aspirations (or to flame regional tensions)* will backfire on one's own prospects. This principle, born out in Croatia-Slovenia and Greece-North Macedonia cases, needs consistent application. But beyond being a stick, regional cooperation is a carrot in itself – it prepares countries for EU membership by getting them used to collaboration. We recommend that the EU *institutionalize the Berlin Process* outcomes: for instance, the recent agreement to create a *Common Regional Market* (an extension of CEFTA, aiming to emulate four freedoms regionally) should be strongly supported and perhaps made an *interim milestone* in the accession roadmap. Qorraj *et al.* (2024:5) view the Common Regional Market as either a deepening of integration or a "*time-winning strategy*" by the EU to postpone membership – in either case, if Western Balkans implement it fully (recognizing each other's professional qualifications, removing roaming charges, etc.), it will both improve their economies and ease eventual EU integration. The lesson from Visegrád is that a united regional voice can even influence EU policies. So, encouraging the Western Balkans to form common positions on certain EU matters (like climate or youth policy) even before accession can empower them and signal to EU members that the region will be a value-added, cohesive bloc rather than a fractious add-on. *Recommendation:* The EU could create a format where Western Balkan ministers attend certain EU Council meetings as observers *as a group* (somewhat akin to how V4 often presents united stances). This would reinforce the habit of intraregional consultation. Additionally, cross-border infrastructure (Corridor X highway, Rail links, energy interconnectors) should be fast-tracked – the EU's new *Growth Plan for the Western*

Balkans (2023), worth €6 billion, rightly emphasizes connectivity. Past enlargements show that integrating infrastructure prior to accession (e.g. Baltic states' electricity grid synchronization with the EU) helps avoid bottlenecks later.

4.4. Reconciliation and Transitional Justice: Make it a Core Integration Pillar

Unique to the Western Balkans (as compared to CEE) is the very recent memory of interethnic war. The EU has sometimes treated reconciliation as separate from the *acquis* chapters, but the lesson from post-WWII European integration (and indeed the Franco-German rapprochement) is that *peace and integration go hand in hand*. Baliqi (2021) argues there will be "*no regional collaboration without dealing with the past*", so initiatives like the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), the missing persons dialogue, or the Regional War Crimes Verification Commission (RECOM, an NGO-driven project) should receive robust EU backing and be factored into progress assessments. We propose that the EU *expand Chapter 23 (J Judiciary and Fundamental Rights)* or Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom, Security) to explicitly include *transitional justice metrics* – e.g. cooperation with the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals, domestic war crimes trials, measures against genocide denial and hate speech, school curriculum reforms for inclusive history education. These issues may seem outside classic EU law, but they relate to EU values of human rights and are critical for long-term regional stability. The CEE experience offers parallels: for instance, how countries dealt with their communist past (lustration, truth commissions) did not directly affect EU laws but did affect the climate in which reforms took place. The EU informally encouraged CEE states to resolve those issues domestically. In the Balkans, it may need to be more proactive – perhaps convene a *Western Balkans Truth and Reconciliation Conference* under EU auspices, or tie funding for cultural heritage and education to multiethnic projects. *Lesson:* Don't compartmentalize peacebuilding and EU integration; treat them as mutually reinforcing objectives.

4.5. Socio-Economic Convergence and Absorption Capacity

Economic lessons from Eastern enlargement abound. A positive one is that *trade integration with the EU significantly boosted the Western Balkans' economies even before membership*, as seen by the EU now taking ~2/3 of Western Balkan exports and the region's GDP growth picking up in the 2000s. However, Eastern Europe also shows that rapid integration can lead to *imbalances*: deindustrialization in some regions, brain drain of young workers to the West (Baltic states lost significant population to migration post-2004), and dependency on a few sectors. Already, the Western Balkans face severe brain drain – a trend Baliqi links partly to slow EU progress causing young people to lose hope. The EU's new enlargement approach tries to alleviate this by increasing pre-accession funds and investment (the Economic and Investment Plan for WB targets €9 billion for connectivity, green transition, private sector support). We recommend focusing these investments on *skill retention and job creation* for youth, to give potential emigrants reasons to stay. Additionally, improving *absorption capacity for EU funds* is crucial – many Balkan ministries struggle to use all available IPA funds due to limited project management skills. Here, East European countries like Poland, which excelled at absorbing structural funds (sometimes above 95% utilization), can mentor Balkan administrations. Twinning programs should be ramped up, pairing, say, *Polish and Ukrainian* experts with Bosnian or Albanian counterparts on how to design

projects that meet EU criteria. *Lesson from CEE agriculture*: as one study put it, EU membership “resulted in a total change of agricultural policy” in countries like Poland, bringing yields up but also challenging small farmers. The Balkans should prepare their farmers and SMEs early through pilot projects and gradual integration into EU value chains. For example, allow Western Balkan companies to participate in EU supply chains (through the common market aspects of the CRM, etc.) so that by the time of accession they are competitive. The overarching lesson is *preparation and adaptation*: East-Central Europe had the PHARE, ISPA, SAPARD programs to get ready; the Western Balkans have IPA but perhaps need a tailored “WB-Accelerator” program focusing on areas of persistent weakness (e.g. public administration reform, digitalization of government services). Strengthening these areas not only helps meet EU criteria but also improves daily governance, yielding benefits irrespective of timelines.

4.6. Managing EU Internal Dynamics

Lastly, ECE’s journey illuminates the importance of engaging with *EU member states’ concerns* to avoid unexpected roadblocks. The Western Balkans face some skepticism among segments of the public in certain EU countries (enlargement fatigue, fears of migration or organized crime). Instead of dismissing these, Balkan countries and EU supporters should address them head-on – for instance, by highlighting positive contributions of current Balkan diasporas in the EU, and by actively participating in European programs (sports, culture, research) to build people-to-people goodwill. In the late 1990s, CEE governments lobbied EU publics (through cultural diplomacy, media outreach) to present a favorable image; similar efforts now (a “*Balkan Voices in Europe*” campaign, perhaps) could mitigate misperceptions. It’s also worth noting that *geopolitical shifts* – like the Ukraine war – have somewhat rejuvenated enlargement discussions by reminding Europe of the strategic importance of its neighborhood. The Western Balkans can leverage this by positioning themselves as reliable partners aligned with EU foreign policy (most have, for example, joined EU sanctions on Russia, except notable issues with Serbia’s stance). Highlighting this alignment addresses Western European concerns about admitting countries that might side with rival powers. In short, a lesson from ECE (and now Ukraine’s candidacy) is that *enlargement is not only a technical process but a political one* – winning hearts and minds in existing member states is part of the job of candidate countries.

In implementing these recommendations, a cooperative effort is needed: Western Balkan leaders must have the vision and courage to sometimes take domestically difficult steps (as North Macedonia’s leaders did with Prespa), and the EU and its member states must reward and acknowledge these steps, keeping the integration door wide open. The story of East-Central Europe’s path to the EU – from the early 1990s chaos to EU membership and subsequent growth – should inspire the Western Balkans that such transformation is achievable. Conversely, the EU must remember the “*renewed dynamism*” that enlargement brought to the Union in 2004 – an enlarged EU can be a stronger, more culturally rich and secure EU. The Western Balkans, with roughly 18 million people, will never be as large a shock as the inclusion of 100 million CEE citizens was; the EU can surely absorb them if it prepares well (and indeed must, to complete the unification of Europe).

5. CONCLUSION

East-Central Europe's EU integration experience offers a rich repository of lessons for the Western Balkans' current and future efforts to join the Union. *Comparative analysis reveals* that while contexts differ – the Western Balkans face the dual challenges of post-socialist and post-conflict transition – many fundamentals of successful Europeanization remain consistent. These include a firm commitment to *the rule of law and democratic institutions*, the importance of *economic and administrative preparedness*, and the transformative impact of a *credible accession perspective*. The ECE countries demonstrated how intensive reforms coupled with regional solidarity could propel even formerly authoritarian societies into the European mainstream within a decade. They also taught the EU that consolidation of democracy is an ongoing process: ensuring that initial reforms are deep and sustainable is far preferable to dealing with backsliding after the fact. Accordingly, the EU has adjusted its approach for the Balkans by toughening conditionality and integrating conflict-resolution into the enlargement paradigm.

A central insight of this paper is encapsulated in the maxim that “*the road to Brussels runs through the region.*” The Western Balkans will reach the EU only by strengthening ties among themselves – through trade, infrastructure, and people-to-people contact – much as the states of Central Europe did in the 1990s. East-Central Europe serves as both *a model and a mirror*: a model in showing that neighbors can jointly advance and even *accelerate integration through cooperation* (the Visegrád example, regional advocacy, etc.), and a mirror in reflecting challenges that might also beset the Balkans if not proactively addressed (persistent corruption, regional disparities, populist politics). By taking these lessons to heart, Western Balkan leaders – supported by a reinvigorated EU commitment – can design a pathway that maximizes the advantages of hindsight. Already, initiatives like the Common Regional Market and joint regional institutions (e.g. RYCO for youth cooperation) echo the patterns that worked in Central Europe, adapted to local realities.

There is also a *moral imperative*: completing the European integration of the Western Balkans would fulfill the promise of Thessaloniki and ensure that the EU's unifying mission, which successfully reunited Eastern Europe with the West, is not halted at the Balkan peninsula's edge due to complacency or fatigue. The cost of failure would be high – a perpetually unstable enclave surrounded by the EU, vulnerable to external malign influence and draining its human capital across the Union's borders. Conversely, the benefits of success echo those seen after 2004: more secure and prosperous neighbors, new markets and cultural riches added to the EU mosaic, and the *definitive burying of old enmities* under the weight of shared European identity.

In conclusion, “*Boosting cooperation in the European integration process*” is not just a slogan but a strategic necessity for the Western Balkans. The experience of East-Central Europe – its accomplishments and its ongoing struggles – provides a guide for what to emulate and what to avoid. If the Western Balkans can harness regional cooperation as effectively, commit to rigorous reforms as sincerely, and keep the end goal of EU membership as vividly in sight as the ECE countries once did, then their integration, too, can shift from a distant aspiration to a tangible reality. The European Union, for its part, must apply the lessons of past enlargements by being both supportive and demanding in the right measures, keeping its door open while guarding its values. As one scholar aptly put it, *enlargement is Europe's “most effective foreign policy” tool*

for peace and democracy – in the case of the Western Balkans, it is a tool that, if wielded wisely, will not only transform the region but also enrich the Union that welcomes it.

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ROMANIA'S PATH IN THE EU: CHALLENGES, ACHIEVEMENTS, AND RELEVANCES FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

Zsolt BOTTYAN*

Abstract. This paper analyzes Romania's trajectory seventeen years after its 2007 EU accession, examining the resulting economic and social outcomes and their relevance for the Western Balkans. While objective data reveals significant macroeconomic progress, including a quadrupled GDP and growth rates exceeding the EU average, this narrative of success is contrasted with persistent social challenges. Romania continues to grapple with high rates of poverty, ranking among the worst in the EU for social exclusion, material deprivation, and inadequate housing. Social cohesion has been significantly undermined by mass emigration, which resulted in the loss of nearly 20% of the population, and a persistent corruption problem that EU-led mechanisms only moderately improved. The article argues that a key issue has been the political class's complacency, leading to an over-reliance on EU frameworks and undermining national strategy. Ultimately, Romania's experience serves as a cautionary lesson for the Western Balkans, demonstrating that EU integration is not a panacea and that robust national governance is crucial to address structural problems.

Keywords: EU Integration, Romania, Poverty, Political Complacency, Emigration.

Romania acceded to the EU in 2007, following 17 years of a difficult economic and political transition (Constantin, Goschin, & Danciu, 2011; Tatar, 2016). The Western Balkans are in a similar position to Romania before 2005, when its Accession Treaty was signed, grappling with comparable issues: emigration, poverty, corruption, and political instability (Mansi, Hysa, Panait, & Voica, 2020; Pržulj & Kostadinović, 2014).

The NATO and EU membership was viewed by the political elite and ordinary Romanians as a panacea for their economic, political and security problems (Papadimitriou & Phinnemore, 2008). Moreover, accession to the EU was an issue of national prestige, deeply ingrained in the Romanian collective psyche after 50 years of isolation from the West (Boia, 2001).

But has integration into NATO and the EU solved Romania's economic, social and security problems? Does the outcome of integration meet the expectations of Romanians before integration? In 2024-2025, Romania had one of the most contentious presidential elections in its post-communist history. The Romanian electorate was deeply dissatisfied with the political establishment that controlled the Romanian politics since 1989. The discontents formed a novel coalition which comprised mostly young people and a big portion of the Romanian diaspora and was labeled by the pro-establishment media as "anti-European". This conflict revealed a cleavage between the "winners" and "losers" of EU integration, a divide with complex economic, political, and cultural roots

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that were ignored by a political class content with achieving accession to the EU and NATO. The main question of this paper is whether this cleavage can be explained, even partially, by certain aspects of Romania's accession process.

THE NARRATIVE OF ECONOMIC PROGRESS

Analyzing certain social and economic indicators, Romania's integration into the EU can be presented as an unquestionable economic success. Romania's GDP has shown impressive growth within the context of the economic and political stability and predictability generated by its EU membership status (Radu, 2015). Romania's GDP grew from \$98.45 billion in 2005 to \$382.77 billion in 2024, almost quadrupling in 20 years (data source: <https://data.worldbank.org/>, visited on 07.07.2025). In Fig.1 we can observe that Romania has a considerably higher GDP per capita than the Western Balkan countries, but the tendencies in the evolution of GDP growth are rather similar.

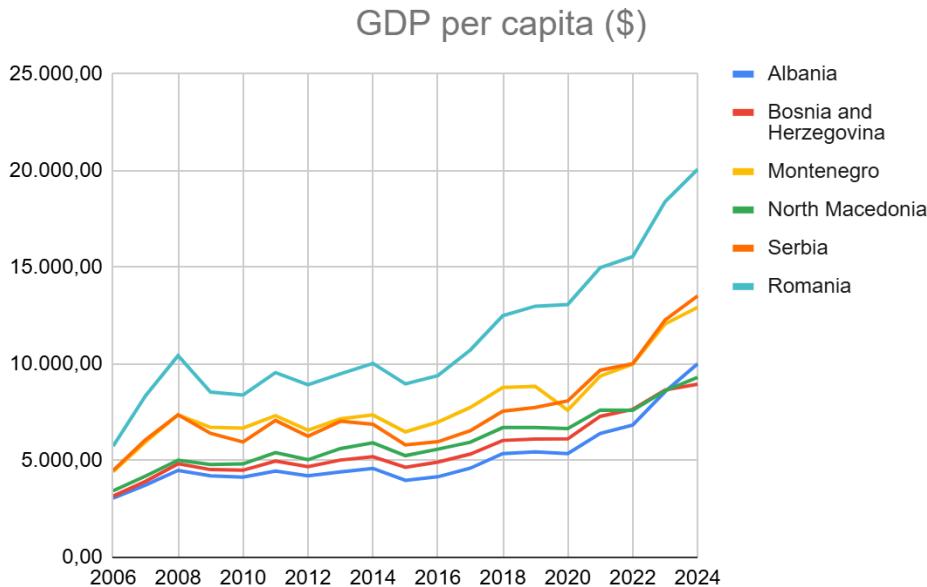


Figure 1. Data source: <https://data.worldbank.org/>, visited on 07.07.2025

Further analysis of Romania's GDP, using indicators such as GDP annual growth, GDP per capita (current US\$) and GDP per capita, PPP (current international \$), reveals the positive effect of EU integration on the Romanian Economy (see Fig.2 and Fig.3). Romania's GDP grew between 2006 and 2024 with an average of 2,85% per year, which is more than 2,4 times higher growth comparatively with the 1,17% registered by the EU and 1,01% registered by the Euro area. In Fig.3 we can see the proportion of the Romanian GDP per capita compared with the EU and Euro area. It can be observed that Romania's GDP per capita represents 46.52% of the EU average. The situation appears even better when considering the GDP per capita PPP (purchasing power parity) indicator which shows Romania at 78.02% of the EU average. Taken aside the questionable measuring of the PPP indicators (Seshaiah & Tripathy, 2018), the 31.05% difference

between the two GDP per capita indicators shows that there is room for interpretation of how much Romania's economy improved in the last 20 years of EU ascension.

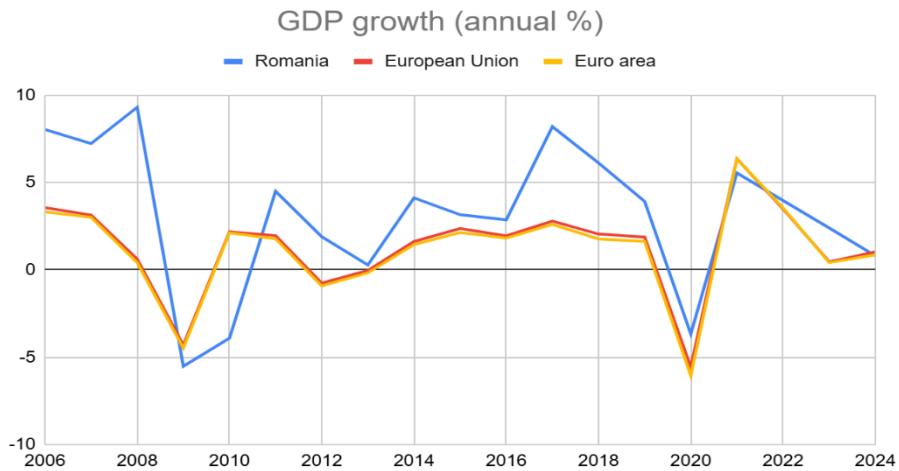


Figure 2. Data source: <https://data.worldbank.org/>, visited on 07.07.2025

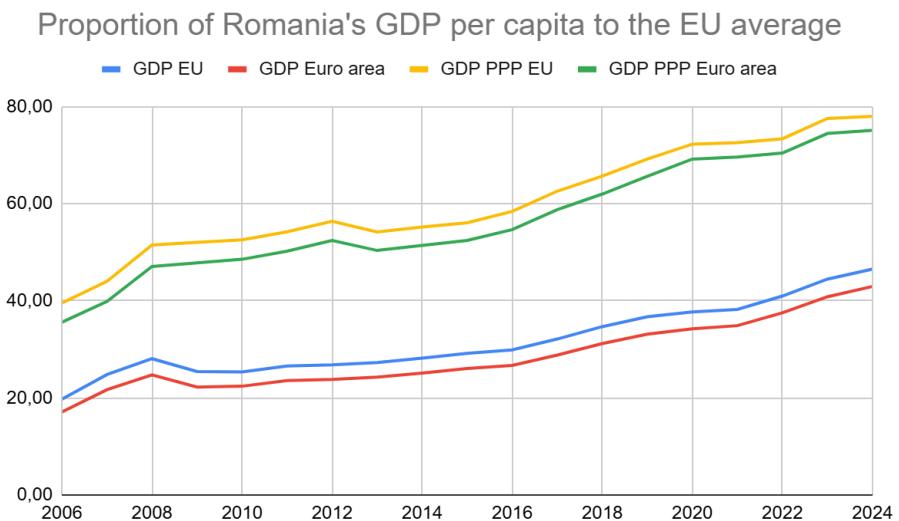


Figure 3. Data source: <https://data.worldbank.org/>, visited on 07.07.2025

EU accession had an initial negative effect on economic inequality in Romania (Fig.4). Subsequently, however, the general Gini index showed a downward trend, decreasing from 39.6% in 2006 to 32.3% in 2022. This figure points towards moderate inequality, although the situation can differ for certain age cohorts (Oancea, Andrei, & Pirjol, 2017). In the Western Balkan countries, the Gini index shows a fairly similar situation after 2020, ranging between 35.7% and 32.8%, which represents moderate inequality.

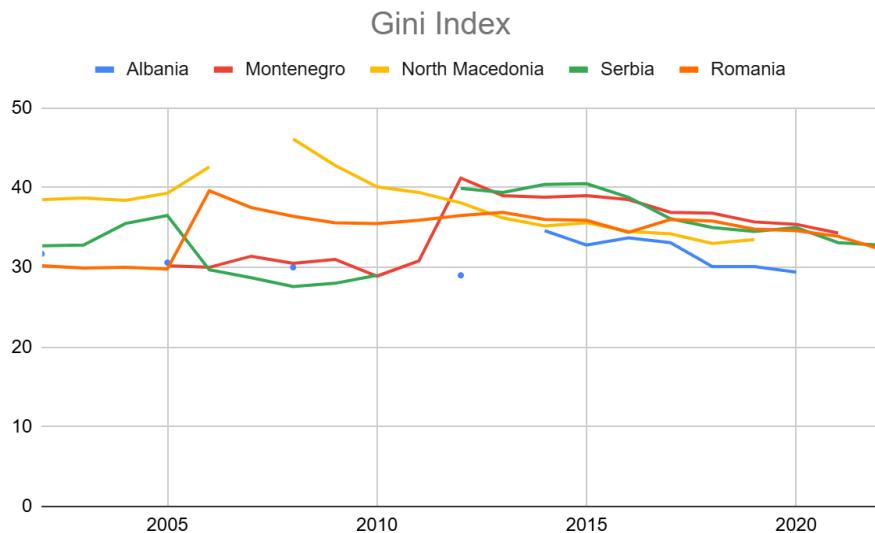


Figure 4. Data source: <https://data.worldbank.org/>, visited on 07.07.2025

The objective data on the economy can be corroborated with the subjective data reported through annual barometers taken at the EU level. The Romanian sentiment on the economy mirrors the general sentiment in the EU (Fig.5), but at much lower levels until 2018. The subjective opinion on the economy was pronouncedly negative between 2009 and 2012, when the economic crisis and its aftermath strongly affected the Romanian economy. Economic sentiment started to change in 2014, improving steadily, reaching in 2024 similar levels of positive sentiment towards the economy as the EU average.

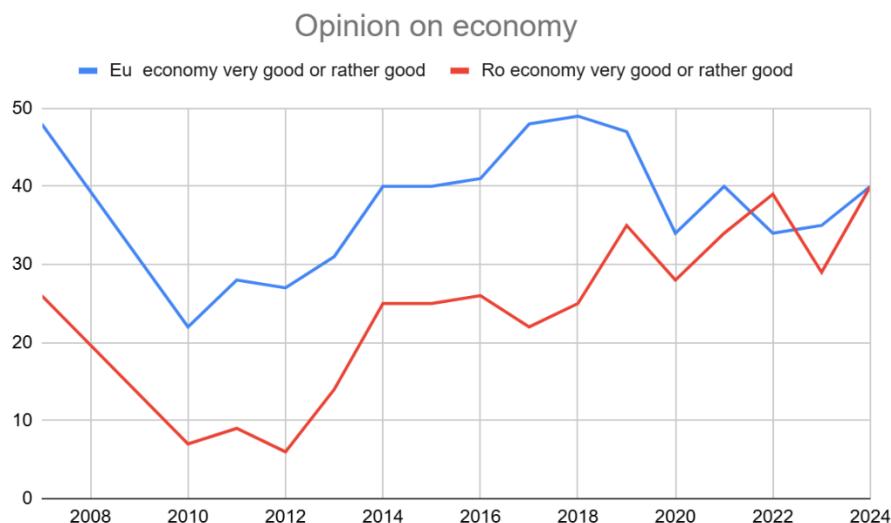


Figure 5. Data source: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/>, visited on 08.07.2025

Less than 30% of Romanians believe the EU contributes significantly to their economic prosperity (Fig.6), which is far lower than those who considered, for example,

that the EU is ensuring freedom to travel, to study, and work in the EU, answer which scored constantly over 50%.

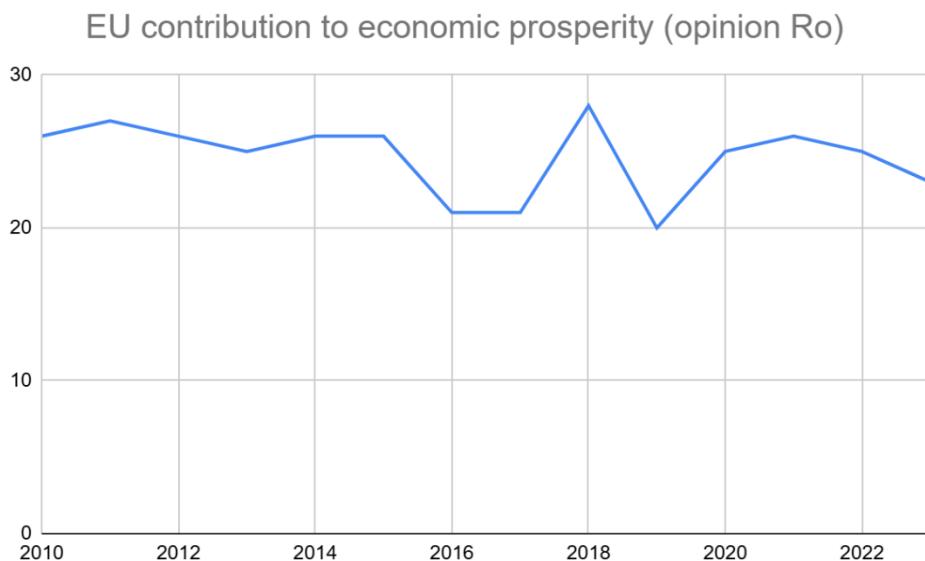


Figure 6. Data source: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/>, visited on 08.07.2025

In conclusion, the data shows an objective and significant improvement of the Romanian economy since its ascension to the EU. Only 24.64% of Romanians, on average, considered that the EU meant economic prosperity for them since 2007. Romanians subjectively acknowledged the betterment of the economy towards the end of the period, starting with 2021, when the opinion on the national economy reached the EU average. This positive appreciation of the national economy could explain partially the discontent of the Romanian diaspora, as the perceived differences between the Romanian and EU economies made working abroad less attractive.

ECONOMIC REALITY: POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

The problem of the “winers” and “losers” of the economic transition after the fall of the communist regimes was analyzed throughout Central and Eastern Europe (Hellman, 1998; Mateju, 1996; Titma, Tuma, & Silver, 1998). The first phase of the transition was characterized by the forced transformation towards a market economy, through various privatization processes of the state economy. In Romania, the privatization process was politically controlled and included some populist components, such as the distribution of state-owned equity based on citizenship. However, corruption ultimately favored a small portion of the population that came to control the vast majority of the economy's assets (McCollum & Schoening, 2002; Popescu-Birlan, 1994). In this context, two economic classes emerged, the “winers”, which appropriated the state assets through the privatization process, and the “losers”, which represented most of the Romanian population who struggled with poverty caused by high unemployment and low wages.

The Gini index shows moderate inequality in Romania, which is not worse than the EU average, but the economic data hints towards an ongoing economic differentiation. The 31% difference between the classic GDP per capita indicator and its

PPP variant compared to the EU average suggests the complexity of how economic growth translated into economic well-being for Romanians.

The persistent problem of poverty

Romania struggled with poverty since the catastrophic mismanagement of the economy by the communist regime (Rotariu & Popescu, 1999). After a difficult transition, Romania's poverty situation started to improve markedly during the ascension in the EU (see Fig.7). The "poverty headcount ratio at \$8.30 a day (2021 PPP) (% of population)" metric provides a standardized and internationally comparable statistic, and represents the percentage of a nation's population whose daily income or consumption falls below an international poverty line of \$8.30, adjusted for differences in purchasing power across countries (Foster, Jolliffe, Ibarra, Lakner, & Tetteh-Baah, 2025). While the headcount ratio of those living on \$8.30 a day declined decisively during Romania's EU membership—from 40% in 2007 to 8.6% in 2022—the poverty headcount ratio at the societal poverty line has remained persistent, hovering around 25%.

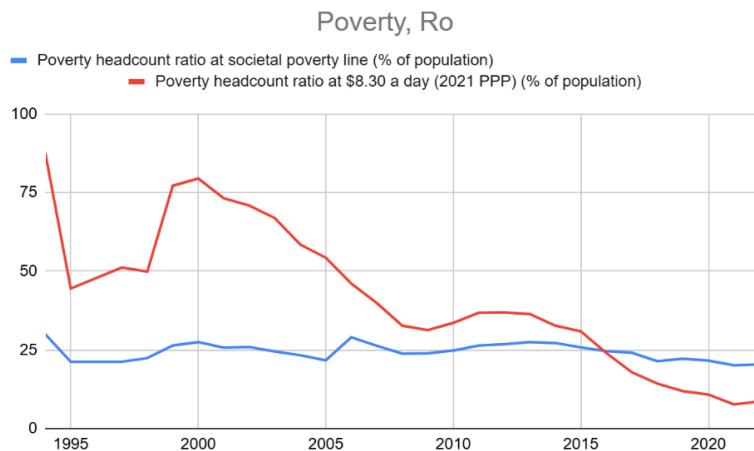


Figure 7. Data source: <https://data.worldbank.org/>, visited on 08.07.2025

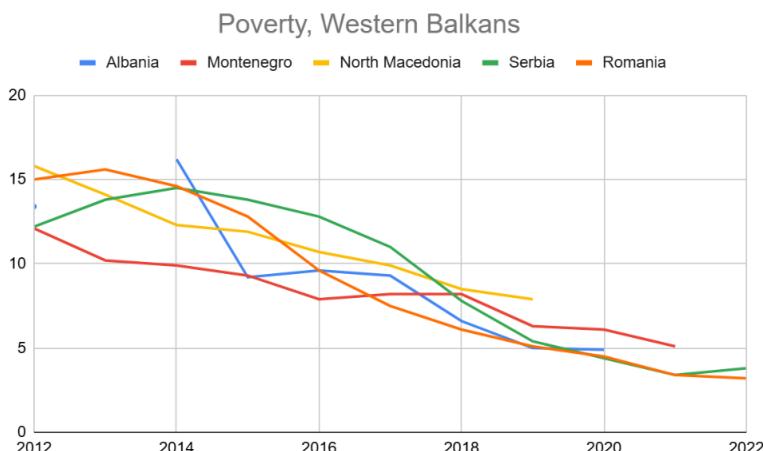


Figure 8. Data source: <https://data.worldbank.org/>, visited on 08.07.2025

The Western Balkans are also struggling with poverty (Mansi et al., 2020). From Fig.8 we can observe a similar trend regarding the "poverty headcount ratio at \$8.30 a day (2021 PPP) (% of population)" metric in the Western Balkan countries. The indicator improved significantly, even these countries not being members of the EU, and it can be observed that the values are close to those obtained from Romania. Besides potential measurement issues, this proximity between Romania and the Western Balkans can be explained by the historically low wages with which Romania has grappled since the collapse of the communist regime.

Underscoring Romania's poverty situation, the country has the second-highest rate (27%) of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in the EU in 2024, surpassed only by Bulgaria (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data>, visited on 08.07.2025). The severe material and social deprivation (SMSD) indicator, which is part of the AROPE rate, was defined in the framework of the EU 2030 target on poverty and social exclusion (Guio et al., 2016). It measures household and personal aspects such as the ability to cover unforeseen expenses, the ability to finance a one-week annual vacation, the mortgage or utility bills, the ability to secure food, adequate clothing, home heating or internet access. In Romania, 19.8% of residents have problems ensuring the aspects measured by the SMSD indicator, ranking last in the EU in 2024. (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data>, visited on 08.07.2025).

If we analyze other poverty indicators, that regards living standards such as housing, we can observe that Romania is again at the bottom of EU rankings. In 2023, Romania recorded an overcrowding rate of 40.0%, an indicator that measures the percentage of the population living in an overcrowded household, which is substantially higher than the EU average of 16.8% (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data>, visited on 08.07.2025). The housing cost overburden rate, which measures the percentage of the population living in households where the total housing costs represent more than 40 % of disposable income, registers 16.0% in Romania, in 2023, as the average rate in the EU was 8.8%. Also, in 2023, 15.4% of Romanian homes lacked bath, shower, or indoor flushing toilet, compared to an EU average of just 2.1% (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data>, visited on 08.07.2025). The economic and poverty data in 2025 will be affected by Romania's record budget deficit (8.65% of GDP), the largest recorded in the EU.

As a conclusion, the ascension in the EU didn't solve Romania's poverty problem after 15 years of membership. It certainly improved the situation as it helped the national economy to lift over 30% of the population from extreme poverty, but poverty persists in many forms and affects large swaths of the population, Romania remaining one of the poorest countries in the EU.

Economic inequality

In the last 20 years, the Romanian economy has developed structural problems that have contributed towards economic inequality. Starting with 2004, when the European Council confirmed January 1, 2007, as the accession date for Romania, the economy began to grow rapidly due to a massive increase in foreign investment (Fig.9) (Nistor, 2014). Also, with the easing of travel restrictions in Western Europe after Romania's ascension in the EU, the migration of Romanians to work in the West accelerated. This process represented a "valve" that allowed for the reduction of tension in the labor market, as unemployment began to decline (Fig.10), while generating a continuous flow of remittances that fueled domestic consumption (Horváth & Anghel, 2009).

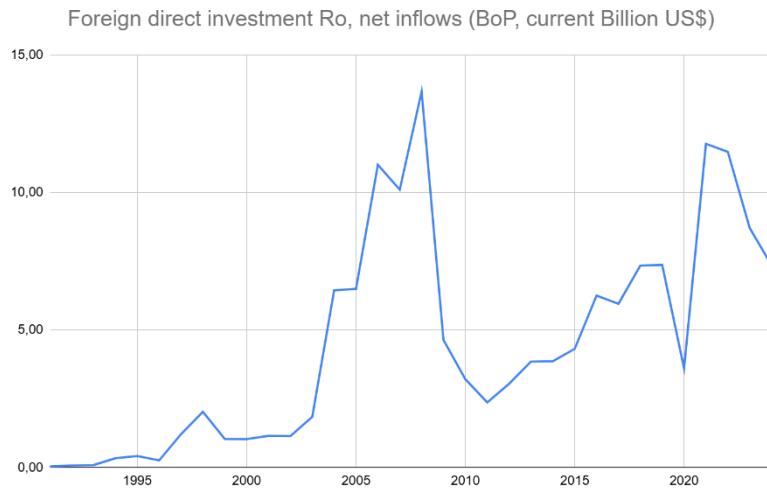


Figure 9. Data source: <https://data.worldbank.org/>, visited on 08.07.2025



Figure 10. Data source: <https://data.worldbank.org/>, visited on 08.07.2025

After the ascension, the Romanian economy diversified through investments by multinational companies and the establishment of small and medium-sized enterprises, a process that gave a strong impulse to the development of the middle class (Mărginean, 2015). In this phase, the economic differentiation was determined mostly by growing inequality between earnings (Dorjnyambuu & Galambosné Tiszberger, 2024). The class of economic "winners" has begun to expand, including, in addition to business owners, self-employed individuals, well-paid employees in the private and public sector public sector (Ioniță & Vasile, 2015). The "losers" were represented by the employees in low-wage positions in industry, agriculture, retail and hospitality. If we take in consideration the average net earnings of Romanians, it is becoming clearer why a large part of Romanians still struggles with some form of poverty (see Fig.11). Romania has an economy where the

main attraction for foreign capital is Romania's EU membership and a relatively educated and qualified workforce that is remunerated at one third of the EU average.

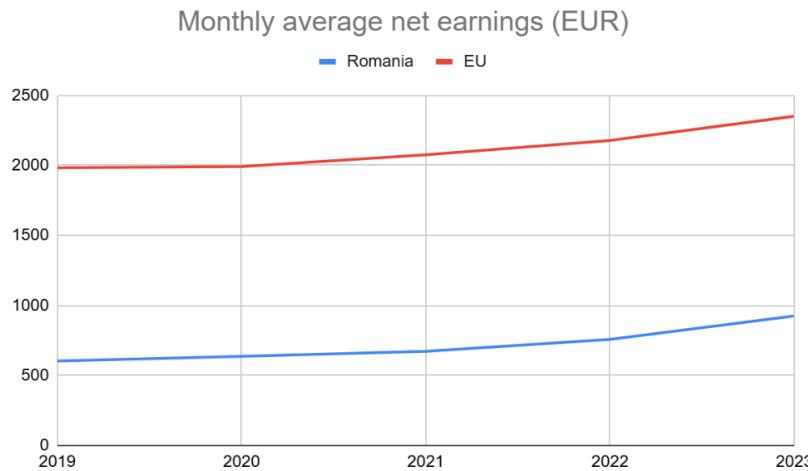


Figure 11. Data source: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data>, visited on 08.07.2025

Inequality was also amplified by significant regional imbalances (Florina, Alpopi, & Burlacu, 2018). Romania, as a condition for EU accession, defined 8 development regions. From Fig.12 we can observe that, among the 8 regions, the capital and its surroundings (Ilfov County) have a GDP per capita almost three times higher compared to the other regions. Also, a more moderate differentiation can be observed between the western and central regions of the country, which are more developed, compared to the southern and eastern parts. There are some historical differences regarding economic development between the regions, but the most important differentiators were represented by the absorption rate of EU funds and the attractiveness for foreign direct investment (Mitrică, Grigorescu, Săgeată, Mocanu, & Dumitrașcu, 2020).

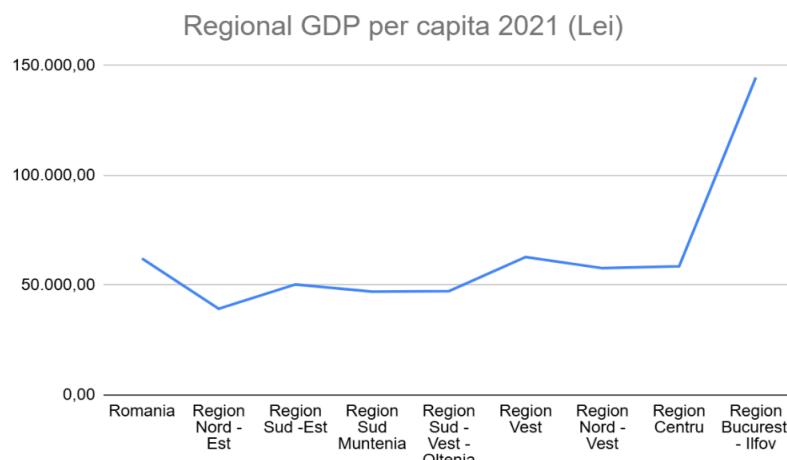


Figure 12. Data source: <https://insse.ro/cms/ro/>, visited on 09.07.2025

In theory, economic equality is maintained by the limited effectiveness of the social protection and healthcare systems in redistributing income (De Vogli, 2014; Standing, 1996). In Romania, the social protection expenditure rate (as % of GDP) was 16.5% in 2022, compared to an EU average of 27.58% (Fig.13). The healthcare expenditure was in 2022 four times lower in Romania compared with the EU average (see Fig.14).

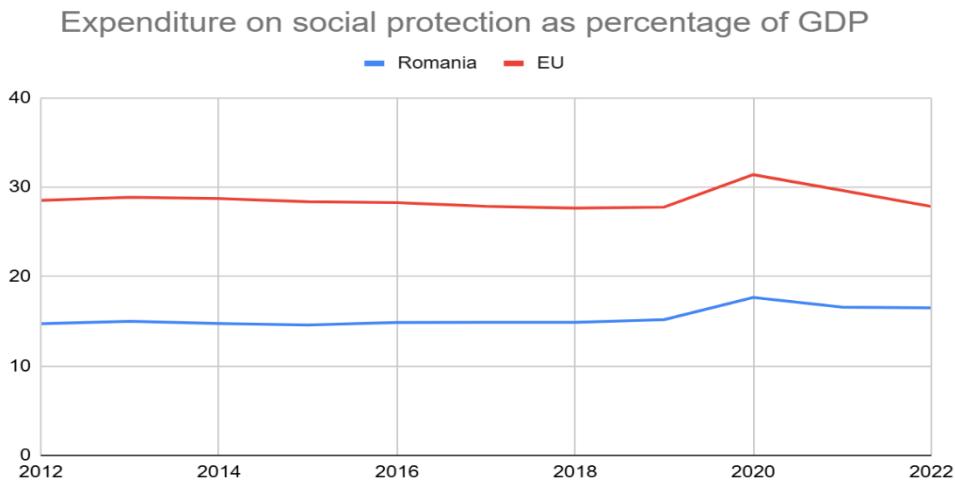


Figure 13. Data source: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data>, visited on 09.07.2022

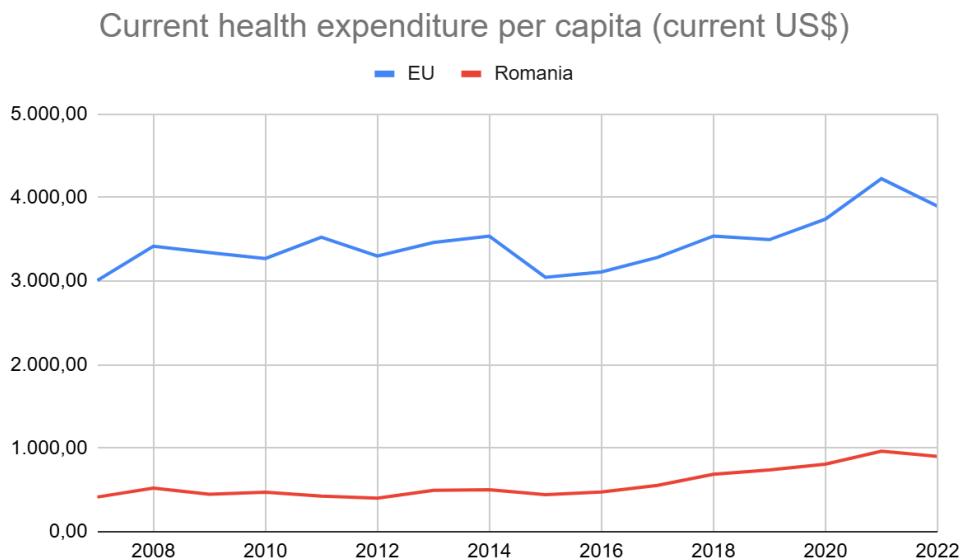


Figure 14. Data source: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data>, visited on 09.07.2022

In conclusion, the economic data shows a general improvement of the economic well-being for the Romanians but also shows that this improvement is not distributed equitably due to structural problems of the economy, many Romanians still struggling with persistent poverty.

SOCIAL COHESION

In addition to the economic aspects discussed in the previous chapter, Romania's social cohesion was affected by emigration and the political complacency induced by the EU accession. Oddly enough, Romania's political system was healthier in the pre-accession period, as political debates and power-opposition dynamics maintained a significant political participation of Romanian society (Crowther, 2010). After accession, the political class developed a degree of self-sufficiency, effectively "outsourcing" the country's strategic development coordination to international institutions like the EU and NATO.

A country torn by emigration

Large-scale temporary emigration to Western Europe intensified after the 1989 collapse of the communist regime (Sandu, 2005). Salary differentials make Romanian jobs less attractive for qualified workers, many of whom do not return after migrating (Goschin, 2016). Overall, Romania has sustained an average negative net migration of 69,646 people annually between 1992 and 2024, losing close to 4 million people, roughly 20% of its population, to emigration (Fig.15). It can be observed that the annual emigration grew until 2009 and then stabilized at under 50.000 emigrants per year. The same trends can be observed in some Western Balkans countries, where people are emigrating mainly for economic reasons, social injustice, corruption and discriminatory group behaviors (Matoshi & Mulaj, 2021).

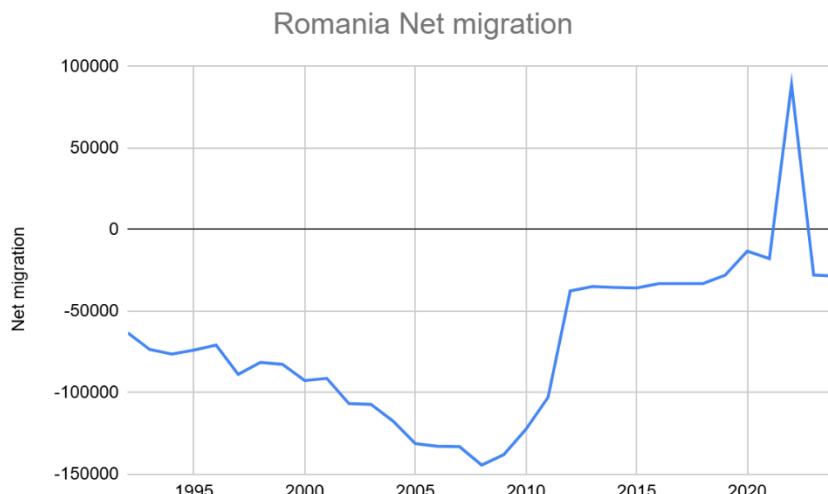


Figure 15. Data source: <https://data.worldbank.org/>, visited on 10.07.2025

The mood related to working and living abroad in Romania has changed considerably after the pandemic. It can be seen in Fig.15, that in 2022, for the first time since the collapse of the communist regime, Romania recorded a positive net migration of 89.076 people. This is due to the negative experiences of many Romanians in Western European countries during the COVID pandemic, where the crisis highlighted their status as second-class citizens (Ulceluse & Bender, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the existence of a "two-tier" EU citizenship. This situation was created by the combined effect of differentiated rights, such as labor market restrictions imposed after the 2004 and 2007

enlargements, and the prejudicial practices of exploitation and exclusion that Eastern European migrant workers commonly face. The COVID crisis highlighted a significant contradiction: while Western European nations were closing borders and repatriating their own citizens, they were actively recruiting and facilitating the travel of thousands of Eastern European workers to sustain essential sectors like agriculture (Ulceluse & Bender, 2022). This recruitment often occurred with a disregard for the workers' safety as they were transported and housed without proper protective measures or enforcement of social distancing rules, in stark contrast to the regulations imposed on the general public. Eastern European migrant workers were often excluded or neglected from receiving health and social assistance during the COVID-19 crisis (Ulceluse & Bender, 2022). This experience undermined the rhetoric around emigration to work that used concepts such as European citizenship and the right to work in the EU.

The discontent of the Romanian diaspora was visible in the 2024-2025 elections, where it voted in majority, in protest, for the nationalist, anti-establishment parties, for the first time in the post-communist era. The participation of the diaspora in the elections is an indicator of their integration in the host countries (Gherghina & Basarabă, 2024). This can be explained by two factors: the increased economic convergence between Romania and Western Europe and the structure of the Romanian diaspora. Romania's economic convergence with the EU has significantly reduced the social valuation of the status of temporary migrant for work, the costs of migration not being compensated by the potential earnings. A minority part of the Romanian diaspora is made up of highly qualified people who emigrated for better working conditions and salaries and who have properly integrated into the host societies (Camară, 2019). But many of the Romanians who have emigrated in the past 15 years have left Romania running from poverty, to support themselves and their families. These emigrants are mostly young and attached to Romanian traditional values and their integration has been hampered by cultural changes and economic difficulties in Western Europe. These factors led to an unprecedented diaspora participation in the 2024-2025 Romanian elections, in which part of the diaspora adopted a critical position towards Romania's relationship with the EU, being characterized as "anti-European" by the pro-establishment media.

In conclusion, while emigration temporarily played a positive role by alleviating labor market pressures during the 1990-2007 transition, it proved to be a disruptive process in the long term. It undermined the country's social cohesion, generating a deep rift between those who built a future at home and those forced to emigrate for the hope of a better life.

5.7. The never-ending fight against corruption

Poverty and corruption exist in a circular relationship: poverty can fuel corruption, while corruption undermines the economy, thereby maintaining or even generating more poverty (Chetwynd, Chetwynd, & Spector, 2003).

After 1990, corruption became a major issue of the Romanian political and economic transition, as it blossomed on the fertile ground generated by poverty and social mores inherited from an authoritarian system that functioned based on state corruption (Badescu, 2011; Precupetu, 2007). Consequently, anti-corruption measures were among the EU's fundamental requirements for Romania's ascension. The anticorruption commitments were not explicitly presented within the main text of the Treaty of Accession but were instead formalized through a unique monitoring system known as the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM). This mechanism was established by the European Commission to assist Romania in addressing shortcomings in judicial reform and the fight

against corruption and to ensure the country's continued progress in these areas post-accession (Carp, 2014). The CVM outlined a series of benchmarks which served as a roadmap for the necessary reforms and provided a framework for the EU to regularly assess Romania's progress (Vachudova & Spendzharova, 2012).

The EU required a consolidation of the legal framework for combating corruption (Carp, 2014). This involved aligning Romanian legislation with EU and international standards, ensuring that all forms of corruption were criminalized, and providing for effective and dissuasive sanctions. The CVM had important concrete institutional requirements, such as the creation of the National Anti-corruption Directorate (DNA), a specialized prosecution office tasked with investigating and prosecuting high-level corruption cases. Similarly, the National Integrity Agency (ANI) was established to verify the assets, incompatibility, and potential conflicts of interest of public officials. The independence and operational capacity of these institutions were paramount. To ensure a transparent and efficient judicial process through the CVM were required reforms within the judiciary to guarantee its independence, professionalism, and impartiality. Measures included strengthening the role and accountability of the Superior Council of Magistracy, the body responsible for safeguarding the independence of the judiciary. Romania had to strengthen its administrative capacity to prevent and fight corruption effectively. This aspect included better coordination between different government agencies and the provision of adequate resources for anti-corruption efforts.

There has been informal pressure from the EU to investigate and prosecute high-level corruption cases, regardless of political affiliation. This pressure has led to a series of high-profile arrests, accused by some in the press and public opinion of being politically motivated to demonstrate Romania's commitment to fighting corruption. The mechanism was officially lifted in September 2023, with the Commission considering that Romania made significant progress in strengthening its rule of law and anti-corruption framework.

As it can be observed in Fig.16, Romania obtains constantly a value under 50 for the corruption index (where 0 is highly corrupt and 100 is very clean), ranking at position 65 from 180 countries in 2024, only Bulgaria and Hungary are ranked worst in the EU. Romania's corruption perception index score improved somewhat because of the implementation of the CVM, but from 2016, we can observe a stagnation in the evolution of the index. This stagnation underlines that the fight against corruption has certain institutional limitations and the economic and cultural conditions are much harder to overcome.

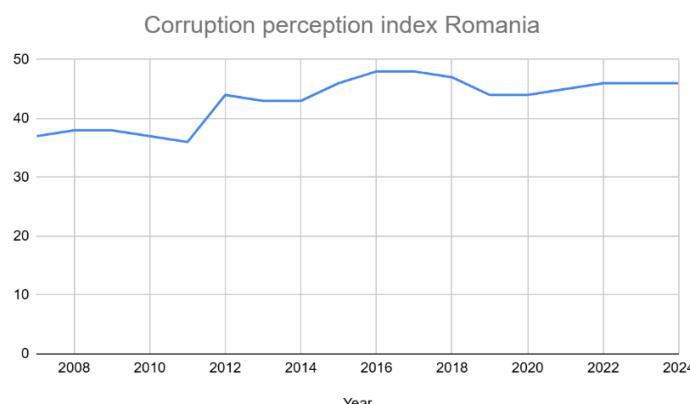


Figure 16. Data source: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/>, visited on 10.07.2025

Romanians do not trust the administration, where corruption is perceived to occur, but they have a better perspective on the institutions that should combat corruption, such as the police and the judiciary (see Fig.17). Regarding the police, there is a slightly majority positive perception of the institution, this being due less to its responsibility to combat corruption, but rather to the low crime rate and traditional respect for authoritarian institutions. We can also observe that the perception of the legal system has improved in parallel with the corruption perception index, an aspect that correlates with the implementation of the CVM.

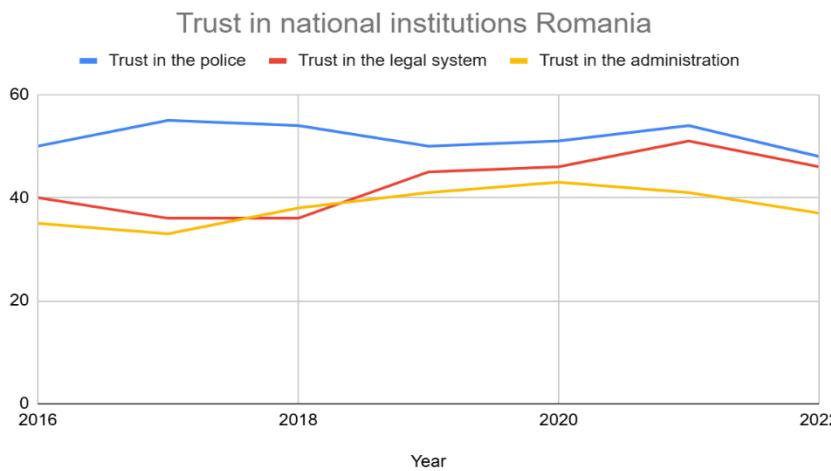


Figure 17. Data source: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/>, visited on 11.07.2025

In conclusion, the EU's strong involvement in the fight against corruption has only yielded moderate results, corruption remaining a persistent problem in Romania even after 17 years of EU membership.

Political complacency

The political and academic establishment has largely ignored corruption and the social and economic costs of constant emigration. Corruption has been treated as a chronic disease, rooted in Romanian culture, that will be “overcome” with deeper integration into the EU and the rise in the standard of living of Romanians. Emigration to the EU has been presented by politicians and the media as “normality” in the context of European “citizenship” and a direct consequence of the right to free movement within the EU. The complacency that characterized Romania’s political establishment after the accession was based on the fundamental assumption, somewhat accepted by Romanian society, that Romania could not have distinct interests from those of the EU and NATO. This represented a de facto recognition of Romania’s peripheral status in the EU and NATO, as any significant decisions regarding the economy, security, foreign policy, or even cultural trends are made by the European bureaucracy, controlled by the great European powers, France and Germany, and by NATO, controlled by the US. This assumption was constantly present in various political decisions made by the representatives of the establishment and became their only political message in the 2024-2025 political campaign.

The political complacency took a concrete political form through the unification of the political establishment into a broad coalition, which undermined Romanian

democracy. In the periods 2012-2014 and 2021-2025, Romania had a “grand” coalition of the two main political parties, the left leaning Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the right leaning National Liberal Party (PNL), which left Romania without a significant opposition.

As can be seen in Fig.18, Romanians have low trust in national political institutions. Political parties, which are the fundamental units that formulate group interests in the political system, enjoyed less than 10% trust from Romanians during the economic crisis. Trust in the EU, its institutions, and NATO was over 50% (Fig.19), on average 20% higher compared to trust in national institutions. It should also be emphasized that trust in national institutions has been steadily increasing, and local authorities enjoy trust well above that of national institutions, reaching levels of trust in EU institutions in 2023-2024.

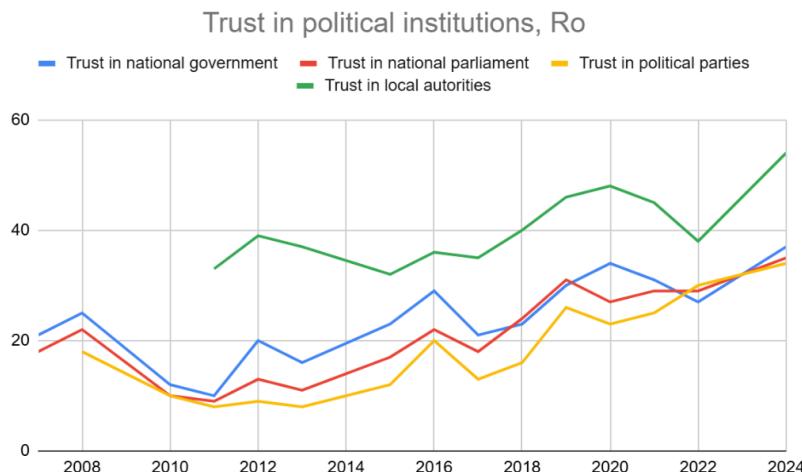


Figure 18. Data source: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/>, visited on 11.07.2025

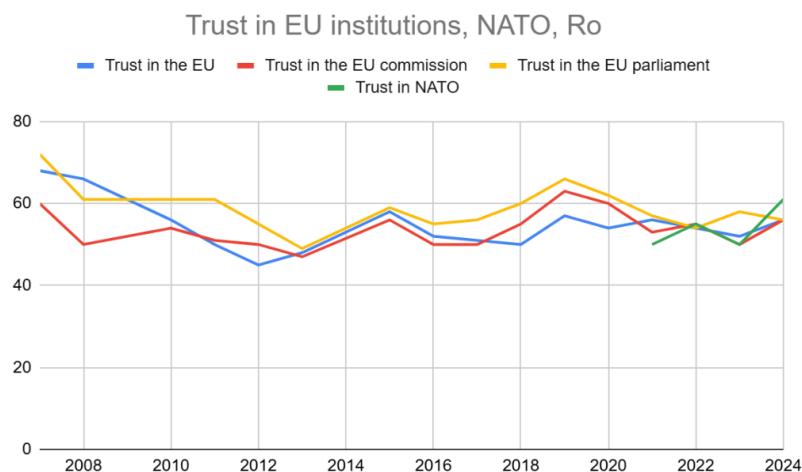


Figure 19. Data source: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/>, visited on 11.07.2025

These trends confirm the social basis for the political complacency that engulfed the political class after the EU ascension, as the public trusted significantly more the EU institutions and NATO compared with the national institutions. The situation changed during the COVID pandemic and the Russo-Ukrainian war, when the gap in Romanians' trust in national institutions compared to EU institutions narrowed, with part of the electorate no longer accepting the transfer of political responsibility to international institutions such as NATO and the EU. The increase in trust in national political institutions reflects not so much trust in the parties and personalities leading these institutions, but a reassessment, on the part of the electorate, of their importance compared to international institutions.

This complacency of the Romanian political class came to the surface during the political debate regarding Romania's involvement in the Russo-Ukrainian war. The "grand" coalition and its supporters in the media championed an aggressive position of involvement in the war represented by the EU, NATO and the Biden administration, against the backdrop of virulent anti-Russianism. Romanians overwhelmingly agreed (over 60% during 2022-2024) that the Russo-Ukrainian war was a threat to the national security, will negatively affect the economy, Ukraine must be supported from a humanitarian point of view and that Russia is responsible for the war (data source: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/>, visited on 11.07.2025). The situation is more nuanced when we analyze the support for EU funds that should finance the war operations and the Ukrainian economy. In Fig.20 it can be observed that after the shock of the start of the war in 2022, the Romanian opposition for the EU to directly finance Ukraine increased considerably.

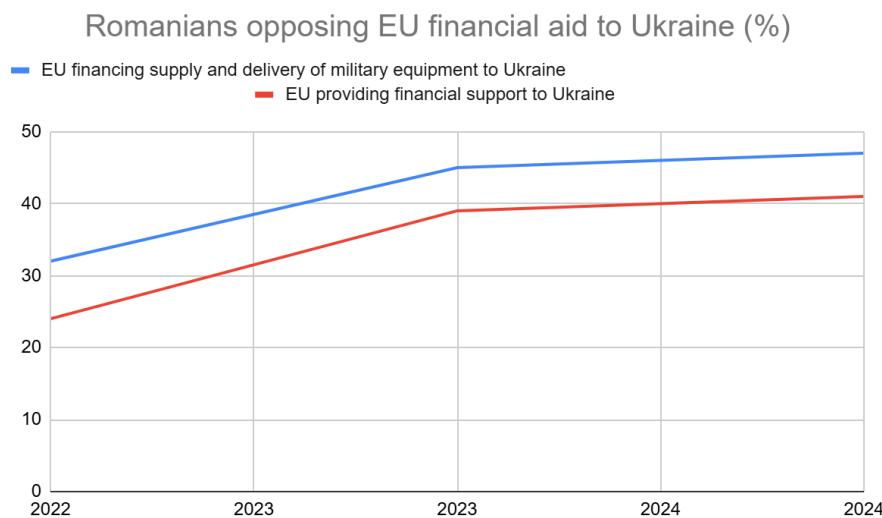


Figure 20. Data source: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/>, visited on 11.07.2025

The results in Fig. 20 do not include the effects on public opinion of the political debates that took place towards the end of autumn 2024. Nationalist-populist parties, which emerged during the COVID period following the general dissatisfaction with the restrictive measures, questioned the establishment's national security strategy, underlining the subordination of Romania's interests to international institutions that

acted outside their mandate: NATO is a defensive organization of member states and the EU is an economic cooperation organization aimed at promoting peace. During the political debates in 2025, the populist opposition attacked the superficial presumptions of the governing coalition regarding Romania's security guarantees by NATO and the EU, given that the change of administration in Washington has undermined NATO's unity and the EU lacks common defense capabilities.

In conclusion, the “grand” coalition that controlled Romanian politics post-accession undermined its own political standing. As a result of its complacency, it shrank its support base, pushing a part of the electorate toward nationalist-populist parties of questionable vision and political effectiveness, thereby opening the possibility of a period of political instability.

CONCLUSION

After 15 years of membership in the EU, Romania has experienced strong economic growth, which has lifted 30% of Romanians out of extreme poverty, that would not have been possible without the direct investments, European funds and the economic stability provided by European integration. On the other hand, in 2025, Romania is a country facing problems related to poverty and social inequality, remaining among the poorest countries in the EU. Along with its economic problems, Romania is facing a period of political instability.

In the context of European integration, Romania's major problem has been the complacency of its political class, which has been content to implement European programs and directives while abandoning their critical analysis and the development of a national strategy that prioritizes Romania's interests. The political elite has not formulated coherent strategies regarding the national economy, corruption, migration and Romania's security problems, which have become acute in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Romanians had high hopes when they joined the EU, for some of them the hopes became reality, but for a large part of Romanians the results are disappointing. The EU can help economically and with expertise, can create a framework of stability, but cannot fulfill a member country's economic, social, political or security expectations. Despite direct involvement through the CVM mechanism, the EU has not solved the corruption problem in Romania. Although Romania has received considerable EU funds, it still struggles with structural economic problems that cannot be solved without a coherent national economic strategy. Romania is economically dependent on the EU (72% of imports and exports), in terms of security on NATO, but does not have an independent strategy regarding economic, political and security relations with the rest of the world. The utopia of living in the EU as “European citizens” was tempered by the reality check offered by the COVID pandemic, migration and the Russo-Ukrainian war. The coveted membership of the Schengen Area, obtained by Romania in 2025, is devaluing as more and more European countries reintroduce border controls and restrict access (Gülzau, 2023).

I consider that the experience of Romania can be instructive for the Western Balkans countries which do not have the demographic and economic size of Romania but have similar problems and political culture. Migration, for example, can have profound consequences that can threaten some of these countries' survival as distinct societies and cultures. European integration is a great opportunity for the Western Balkans, but the dynamic between the national governance and the European

bureaucracy will always favor the later, so avoiding the political complacency that plagued Romanian politics will be difficult, as only a crisis, that the EU bureaucracy cannot and has no mandate to solve, can shake up the political establishment to face the issues and the expectations of their citizens.

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COGNITIVE WARFARE AS A TOOL TO COUNTER EUROPEAN INTEGRATION: THE CASE OF THE WESTERN BALKANS

*Ivanna MAKUKH-FEDORKOVA**

Abstract. This article explores the concept of cognitive warfare as a distinct and increasingly influential form of non-kinetic conflict that targets the human mind as a battlefield. Drawing on case studies from the Western Balkans, particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, the article analyzes how external actors use psychological operations, propaganda, and digital technologies to manipulate perceptions, reinforce ethnic divisions, and obstruct democratic integration. The study explains the mechanisms of influence through cognitive biases such as the availability heuristic, confirmation bias, and framing effects and demonstrates how they are systematically exploited in political communication and media narratives. Special attention is given to the role of the Overton Window in shifting public discourse toward the normalization of extreme ideas. The article argues that cognitive warfare represents a paradigm shift that merges information, psychological, and semantic operations, calling for increased societal resilience and awareness of the subtle methods used to influence individual and collective cognition.

Keywords: Cognitive warfare, propaganda, Western Balkans, cognitive bias, Overton Window.

The concept of cognitive warfare has only recently gained widespread scholarly and strategic attention, yet it emerges from a broader tradition of non-kinetic conflict, particularly psychological and informational operations. Cognitive warfare is fundamentally concerned with the manipulation of the human mind, aiming to influence perception, emotional response, decision-making, and ultimately, behavior. It is important to recognize that cognitive processes in this context are not random or spontaneous they follow a clear strategic logic. These processes involve targeted actions that seek to alter the worldview of individuals and groups through technological, psychological, and media-based interventions, often without the audience's awareness.

In today's hybrid threat environment, cognitive warfare is frequently conflated with related concepts such as information warfare and cyber warfare. However, as scholars have noted, these forms of conflict are distinct in scope and method. For instance, Martin Libicki, a researcher affiliated with the RAND Corporation, defined information warfare as a multifaceted construct consisting of command-and-control warfare, intelligence-based warfare, cryptographic and electronic operations, hacker warfare, economic information control, cyber warfare, and psychological warfare which includes cognitive manipulation directed at allies, adversaries, and neutral parties (Libicki, 1995:3). Yet, unlike information warfare, which primarily targets access to and

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control of information flows or cyber warfare, which seeks to disable digital infrastructure, cognitive warfare targets the mind itself. Its goal is not just to misinform, but to reshape how people think, feel, and act, often by exploiting existing cognitive biases and emotional vulnerabilities.

As this article demonstrates, the Western Balkans, a region marked by post-conflict fragility, ethnic fragmentation, and contested geopolitical alignments, has become a critical testing ground for cognitive warfare tactics. Through propaganda, digital disinformation, selective framing, and psychological manipulation, external actors most notably the Russian Federation have deployed cognitive tools to undermine democratic processes, fuel ethnic polarization, and obstruct the region's path toward European integration. These efforts do not operate in isolation but are part of a broader strategy that combines semantic, psychological, and technological instruments to gradually shift public discourse, normalize extremist views, and erode trust in Euro-Atlantic institutions.

This article aims to explore the specific mechanisms of cognitive warfare as applied in the Western Balkans, analyzing its use in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. It focuses on the ways in which cognitive biases such as the availability heuristic, confirmation bias, framing effect, and bandwagon effect are systematically manipulated. Special attention is given to the Overton Window as a theoretical model for understanding how previously unthinkable ideas become normalized in public discourse. By highlighting the interplay between cognitive manipulation and strategic geopolitical interests, the article offers a critical lens through which to assess emerging threats to European integration and democratic resilience in the region.

A group of authors, Lieutenant Colonel Michael Purcell, Major Brian McLaughlin, and research fellow of the Center for Advanced Operational Culture at the Marine Corps University, Blagovest Tashev, note in their joint article that «the cognitive dimension is the highest aspect of the information environment» (Tashev B., Purcell M., McLaughlin B., 2019:133). At the same time, the 2017 publication by Michael Connell and Sarah Vogler from the Center for Naval Analyses, *«Russia's Approach to Cyber Warfare»*, emphasizes that cognitive manipulation is a key element of cyber warfare (Connell M., Vogler S. 2017:7). However, other researchers argue that the control of cognition is not limited solely to information warfare or cyber warfare, as many political tools, such as propaganda, public relations, and public diplomacy – can also be employed to influence cognition. At the same time, a document from the Information Center highlights that cognitive warfare can be used by external actors to manipulate public opinion with the aim of destabilizing state institutions and influencing government policy.

Attention is also focused on the distinction between the concepts of information warfare and cognitive warfare: while the former aims to control information flows and the media, the latter is centered on controlling the mind and tracking people's reactions to particular information. Moreover, cognitive warfare can leverage new channels of public communication, such as social media, which can be used to effectively influence the population. A group of researchers in the field of digital technologies and security argues that equating information warfare with cognitive warfare is a mistake. This, in turn, highlights the lack of a unified understanding in the interpretation of the concept of cognitive warfare (Fenstermacher L., Uzcha D., Larson K. G., Vitiello C., & Shellman S. 2023:163). In any case, based on the above, it can be concluded that elements of

subconscious influence are inherent in any war. However, how exactly cognitive influence alters the perception of human goals and what technologies are used in this process will be discussed below.

For a more comprehensive understanding of the difference between the concepts, it is important to formulate clear definitions. According to NATO, information warfare is «Information Warfare is an operation conducted in order to gain an information advantage over the opponent. It involves control of your own information space, protection of access to your information, acquisition and use of the opponent's information, destruction of their information systems, and disruption of their information flow» (North Atlantic Treaty Organization. 2014: 14-1). In other words, information warfare is directed against decision-makers.

Cyber warfare is a type of cyber conflict and involves the destabilization of computer systems and internet access of government and financial institutions, the large-scale destruction of critical infrastructure, which may lead to significant losses, physical damage, and numerous fatalities (Andress J., Winterfeld S. (2014:306). In turn, cognitive warfare encompasses information warfare, offensive cyber operations, and psychological operations. It is, to some extent, an interdisciplinary approach that combines social sciences and emerging technologies with the aim of influencing understanding and decision-making processes, disrupting the heuristics of the human brain in the ultimate attempt, as French Chief of Defence General Thierry Burkhard put it – «to win the war before it even begins» (Pappalardo D. 2022). It is worth noting that propaganda is used in all wars, however, cognitive warfare differs in that the mass audience is influenced in a subtle and often unnoticed way, leading people to actively absorb imposed informational content. To some extent, this represents a kind of revolution, as it combines the use of psychological biases, reflexive thinking, and influence over decision-making by obstructing actions at both individual and collective levels. Most importantly, it involves the use of neuroscience as a weapon within the system of geopolitical transformation.

Cognitive warfare is increasingly recognized as a profound shift in the nature of conflict, aiming to exploit the brain itself as a battlefield. As noted in Polytechnique Insights: «Cognitive warfare uses technology as a weapon. It can use invasive technologies to alter the medium of thought, the brain, and more broadly the nervous system that underpins its functioning» (Claverie B. 2025, February 5). In this context, we can cite examples of the use of cognitive warfare to influence public opinion in the United States during the 2016 presidential election, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the United Kingdom's vote to leave the European Union (Cassidy, J.A. 2018, March 28). All of these cases lead to the conclusion that, in comparison to information warfare, cognitive warfare focuses less on controlling the media and more on the psychological and emotional state of the audience, appealing to fear, anxiety, or passive sentiments, often intensified by widespread disillusionment and apathy. Through social media and information technologies, covert information campaigns are conducted that can destabilize a country's economy and sow chaos by interfering in political processes both in democratic and authoritarian regimes.

A clear example of cognitive warfare being used to counter European integration can be found in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly within the entity of Republika Srpska. Russian-backed information operations, often carried out through state-sponsored media such as *Sputnik Srbija* and local outlets like RTRS, have promoted narratives aimed at fostering fear, distrust, and a sense of external threat among the Serb

population. These campaigns portray NATO and the European Union not as partners but as existential dangers to Serbian identity and autonomy. Rather than relying solely on traditional media control, these operations exploit the emotional and psychological vulnerabilities of targeted audiences – hallmarks of cognitive warfare. They amplify societal divisions and trigger cognitive dissonance through appeals to ethnic loyalty, historical grievances, and perceived cultural threats. As a result, such strategies undermine pro-European attitudes, fuel political polarization, and obstruct the country's path toward Euro-Atlantic integration. This is particularly visible in the rhetoric of Republika Srpska's leadership, which increasingly echoes Russian strategic messaging. According to the Re-Engage Horizon Europe project, this instrumentalization of ethnic fragmentation in Bosnia and Herzegovina serves as a deliberate tactic by external actors to maintain regional instability and weaken EU influence (Re-Engage Project. 2024).

Additional support for this assessment is provided by a report from the European Parliament, which highlights Russia's hybrid tactics in the Western Balkans, including disinformation and psychological influence aimed at derailing democratic consolidation and European alignment (Caprile, A., & Stanicek, B. 2023:3). These examples clearly demonstrate how cognitive warfare is leveraged as a strategic tool to counteract European integration in the Western Balkans.

It is worth mentioning the scholarly work of Ukrainian researcher Heorhii Pocheptsov, who notes that «each type of war targets its own domain. Information warfare does not change a person's beliefs it shapes the informational agenda through facts. Semantic warfare, on the other hand, sets the agenda for decades, as it transforms knowledge. Once knowledge is altered, facts lose all meaning, because a person makes decisions based on the new framework. The main danger lies in the fact that semantic warfare turns a person into a kind of 'censor' who interprets facts in a predetermined direction, thus achieving the ultimate goal – self-destruction of large social groups and even nations». Moreover, semantic warfare influences the public through mass culture, which includes informational, virtual, and commercial products, enhancing levels of appeal and aesthetic perception through the entertainment industry (Pocheptsov H. 2016:3).

Thus, semantic/cognitive wars that use «soft power» are less noticeable than informational ones, as they are wrapped in a veil of aesthetic appeal. This is where their danger lies because their disguise operates subtly yet effectively, always aiming for long-term impact. This allows us to conclude that semantic/cognitive warfare possesses a deeper structure of influence.

To better understand the methods and technologies of semantic/cognitive warfare aimed at changing the value systems of social groups and their collective consciousness, let us briefly examine the specifics of the psychology of cognitive influence and its history. The development of cognitive science began in the 1950s and marked a revolutionary shift, as the scientific interdisciplinary field for studying human intelligence and behavior emerged under the influence of the scientific and technological revolution. It encompasses functions of the nervous system such as mental abilities, developmental psychology, perception, memory, emotional experience, decision-making, and more. All of this aligns with new approaches in philosophy, linguistics, neuroscience, and the emergence of artificial intelligence (Gardner H. 1985:6). As well as the development of cybernetics in the 1930s-1940s.

For several decades, behaviorism dominated experimental psychology, effectively rejecting the study of mental responses and thinking. According to

behaviorists such as J. B. Watson, psychology should be limited to examining the relationship between observable stimuli and behavioral responses (Watson J. B. 1924:11). The discussion of consciousness and mental representations was absent from scientific discourse because behaviorism continued to dominate in North America through the 1950s. However, in the second half of the decade, the situation began to change with the active development of artificial intelligence research. By the 1970s and 1980s, cognitive science had emerged as a distinct academic discipline, and in 1986, the world's first Department of Cognitive Science was established at the University of California, San Diego (University of California, San Diego).

An interesting fact is that in 1972, American psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, as part of their scientific research, introduced the concept of *cognitive bias* – a deviation in judgments that manifests as a tendency to think in a certain way, violating the logic of common sense and leading to illogical conclusions about other people or situations. Indeed, our brain's resources are insufficient to analyze all the information we receive especially now, when we live in an era of total information overload. In order to filter out unnecessary details, react more quickly, and believe that our conclusions are correct and rational, our brain sometimes deceives us. This «deception» happens precisely because of cognitive biases, a concept studied by both psychologists and behavioral economists.

Most researchers agree that cognitive biases help us deal with four key problems: information overload, difficulty in understanding complex issues or questions, the inability to remember large amounts of information, and heuristic availability. It is worth noting that in 1973, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman were the first to study this phenomenon and called it the *availability heuristic* – an intuitive process in which a person perceives events based on how easily they come to mind, relying on examples that are most readily recalled when evaluating a specific situation, topic, or decision (Tversky A., Kahneman, D. 1974:1124). The main goal of propaganda is the development of cognitive heuristics that reject any alternative version of reality. Propaganda aims to create an emotional state in people that lowers their capacity for critical thinking. A continuous stream of television shows is primarily used to keep people in this state of heightened emotional involvement. These shows follow the rules of theatrical performance and strive to become addictive to their audience an approach actively employed by Russian propaganda.

In this context, it is worth emphasizing the aforementioned Israeli-American psychologist, economist, and sociologist Daniel Kahneman, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 2002. He gained widespread recognition for his 2011 book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Kahneman D. 2017: 480), in which, drawing on research in cognitive and social psychology, he explores how the human brain functions. The book details unconscious biases and the role of emotions in evaluative judgments.

Propaganda actively leverages various cognitive biases to manipulate public consciousness and shape desired narratives. One of the most common is confirmation bias, where people attend only to information that reinforces their existing beliefs and ignore anything contradictory. This allows propaganda to continuously reinforce its preferred views for example, by showcasing only the «victories» or «heroism» of one side while concealing defeats. It also heavily relies on the availability heuristic (Tversky, A., Kahneman, D. 1973:208), where frequent exposure to specific types of events such as violence or aggression by the enemy creates the false impression that such events are widespread.

A concrete illustration of cognitive bias exploitation in the Western Balkans can be seen in media portrayals of Kosovo within Serbian-speaking communities across the region. Russian-aligned platforms and sympathetic local outlets frequently highlight isolated instances of violence allegedly committed by Kosovar Albanians against Serbs, disproportionately amplifying these events compared to broader realities. This repeated exposure to violent imagery or reports fosters the *availability heuristic* the impression that such violence is systemic and constant, even when statistical data suggests otherwise (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973:208).

Simultaneously, confirmation bias is engaged through selective reporting that reinforces pre-existing Serbian narratives of victimhood and betrayal by Western actors. Pro-Russian media often frame EU and NATO support for Kosovo as proof of a Western agenda against Serbs, feeding into historical grievances and distrust toward Euro-Atlantic institutions. This method creates a closed cognitive loop, where audiences reject alternative perspectives as disinformation or enemy propaganda.

Such tactics have been particularly effective during moments of political tension, like the 2023 North Kosovo unrest, when media outlets presented events in a way that deepened ethnic divisions and mobilized public opposition to Western diplomacy. These narratives, consistently reinforced, undermine efforts at regional stabilization and European integration by presenting the EU as biased and incapable of protecting Serb interests. This strategy has been documented in both policy research and European institutional analysis (Caprile & Stanicek, 2023:3), and is further supported by findings from the Horizon Europe *Re-Engage* project, which highlights how external actors exploit ethnic fragmentation to sustain instability in the Western Balkans (Re-Engage Project, 2024:78).

The framing effect plays a significant role in shaping public perception in the Western Balkans, particularly within the context of geopolitical tensions and strategic communication campaigns. Framing allows the same event to be interpreted in multiple ways, depending on how it is presented linguistically and contextually. In the post-Yugoslav region, foreign and local actors have strategically used framing to influence attitudes toward the European Union, NATO, and national governments. A notable example is the persistent reframing of military or political interventions. In Serbian-language media affiliated with Russian interests, NATO-led operations or regional peacekeeping efforts are often described not as security cooperation, but as «Western pressure» or «threats to sovereignty», thus turning neutral or supportive actions into perceived aggressions (Entman, 1993:52). During the 2023 unrest in North Kosovo, for instance, pro-Kremlin media such as *Sputnik Srbija* and *RT Balkan* framed violent attacks against Kosovar police as legitimate «defensive actions» by local Serbs rather than acts of provocation or sabotage. This reframing redirected public sentiment away from criticism of violence and toward solidarity with the aggressors (Caprile & Stanicek, 2023:3).

Similarly, during the 2018 referendum in North Macedonia on the country's name change a prerequisite for NATO and EU accession disinformation campaigns reframed the agreement with Greece as a «betrayal of national identity». This framing, amplified by pro-Russian actors, portrayed the name change not as a diplomatic achievement, but as the forced erasure of Macedonian heritage. As a result, public opposition increased, and voter turnout was significantly affected (GMFUS, 2019:4).

Another clear application of the framing effect occurred during the post-2022 energy crisis in the Balkans. Pro-Russian narratives in Serbia and Republika Srpska

reframed rising energy prices as a consequence of «anti-Russian sanctions imposed by the West», ignoring the broader global energy context. Meanwhile, EU institutions framed the crisis as a «temporary challenge during the green transition». This divergence in framing shaped opposing interpretations of the same economic event and influenced public blame attribution (Re-Engage Project, 2024:78).

These strategically curated frames shape not only emotional responses but also cognitive processing. By presenting EU efforts in the region as either «imperialist manipulation» or «economic colonization», these actors delegitimize democratic reforms and create a sense of cultural encroachment. As Entman (1993) notes, framing involves both *selection* and *salience*: choosing which aspects of reality to emphasize and how to present them in ways that guide interpretation (Entman, 1993:52).

Thus, in the Western Balkans, the framing effect is a powerful tool of cognitive warfare. It amplifies ethnonationalist sentiments, reinforces geopolitical alignments, and weakens trust in Euro-Atlantic institutions. Unless countered through narrative resilience and critical media literacy, such frames will continue to distort democratic discourse and obstruct regional integration.

The bandwagon effect – a cognitive bias where individuals adopt beliefs or behaviors because they perceive them to be widely accepted – has been strategically employed in the Western Balkans to influence public opinion and political alignment. In highly polarized and transitional societies, the desire to conform to the perceived majority opinion can become a powerful tool for information manipulation, especially when combined with nationalistic rhetoric or geopolitical framing.

In Montenegro, during the mass protests surrounding the 2019 *Law on Religious Freedom*, state-affiliated and pro-Serbian media repeatedly portrayed opposition to the law as a «national movement» supported by the «entire Orthodox population». This messaging framed participation in protests not just as a political act, but as a collective cultural obligation. Through visual coverage of massive processions, religious symbols, and emotional appeals, the narrative reinforced the idea that «everyone» was resisting the government's pro-European stance. This mobilized even apolitical individuals to join for fear of being seen as outsiders or traitors (European Western Balkans. 2021, September 6). In Serbia, the government has frequently used the bandwagon effect during elections by emphasizing “national unity” behind President Aleksandar Vučić's leadership. State-controlled outlets amplify poll results and street interviews that depict overwhelming support for the ruling party, often sidelining dissenting voices. Such one-sided coverage cultivates an impression that public consensus already exists, thereby pressuring undecided voters to «go with the flow» to avoid marginalization (Freedom House, 2022:18).

Another illustrative case emerged in Republika Srpska during the 2022 general elections, where local media linked support for Milorad Dodik's SNSD party with loyalty to Serbian heritage and resistance to «foreign interference». Citizens who questioned Dodik's governance or expressed pro-European views were often portrayed as working against «Serb unity», framing dissent not as legitimate criticism, but as betrayal. This form of social shaming relies on the bandwagon mechanism: people are made to feel that opposition is not only unpopular, but socially dangerous (Bieber & Tzifakis, 2020:141). Importantly, this effect is further reinforced online. Social media campaigns driven by bots and coordinated troll networks artificially inflate likes, shares, and supportive comments on pro-government content, simulating public consensus. In turn, genuine users are nudged toward accepting and amplifying dominant narratives, believing they

reflect the actual majority (Jovanović V. 2022, December 5). The illusion of mass support becomes a substitute for real debate.

Thus, in the Western Balkans, the bandwagon effect is not merely a passive psychological phenomenon – it is actively engineered through media ecosystems and political messaging. It leverages cultural identity, nationalism, and fear of social exclusion to drive conformity and suppress dissent. Addressing this challenge requires not only media literacy but also pluralistic platforms that visibly reflect diversity of opinion.

In the context of the Western Balkans, cognitive biases are not merely abstract psychological concepts – they are actively harnessed in political communication, media framing, and foreign influence strategies. Among the most influential are the polarization effect and the illusory truth effect, both of which are particularly effective in fragile, post-conflict societies. These biases shape not only how people interpret events, but also how they relate to one another often reinforcing division, distrust, and resistance to democratic reform. The following examples illustrate how these effects operate in the region and the risks they pose to social cohesion and political stability.

The polarization effect intensifies inter-group hostility rather than merely encouraging disagreement. Ethnic identities are continually pitted against each other through media segmentation and political framing, creating stark «us versus them» narratives. According to a report on political dynamics in Bosnia and North Macedonia, ethnic identity is wielded as a political tool party strategies are tailored to specific groups, reinforcing divisions rather than bridging them (Political Staff Report, 2018:3). This practice ensures that citizens increasingly see political issues through an ethnic lens, fostering distrust and opposition toward other communities.

A tangible example comes from Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the implementation of the «two schools under one roof» model in mixed Croat–Bosniak areas consolidates segregation. Students from different ethnic groups attend the same building but are physically, symbolically, and psychologically separated. This arrangement perpetuates division, encouraging each community to view the other as fundamentally different – thereby reinforcing polarization at an early age (OSCE, 2018:2).

Equally pervasive is the illusory truth effect, whereby repeated statements even false ones become accepted as fact. Experimental studies have demonstrated how mere repetition increases perceived accuracy (Unkelbach C., Fiedler K. 2021:1). In the Balkans, propagandistic narratives about geopolitical threats are relentlessly broadcast across radio, TV, and social media. Claims such as «EU accession equals loss of national identity» are repeated continuously, especially during referenda or elections. Over time, even skeptics internalize these statements as credible, weakening support for EU integration and embedding distrust through sheer repetition.

Both cognitive biases polarization and illusory truth become especially potent under conditions of societal fear, economic uncertainty, or external pressure. When trust in institutions is low, endorsements from one's in-group carry disproportionate weight. Falsehoods repeated amid such stress feel familiar and thus plausible, even to educated individuals.

Modern propaganda frequently employs non-contradictory or simplified models of perception such as binary oppositions like «us vs. them» or «friend vs. foe». These cognitive frames serve to justify the severity of criminal actions and reshape public perception. In this context, the concept of the Overton Window plays a crucial role in

legitimizing previously unthinkable ideas (Mackinac Center for Public Policy. 2006, January 4). American engineer and lawyer Joseph Overton developed a model explaining how public attitudes toward controversial topics can shift – from total rejection and moral condemnation to political acceptance and integration into mainstream ideology. The Overton Window follows a progression: first, a shocking idea appears in the media; then it faces public backlash; subsequently, rational arguments are introduced to normalize the idea; and eventually, it becomes embedded in public discourse and even popular culture.

In the Western Balkans, propaganda and cognitive manipulation go beyond simple framing or repetition they actively seek to shift the Overton Window, that is, what ideas are considered acceptable in public discourse. This strategy gradually moves previously extreme or taboo notions into mainstream conversation, ultimately normalizing them. A clear regional example is the campaign in Montenegro surrounding the 2023–2024 debate over the UN’s Srebrenica resolution and census-driven national identity measures (Disinformation Surrounding the Resolution on Srebrenica, Digital Forensic Center, 2024, pp. 1–2).

According to a detailed analysis by the US-based Defense & Foreign Affairs Council (DFC), pro-Serbian and pro-Russian actors used targeted influence operations to introduce radical constitutional changes into mainstream discourse. Initially, radical ideas like amending Montenegro’s constitution based on ethnic census results or obstructing EU-backed resolutions were presented as legitimate public concerns (DFC, 2024:3). Through repeated media messaging and political statements, these ideas moved from being deemed extremist to being perceived as prudent or necessary measures. Montenegrin politicians such as Andrija Mandić publicly stated plans to amend the constitution depending on census outcomes (DFC, 2024:4). This acted as a deliberate Overton Window shift: by repeating such assertions in media and parliamentary discourse, previously fringe positions such as redefining citizenship or national identity became part of acceptable political conversation. This process minimized dissent; actions that would have been unthinkable months earlier were now seen as viable.

The strategy reflects the logic of the Overton Window, a model describing how ideas shift from the unthinkable to mainstream policy. First came the shock phase: the proposal of census-based constitutional reforms. Then followed normalization, as political actors and commentators increasingly presented these reforms as legitimate protections of Serb cultural rights. Finally, institutionalization occurred through formal parliamentary debate and legal drafting, marking the acceptance of previously marginal ideas into the legislative process (Lehman, 2006, p. 1).

Importantly, these developments operated against a backdrop of polarization and illusory truth, which reinforced the narrative’s perceived legitimacy. As the Overton Window shifted, more traditional media outlets began echoing these ideas, reinforcing the notion that they represented mainstream opinion (NATO Review, 2020:2). By embedding constitutional amendment discussions in everyday political talk, the Overton Window strategy facilitated a stealthy yet dramatic transformation of what was considered «acceptable» in Montenegrin public life.

CONCLUSION

Cognitive warfare represents not merely a supplementary tactic in modern conflict, but a strategic and paradigmatic shift in the nature of influence operations. As demonstrated in the Western Balkans, this form of warfare exploits the vulnerabilities of the human mind to reshape political behavior, social cohesion, and collective values.

Unlike conventional or information warfare, cognitive warfare targets the inner architecture of thought memory, identity, emotion, and perception operating across multiple domains including media, education, culture, and digital ecosystems.

Through mechanisms such as confirmation bias, the availability heuristic, the framing effect, polarization, the illusory truth effect, and the bandwagon effect, actors like Russia, often in alliance with local political elites or sympathetic media, undermine the legitimacy of Euro-Atlantic institutions, normalize once-radical discourses through Overton Window shifts, and reengineer national narratives. This manipulation is not overt; it works precisely because it is subtle, mimicking organic social processes while covertly steering public discourse toward desired geopolitical outcomes.

What makes cognitive warfare especially dangerous in transitional societies like those of the Western Balkans is the legacy of ethnic fragmentation, fragile democratic institutions, and persistent economic and political instability. These factors create a fertile ground for manipulation, where disinformation is not only consumed but often internalized, particularly in environments with low media literacy and high distrust in public institutions. The Balkan examples show that undermining European integration does not require large-scale military aggression; it requires the gradual erosion of belief in its necessity and legitimacy.

Therefore, the response to cognitive warfare must go beyond cyber defense or counter-disinformation efforts. It must involve a holistic strategy of narrative resilience, grounded in education, pluralistic media ecosystems, inclusive political discourse, and public campaigns that reinforce critical thinking, civic values, and democratic legitimacy. Regional and international actors must also recognize the urgency of developing early-warning mechanisms that detect not only propaganda, but subtle shifts in discourse and emerging social narratives that indicate cognitive intrusion.

Ultimately, this analysis suggests that cognitive warfare has become the invisible frontline of 21st-century conflict, a silent war for perception in which victories and defeats are often unseen, but deeply consequential. Its deployment in the Western Balkans should serve as a cautionary case study for democratic societies worldwide, emphasizing the imperative to protect not just borders and institutions, but the very cognitive frameworks that underpin freedom, rationality, and social trust.

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METHODS AND MEANS AT EUROPEAN LEVEL TO ERADICATE HUMAN TRAFFICKING. ORIGIN AREA VICTIMS

*Aurora GAVRIS**

Abstract. *Trafficking in human beings in its forms of manifestation, mainly through sexual exploitation, forced labor and coercion to commit crimes, especially against children and people with disabilities, is a phenomenon often linked to organized crime, but whose real dimension is unknown. At the level of the European Union, it was considered necessary to intensify the fight against trafficking, adopting the Strategy to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings 2021-2025 with the commitment of Member States to support the implementation of the necessary measures through specific judicial methods, with an emphasis on cooperation in the fields of enforcement law and cooperation between Member States - by promoting dialogue and good practices through EU agencies - together with the private sector and digital industries. Therefore, with the exacerbation of the phenomenon, the measures and methods to combat it have diversified, starting with the elements of prevention, investigation and sanctioning and with increased attention paid to victims - a category presenting individual, social, economic or other vulnerabilities - aiming at specific and personalized assistance and protection, including financial, upon return, if applicable, as well as specific guarantees for children - the goal being its eradication.*

Keywords: *human trafficking, victims, methods of combating.*

INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking as a criminal phenomenon of our days is shameful for humanity, being "a form of slavery at the beginning of the millennium" (Udroiu, 2015:136) that should not exist at all!

Universal human rights instruments consider human trafficking as part of the category of crimes against humanity, respectively from the perspective of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the three additional protocols: the Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish human trafficking, especially women and children, the Protocol against the smuggling of migrants by land, air and sea and the Protocol against the illicit manufacturing and trafficking in firearms, their parts and components and ammunition. The Romanian Criminal Code, through art. 439 letter c), classifies slavery or trafficking in human beings, especially women or children, as crimes against humanity, being part of the dangerous acts targeting the entire society, of serious public danger, criminal acts not only affecting the person or private relationships between individuals. Moreover, slavery, human trafficking, trafficking minors, pimping, sexual assault, torture and child pornography are included in Romania from 2021 in the category of non-prescriptive crimes, no longer removing criminal liability.

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The international community has set out to eradicate human trafficking, all the more so since during the last century "millions of children, women and men have been victims of atrocities that defy the imagination and deeply offend the human conscience" (Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court - Preamble), all forms of slavery being criminalized, Article 7 of the Statute attributing to the category of crimes against humanity: submission to slavery, rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity, if these are committed as part of a generalized or systematic attack launched against a civilian population; if we consider that human trafficking is a variety of the slave trade, and forced labor is a form of slavery, then it is imperative to repress these phenomena, of increased danger for all humanity; Due to the brutal nature of the violation of human rights and freedoms, human trafficking is placed on the same level as crimes against humanity and, extrapolating, we find that practically, in all international acts containing norms regarding acts classified as crimes against humanity, some varieties of human trafficking are also found (Jitariuc, 2021).

Also, as stated in the introductory part of the Romanian Strategy against Trafficking in Persons for 2024-2028¹ ... "[t]he phenomenon is extremely versatile, with increasingly varied manifestations, from year to year and from one geographical region to another". Among the elements that amplify the phenomenon of trafficking in persons at the level of the European Union is the conflict in Ukraine, which has generated, on the one hand, the departure of numerous people from their own territory in search of a better life.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING CRIMINALIZED AT ROMANIAN NATIONAL LEVEL

In Romania, human trafficking is criminalized by art. 210 of the Criminal Code and designates, in simple or basic form of the crime, "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of a person for the purpose of exploiting him/her, committed: a) by coercion, kidnapping, deception or abuse of authority; b) taking advantage of the impossibility of defending oneself or expressing one's will or of the state of obvious vulnerability of that person; c) by offering, giving, accepting or receiving money or other benefits in exchange for the consent of the person who has authority over that person - is punishable by imprisonment from 5 to 12 years and the prohibition of the exercise of certain rights."

We specify that until July 1, 2024 in Romania, human trafficking and slavery were punishable by imprisonment from 3 to 10 years, the tightening by raising the quantum of the punishment for serious crimes indicates a criminal policy of the Romanian state, directly admitted at the perpetrators and the criminal phenomenon and indirectly, at the victims. The ways in which a person can be exploited - generically understanding "the exploitation of the physical capacities of human beings" (Gavriş, 2013: 49) but also by applying numerous psychological tactics, are indicated by Law no. 678/2001 as those set out in art. 182 of the Criminal Code, namely: - submission to the execution of work or the performance of services, forcibly; - keeping in a state of slavery or other similar procedures of deprivation of freedom or enslavement; - forcing to practice prostitution, to engage in pornographic activities for the purpose of producing and distributing pornographic materials or to engage in other forms of sexual

¹ Published in the Romanian Official Monitor, no. 467 bis, from May 21, 2024.

exploitation; - forcing to practice begging; - illegally removing organs, tissues or cells of human origin.

The qualified form of the human trafficking crime is that provided for in art. 210 paragraph 2 of the Romanian Criminal Code "human trafficking committed by a public official in the exercise of his official duties is punishable by imprisonment from 7 to 15 years", a situation for which, with Law 202/2024² amending and supplementing Law no. 286/2009 on the Criminal Code, the penalties have been increased. We specify that given that the aggravated form of human trafficking is committed by a public official, it cannot be classified as abuse of office, but if the public official commits the act of human trafficking outside of working time or while not exercising his official duties, we are talking about the basic form of the crime for the attention of the judicial authorities.

From the point of view of legal theory, the judicial object of the human trafficking crime is a complex one, since the values protected by criminal law concern human rights, since "human trafficking includes slavery, forced labor, violence, abuse of trust, physical and psychological person aggression, being fully justified the assessment that human trafficking and illegal migration has become "a profitable business for members of the international underworld" (Zidaru, 2003: 268); [...] "the trafficker and the victim are constantly looking for each other and with equally advantageous interests" (Zidaru, 2003: 270); we are implicitly mentioning the economic perspective and stake and we are recalling that at one point, given through the project *You count, not promises!* (UKHTC: 2006, IOM: 2001 *apud* Gavriș, 2013: 11) Romanian partners of the International Organization for Migration carried out campaigns raising awareness and alerting public opinion under the motto "Human beings are priceless" (The Logo is the property of the ILO, 2001 and was created by Tempo Advertising) making the comparison with drug trafficking - human trafficking being more profitable because a person can be sold several times, unlike a dose of cocaine can only be sold at once;

from another perspective, which the Criminal Code presented through the situation of Article 210 within Title I "Crimes against the person", Chapter VII "Trafficking and exploitation of vulnerable persons", although not always when trafficking is criminalized it had this appreciation/consideration; in the current situation, through the provisions of Law no. 187/2012³ implementing Law no. 286/2009 on the Criminal Code, it was also considered to grant criminal legislation until that date affecting some relationships regarding social coexistence" in which Prostitution and Prostitution (decriminalized on February 1, 2014⁴) were punished in another Title, namely Title I "Crimes against the person", this data in Chapter VII "Trafficking and exploitation of vulnerable persons" - protecting certain categories of people in difficult or delicate situations whose condition is circumscribed by certain vulnerabilities.

On the other side, prostitution is currently sanctioned, but it is considered a contravention under Law no. 61/1991 for the sanctioning of acts of violation of certain norms of social coexistence, public order and peace⁵, updated by Law no. 174/2023, provides in art. 2 para. 6 that the act of "attracting persons, in any form, committed in premises, parks, on the streets or in other public places in order to practice sexual

² Published in the Romanian Official Monitor, P. I. no. 607 from June 28, 2024.

³ Published in the Romanian Official Monitor, no. 757, November 12, 2012.

⁴ By the entry into force of Law No. 286/2009 on the Criminal Code and by implementing Law no. 187/2012.

⁵ Published in the Romanian Official Monitor, no. 125, February 18, 2020.

relations with them in order to obtain material benefits, as well as inciting or determining, for the same purpose, a person to commit such acts" constitutes a contravention, as does "accepting or tolerating the practice of prostitution in hotels, motels, campsites, bars, restaurants, clubs, guesthouses, discos or in their annexes by the owners or administrators or managers of the respective premises" is sanctioned with a contravention fine of 500 to 1500 lei according to art. 3 para. 1 letter. c) for premises, the measure of suspending activity for a period between 10 and 30 days was also taken (according to art. 3 paragraph 3 of Law no. 61/1991 amended by Law no. 174/2023⁶).

Also, another financial stake is labor exploitation, a phenomenon to which children, women and men also fall prey, but not all of them choose to complain to the authorities or judicial bodies (on the one side, they do not know that they were victims of the crime of human trafficking, considering that they were only deceived, and on the other side, they consider that they were, at most, passive subjects of the crime of deception provided for in art. 244 of the Criminal Code, a fact that would induce a state of shame compared to the known ones, so they abandon any attempt to complain to the authorities about the situations they went through (Gavriş, 2013).

As for the crime of minors trafficking, it is incriminated by art. 211 of the Criminal Romanian Code, in its simple/basic form assuming the recruitment, transportation, transfer, sheltering or reception of a minor, for the purpose of exploiting him/her, being punished with imprisonment from 7 to 15 years and the prohibition of exercising certain rights (with regard to this phrase – the prohibition of exercising certain rights, we refer to the so-called complementary penalties provided for in the Romanian Penal Code, respectively); we specify that even if the law presents several alternative ways in which the act can be committed, "the commission of a single crime of trafficking in minors will be considered" (Udroiu, 2015: 146), and unlike the crime of trafficking in persons, "in the case of the crime of trafficking in minors in the standard form, the manner in which the trafficking was carried out is not important (the law does not impose alternative essential requirements, it can be committed by any means)" (Udroiu, 2015: p. 146).

Romanian regulatory changes increasingly support victims of crimes – in this regard, we mention the provisions of art. 266 of the Code, the scope of which was expanded by paragraph 1¹⁷ and sanctions the act of a person who, upon becoming aware of the commission of an act provided for by criminal law, of trafficking and exploitation of vulnerable persons or against sexual freedom and integrity, committed against a minor, does not immediately notify the authorities, is punishable by imprisonment from 6 months to 2 years. We do not omit, considering it important to mention that even if the consent of the person (victim) of human trafficking is obtained, the trafficker is not absolved of punishment since according to art. 210 paragraph 3 this does not constitute a justifiable cause in committing the act.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING VICTIMS

Following a study (Gavriş, 2013) that consisted of using several research methods, carried out on several dimensions, assuming:

⁶ Published in the Romanian Official Monitor, no. 544, June 20, 2023.

⁷ Paragraph 1¹ of art. 266 was introduced by sole art. point 4 by Law no. 186/2021, published in the Romanian Official Monitor, no. 657, July 2, 2021.

-quantitative research realized through self-administered questionnaires in the Regional Centers of the National Agency Against Trafficking in Persons (Gavriș, 2013: 282-294);

- qualitative research – documentary analysis of indictments realized by specialized prosecutors of the Bihor Court, the Oradea Court of Appeal and DIICOT/Directorate for the Investigation of Organized Crime and Terrorism – ST/Territorial Service Oradea during the 2003-2008, having as accusation object the crime of trafficking in persons and/or minors;

- qualitative research – life story – semi-structured interviews applied in the Oradea Penitentiary, Bihor County, to persons who committed human trafficking crimes, who were at that time (2009) serving a prison sentence (including female sex);

- study developed at the Street Social Service of the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection of Bihor County and at the Oradea Regional Center of the National Agency Against Trafficking in Persons;

- case study realized at the Center for Assistance and Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking in Satu Mare;

- interview given by the President of the Young Generation Association – Timișoara

- qualitative research - Case studies of victims of human trafficking (Gavriș, 2013: 334-337),

it can see that over time, the methods and techniques of recruitment and exploitation used by traffickers or by criminal networks have diversified, and the connection with related criminality has increased its scope; on the other hand, even among the already classic practices, traffickers still apply the *Lover boy method*, often managing to marry the victim. Extensive research (Gavriș, 2013) has revealed numerous aspects both in terms of traffickers, the methods of exploitation, but also the victims and their profile. Indeed, victims of trafficking are the beings directly and most affected by this phenomenon, what is of interest to them is the extensive recovery process and, as far as possible, social reinsertion.

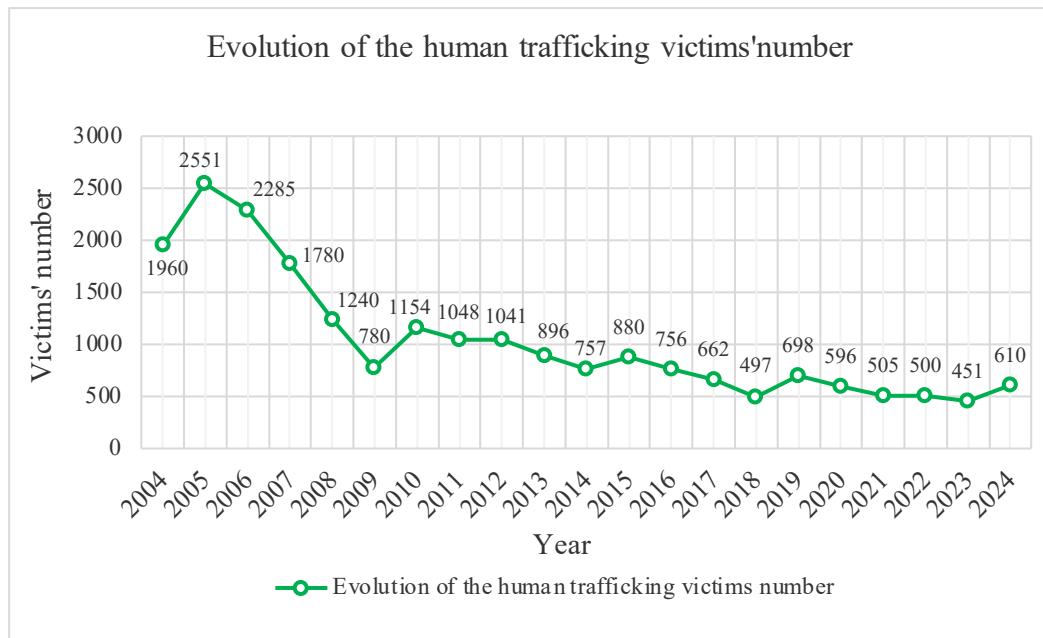
For the current reality, humanity also going through the pandemic period created by COVID-19 and in parallel with the development of social networks, easy access to the internet, accessible online equipment and communication, and trafficking methods have diversified; if previously recruitment was much more cumbersome, through employment companies, through classified ads, through ads from modeling agencies or through recommendations - usually made by people from the circle of friends, acquaintances or even relatives, currently access to dialogue and exchange of information is mediated by computer or telephone and is carried out even through Instagram, Facebook or other platforms. One such case is that of H.A., which I learned about in 2020, who had been "researched in the «Operation Brescia» - a criminal case in which the Romanian authorities had collaborated with those in Italy" (Oprea, 2020).

As a case that we mention, we specify that we met H.A. in 2009 in the Oradea Penitentiary where he was incarcerated following the execution of a sentence for human trafficking, trafficking in minors and pimping, and we recorded him as he himself told us - his own Life Story (Gavriș, 2013: 326-328). Although the years have passed, in 2020 we were unpleasantly surprised that our subject did not abandon his criminal career (this conviction he receives being the fifth), but on the contrary, he adapted his mode of operation even for the exceptional situation in which we all find ourselves in Romania, namely the state of emergency; the perpetrator of the crime together with an accomplice,

in addition to acts such as deception, transportation for the purpose of trafficking a 23-year-old young woman, also had the intention of crossing the state border with the aim of placing the young woman in an international network for the purpose of practicing prostitution, probably in the form of a form of pimping; given the situation in 2020 created by the COVID-19 pandemic - restrictions on movement, etc. and, the intention of one of the recruiters to leave the country with the girl failed; However, the recruiters did not abandon the idea of making money from the girl, and one of them (the subject we interviewed) tried to sell her through messages on Facebook to certain people he thought would be interested in such a purchase. The asking price for a human being was 400 euros - for life, for a 23-year-old girl, who had apparently already been processed using the well-known techniques of traffickers, as the presentation stated that she was docile and would be delivered the following evening, in the parking lot of a supermarket! ... but the efforts did not have the expected outcome, as one of those contacted as potential buyers reported the act by contacting the police, and H.A. was caught red-handed, as a result of which he was arrested, then tried and sentenced to 5 years in prison with execution and the prohibition of certain rights. P.S. Following the criminal trial, the girl that H.A. tried to sell obtained from the Romanian court of law - the Bihor County Court, an amount of 450 euros representing moral damages. The court decision is not final, however.

Regarding the evolution/dynamics of the number of victims referred to the authorities, over time, respectively over a 20-year period presented in the graph below (Graph no. 1 representing the evolution of the number of victims of human trafficking, distributed by year), we can observe that it is fluctuating, but also that there is a decrease starting with 2008, respectively 2013.

Grafic no. 1. The evolution of the human trafficking victims' number (Source: National Agency Against Trafficking in Persons, www.anitp.mai.gov.ro)



Therefore, a unified and centralized analysis of the evolution of the number of victims can also be observed after the National Agency Against Trafficking in Persons became functional - a specialized central public institution, headquartered in Bucharest, respectively the regional centers throughout Romania, and we appreciate that this national institution can coordinate and address the issue of trafficking in persons and minors through public and unified policies; in another vein, we do not omit the role of regional centers, such as the one in Oradea, Romania, in anti-trafficking activities; we also consider important, perhaps even the most important, non-governmental organizations that are involved in activities of assistance, recovery and social reintegration of victims.

METHODS AND MEANS AT NATIONAL LEVEL TO ERADICATE HUMAN TRAFFICKING

In the fight against trafficking, the central element from a normative point of view is Law no. 678/2001 on the prevention and combating of human trafficking⁸, a special law that broadens the scope of action through elements regarding the prevention and combating of the phenomenon, creating the organizational framework for extensive activities in which central public institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Labor, Family, Youth and Social Solidarity, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Education and Research, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Justice, decentralized public institutions, including the institution of the prefect and his working apparatus, local public administration authorities as well as civil society actors, entities in a public-private partnership; therefore, the state through its institutions participates in the implementation of preventive measures and combating human trafficking, and in this regard, for efficient coordination, there is the National Strategy against Human Trafficking for the period 2024-2028 approved by Government Decision no. 533/2024⁹.

Also, for a statistical records that provides information to the authorities and those who have access to them, including from other states, in case of judicial cooperation or letters rogatory, the National automated registry of persons who have committed sexual offences, exploitation of persons or minors¹⁰ was established by Law no. 118/2019, representing a means of knowledge, surveillance and operational identification of persons on the basis of which, moreover, the behavioral integrity certificate can be obtained, both by the person in question and by various institutions; in the case of victims of human trafficking as well as to supplement Law no. 76/2008 on the organization and functioning of the National system of judicial genetic data¹¹, their genetic profiles are introduced (even without their consent), which is also an operational method that provides valuable information in the fight against trafficking.

METHODS AND MEANS AT EUROPEAN LEVEL TO ERADICATE HUMAN TRAFFICKING

"Starting from certain aspects generated by human trafficking between 2017 and 2018 which indicated that at the European Union level there were 14,000 victims, with an estimated economic cost of 2.7 billion euros/year and considering that finding a job is

⁸ Published in the Romanian Official Monitor, no. 783 din December 11, 2001, up to date.

⁹ Published in the Romanian Official Monitor, no. 467, May 21, 2024.

¹⁰ Published in the Romanian Official Monitor, no. 522, June 26, 2019.

¹¹ Published in the Romanian Official Monitor, no. 289, April 14, 2008.

the main factor that trafficking networks and traffickers speculated on in the case of victims of trafficking" – all this issue was exposed within the European forums through the Question asked by Mr. Traian Băsescu – MEP from Romania – EPP (2018); The response was provided by Ms Johansson (2018) on behalf of the European Commission on the issue raised regarding the crime of human trafficking, its effects and combating the phenomenon and aimed at the promise of improving the future combat strategy by expanding it internationally, on the prosecution and conviction of traffickers, on the support and empowerment of victims, especially women and children, with an emphasis on the phenomenon of trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation.

Aspects such as the one reported regarding poverty and lack of/search for jobs have generated new perspectives regarding the adoption by the European Commission of two strategies: the Strategy for Combating Organized Crime, and the Strategy for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings 2021-2025; through these, we appreciate that concerted action is being taken and with a broader vision by combating the criminal phenomenon, since globalization at societal and economic exchanges, the business environment facilitates, the emergence of new ways of criminal action and modes of operation in case of transnational criminal networks, which exploit legislative loopholes, access the internet in its obscure or dark variants and give rise to a qualified crime - serious criminality.

Regarding Romania, an analysis of the data presented by the Romanian authority with competence in the matter, namely the National Agency Against Trafficking in Persons (ANITP), showed that for the year 2024, a number of 610 victims of human trafficking were referred, 35% more than in the previous year. What also presents a novelty is the existence of a 3 times higher number of victims who are foreign citizens, coming from non-EU areas such as Bangladesh, Colombia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka or the Republic of Moldova (18 victims) and who were sexually exploited or exploited through labor or in other forms (Chera, 2024) but also the presence of victims coming from European states such as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Hungary, although their number is relatively small, respectively 6; we specify that even the existence of a victim is, in value, quantitatively significant, because it can be the beginning of a growing phenomenon or a phenomenon with an increased degree of danger or risk; This indication can also be positive, and can also generate preventive actions, in the sense that we want this phenomenon to be eradicated at the national and transnational level, but an expression in numbers and an evaluation of the phenomenon and its dynamics must be carried out.

However, we do not believe that the phenomenon is accidental, since in our country and throughout the Balkan geographical area the phenomenon of illegal migration is present, known to be generated by the economic desires and aspirations of the population in poor areas of the world; on the other side, the lack of labor has led entrepreneurs in our country to hire foreign labor in fields such as construction, hospitality domain, courier, etc., the contingent of 100,000 foreign workers being even insufficient, although since 2020, when this solution was first used, 20,000 foreign workers were opted for, and then their number increased 5 times.

CONCLUSIONS

Our country has taken numerous legislative and logistical measures in recent years to combat the phenomenon, aligning itself with international standards, such as: toughening penalties, the non-prescriptibility of criminal liability for human trafficking

situations, preventive measures for the early detection of people with the potential and risk of being trafficked, measures for increased protection of victims, operational systems for international collaboration and cooperation - maintaining its quality as a partner in the European and transnational fight against organized crime, serious crime and human and minor trafficking. Although compared to the number of trafficked victims that we know of at the level of Romania, also obtained through the National Mechanism for Identification and Referral of Victims of Human Trafficking - approved by GD no. 88/2023¹², this (presented in Graph no. 1: The evolution of the human trafficking victims' number) is relatively small, compared to other years, however it is worrying because, for example, prostitution has been decriminalized and the measures, mechanisms and police forces have been diversified and strengthened.

The complexity of the phenomenon of human trafficking, however, also requires increased care for the human factor, namely the protection and recovery of victims; we cannot ignore the costs of assisting victims, but in a spirit of humanism we firmly affirm that human value is above material value - in arguing and supporting this vision, we mention the Strategy for Combating Human Trafficking 2021-2025 at the European level, which provides for the provision of significant financial and logistical support to victims of human trafficking, namely specialized facilities for trafficked women and children, through the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund and the Internal Security Fund, including for partner countries outside the EU, with the aim of addressing non-governmental organizations that support the psychosocial needs of victims of trafficking.

The issue of human trafficking remains one that must be approached from multiple perspectives to reduce or even eliminate it. It is also important that at the political level this desire exists and measures are implemented and constantly renewed! We believe that future research could aim, from our perspective, at assessing the extent to which illegal migration from Europe will feed networks of illegal workers, but also of prostitution, human trafficking, pimping and related crimes, and it will be interesting to predict how honest people will be tempted to enter the vicious circle of crime!

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¹² Published in the Romanian Official Monitor, no. 95, February 3, 2023.

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Tu contezi, nu promisiunile! / You count, not promises! - Human trafficking prevention project funded by the UK Foreign Office, through the United Kingdom Human Trafficking Centre (UKHTC) and implemented in Romania by the International Organisation for Migration with the help of its partners. Copyright IOM 2006. The "Human Beings Are Priceless" logo is the property of the International Organisation for Migration 2001 and was created by Tempo Advertising. Photos from the TV series "Sex Trafficking", with the support of Channel 4.

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CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE: THE DUAL IMPACT OF ECONOMIC AGGLOMERATIONS ON DEVELOPMENT OF MICROREGIONS. BIHOR COUNTY STUDY CASE

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Abstract. Economic agglomerations refer to the grouping of companies, services and institutions within a specific geographical area, leading to a growing concentration of economic activities. These agglomerations make it easier not only for the enhanced collaboration between companies, but also the sharing of knowledge and resources. The grouping of economic activities promotes a favourable environment for innovation, collaboration and competitiveness, contributing to the overall productivity of the region. This phenomenon can be observed in urban centers and industrial parks, where synergy between companies and the associated labour pool considerably improves economic performance.

Although economic benefits can feed sustainable growth, the social fabric of local communities can be impacted by the pressures carried out by agglomeration economies. This includes the potential degradation of community ties, cultural identity and social cohesion. As companies dispute resources, microregions can experience increased costs, potentially leading to economic inequalities.

In the county of Bihor, located on the internal EU border separating Romania and Hungary, the economic agglomeration emerged as a critical mechanism that facilitates regional development, such as the interaction of local businesses, labour markets and external economic influences moderate its growth trajectory.

Keywords: talent, global, management, cross-border, Japan, innovation, transformation

1. UNPACKING AGGLOMERATION ECONOMIES: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND IMPACTS ON THE REGIONAL GROWTH

Agglomeration economies have emerged as a cornerstone of regional economic theory, offering a comprehensive framework to elucidate the benefits derived from the geographic clustering of economic activities.

The study of agglomeration economics traces its origins to Alfred Marshall, who emphasized that firms gain strategic advantages from geographic proximity – chiefly through a common labor pool, knowledge spillover, and access to specialized suppliers,

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collectively known as the "Marshallian trinity" (Marshall, 1920). Ciccone and Hall underscore the pivotal role of agglomeration economies in fostering urban development and driving economic growth in various contexts (Ciccone and Hall, 1993). Their analysis highlights how industrial concentration enhances productivity, propelled by mechanisms such as labor market pooling – which expands employment opportunities – and the exchange of knowledge among firms and individuals. These synergistic interactions not only reshape urban environments and invigorate local economies but also exert a profound influence on broader economic trajectories. Ciccone further illustrates that the advantages of agglomeration transcend mere cost efficiency, encompassing positive externalities like knowledge spillovers and technological progress (Ciccone, 2002). Understanding the interplay of these factors is essential for recognizing the competitive advantages that clusters can generate, as pointed out by Pessoa in his assessment of agglomeration versus comparative advantages (Pessoa, 2014). In this context, clusters become hubs for innovation, shaping the broader economic scenario. Porter connects the concept of agglomeration economies to competitive advantage through his research on clusters (Porter, 1990; Porter, 2000). These clusters embody agglomeration economies by enhancing productivity, fostering innovation, and encouraging the formation of new businesses. As a result, Porter's competitiveness concept has been applied to assess regional performance. Regions that successfully nurture these groups often experience higher productivity levels, as companies leverage the skills and technologies developed within the cluster to streamline operations and bolster their competitive advantage (Martin and Ottaviano, 2001; McCann and Van Oort, 2019).

The advantages experienced by companies and individuals when they are geographically grouped lead to increased productivity and innovation, as well as opportunities for knowledge exchange and labor market efficiency (Quigley, 2013; Hacker et al., 2013). The proximity of firms accelerates transactions and lowers operational costs, thereby improving overall productivity (Rosenthal and Strange, 2004; Liu et al., 2024). Fujita, Krugman and Venables demonstrate that increasing returns due to external economies of scale, transport costs, and the demand for manufactured goods can explain why economic activities tend to agglomerate in specific areas. Additionally, localization economies, which arise from industrial specialization and clusters, can also become significant in smaller regions (Fujita et al., 1999).

A fundamental aspect of agglomeration economies is the concept of space closeness, which enables companies to benefit from various synergies that improve their competitive advantage. Fujita illustrates that the formation and growth of economic agglomerations often result from the interaction of market forces and geographical factors (Fujita, 2008). Clusters emerge in specific locations due to the effective use of shared resources and services by companies. This grouping not only reduces costs, through shared suppliers and services, but also fosters an environment conducive to collaboration, innovation, and skill development.

The dynamics of economic agglomerations are influenced by infrastructure development, which plays a significant role in facilitating connections and accessibility (Graham and Kim, 2008). Infrastructure investments tend to enlarge agglomeration economies by reducing transaction costs and allowing companies to operate more efficiently. As urban agglomerations grow, the need for effective planning and governance becomes indispensable to adequately exploit these benefits, guaranteeing sustainable growth and competitiveness.

A contemporary perspective on agglomeration economies emphasizes cultural and ecosystem services relating to urban contexts. Scholars suggest that integrating cultural ecosystem service flows into the analysis of agglomerations can enhance the understanding of these phenomena by incorporating non-economic development metrics (Xiao et al., 2017). This approach broadens the conceptualization of urban environments and establishes a meaningful link between agglomeration economies and the discourse on sustainability.

However, while economic agglomerations have numerous advantages, they also encapsulate complexities and challenges for local communities and economies. The concentration of industries in urban areas, as a direct result of agglomeration economies, not only reinforces economic growth but also shapes regional disparities in development. Castells-Quintana and Royuela indicate that, although agglomeration economies serve as catalysts for accelerated growth in urban regions through greater productivity and innovation, these same processes can inadvertently deepen socio-economic divisions (Castells-Quintana and Royuela, 2014). As industries are grouped into urban centers, certain populations can benefit from the increase in employment opportunities and higher wages, while others, particularly those in peripheral or rural areas, may experience stagnation or decrease. This bifurcation is indicative of a broader trend in which the spatial concentration of economic activities creates winners and losers, often marginalizing less competitive regions.

Jacobs argued that diversity within groups is essential to creating a resilient economy, giving rise to the concept of *Jacobs's externalities* (Jacobs, 1969). This notion contrasts with the ideas of Krugman, which acknowledged that while agglomeration may lead to increased economic efficiency, it can also expose regions to vulnerabilities resulting from economic shocks (Krugman, 1991). These vulnerabilities induce socio-economic conflicts promoted by acute inequities and environmental challenges exacerbated by dense urban growth. Fujita and Krugman articulate that while grouping can promote regional growth, it can also lead to unforeseen negative externalities, such as environmental degradation and urban expansion, which present significant challenges for policy formulators. While the agglomerations bring benefits to certain regions, they can also exacerbate inequalities, since smaller cities and rural areas may have difficulty competing for resources and talents (Fujita and Krugman, 1995; Fujita and Krugman, 2004).

The examination of these academic contributions highlights the imperative for regional actors to not only advocate for the advantages of agglomeration economies, but also to actively confront the diverse challenges inherent in urban environments. The intricate relationship between agglomeration, innovation, and productivity underscores the need for comprehensive policy approaches that leverage these dynamics to foster regional growth. Consequently, effective development strategies must embrace the complexities of agglomeration, guiding regions toward sustainable and context-sensitive growth trajectories.

2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Research Objectives and Hypotheses. This study investigates the dual impact of economic agglomerations on regional development, with a particular focus on microregional dynamics in Bihor County, Romania. The central objective is to identify and analyze the factors that influence development trajectories by examining the

interaction between agglomeration economies, competitiveness, and sustainable growth. To guide this inquiry, the following research hypotheses are proposed:

H1. Economic agglomerations shape the growth and development trajectories of microregions, through the interaction of economic and social forces

H2. The socio-economic structure of Bihor County represents a successful model of economic agglomeration, meeting the necessary conditions to function as regional competitiveness pole and a driver of economic growth

Research Design. The study adopts a *qualitative case study design*, which enables an in-depth exploration of the complex and context-specific relationships between agglomeration economies and regional development. The case study method is particularly appropriate for examining convergence and divergence processes within microregions, as it allows for the integration of multiple data sources and analytical perspectives.

Bihor County was selected as the focal case due to its distinctive socio-economic profile and its strategic position within northwestern Romania. The region exhibits both the benefits and challenges associated with economic agglomeration, making it a suitable context for testing the proposed hypotheses. The case study approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of how local economic structures, governance mechanisms, and spatial dynamics interact to produce differentiated development outcomes.

The study is built on data collected from a mix of sources, including statistical indicators from national and regional databases, policy documents, regional development plans, and academic literature on agglomeration economies and microregional development. Spatial and economic data were also analyzed to assess patterns of industrial concentration, labor mobility, infrastructure investment, and socio-economic disparities.

The study also incorporates a *comparative dimension*, examining intra-county variations between urban centers (e.g. Oradea) and peripheral rural areas to assess the spatial distribution of agglomeration benefits and externalities. This approach enables the identification of policy-relevant insights for promoting balanced regional development.

3. INTERSECTING PATHWAYS: DYNAMICS OF MICROREGION CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE

The concepts of *convergence* and *divergence* in microregions are essential to understand the intricate nature of regional dynamics and the interplay of diverse influencing factors. *Convergence* describes the process through which microregions evolve toward greater economic, social, or political uniformity, often fostering a more cohesive regional identity. In contrast, *divergence* reflects the growing differentiation among microregional areas, leading to distinct socio-economic environments and uneven living standards.

The trajectory of convergence within microregions is profoundly shaped by economic, social, and political factors, each exerting distinct yet interconnected influences on development patterns and socioeconomic structures.

Economically, convergence is driven by business relations, investment flows, and labor mobility, particularly when positive externalities are harnessed or when policy frameworks actively promote regional cooperation. Conversely, divergent economic strategies or the uneven allocation of resources can deepen disparities, fostering economic isolation among microregions.

Social dynamics also play an essential role. Shared cultural heritage, common languages, and collective social practices can foster cohesion, encouraging collaboration and reinforcing a shared regional identity. In contrast, cultural heterogeneity may hinder cooperation, leading to fragmentation and the entrenchment of distinct local identities. These social dimensions are closely intertwined with political contexts, where governance

structures and policy choices can either facilitate cultural integration or perpetuate divisions.

Politically, the direction of convergence or divergence is contingent upon institutional capacity, policy coherence, and governance models. Political initiatives that prioritize regional integration – through collaborative policies, joint ventures, and investment facilitation – can strengthen economic convergence. However, political fragmentation and conflict, particularly when local governance favors autonomy over cooperation, may obstruct integration and reinforce divergence.

Economic agglomerations play a pivotal role in shaping the growth and development paths of microregions, creating intricate interdependencies across social, political, and infrastructural dimensions (Pike et al., 2016; Mdlalose and Biyela, 2025). These interactions can yield both beneficial outcomes – fostering *positive convergence* – and adverse effects – intensifying *negative divergence*. The outcomes are influenced by the nature of externalities¹ and how effectively location-based resources and advantages are utilized (Jacobs, 1984; Krugman, 1991; Porter, 2003; Johansson, 2005; Fujita and Thisse, 2012).

By concentrating economic activities, agglomerations produce positive externalities that enhance local resilience and competitiveness, exerting a substantial influence on the socio-economic trajectories of adjacent microregions (Riain, 2010). Economic agglomerations derive their significance from a multifaceted ability to foster growth and drive convergence through various mechanisms.

A primary driver is *the improvement of the efficiency of labour markets*. When companies are located close to each other, they can benefit from a wider pool of work resources, shared infrastructure, and specialized services. Workers benefit from increased employment opportunities, while firms gain access to diverse skill sets, resulting in a more competitive labor market. This improved matching between employers and job seekers contributes to higher productivity levels (Glaeser and Resseger, 2009; Fujita and Thisse, 2012). Moreover, the concentration of companies attracts talent and expertise, cultivating an environment conducive to collaboration and innovation. This thriving labour market can subsequently stimulate spillover and knowledge sharing among companies, enhancing innovation and promoting a competitive advantage at both local and regional levels (Feldman, 2014).

The spillover of knowledge is also a driver of convergence. When companies operate in cluster environments the informal exchange of information can catalyse innovation (Audretsch and Feldman, 1996; Feldman, 1999). Close proximity facilitates the exchange of ideas and expertise, spurring innovation and technological advancement. Consequently, firms benefit from stronger collaborations, partnerships, and business relationships (networking opportunities).

¹ The nature of externalities refers to positive externalities (such as spillover of knowledge or increased interaction between companies), and negative externalities (such as urban congestion or environmental degradation)

Infrastructure development is another critical aspect influenced by economic agglomerations. In urban contexts in particular, agglomerations can increase public and private investments in infrastructure, leading to better transport, public services and services, which further attract companies and qualified workers (Fujita and Thisse, 2013). Investing in infrastructure not only benefits companies in agglomerated areas but also enhances access to services for the workforce, thereby improving the quality of life and attracting further investments. These infrastructure improvements are often considered positive externalities of the economic agglomeration, promoting a wider regional development as they allow better connectivity and resources for the surrounding communities (Duranton and Puga, 2003).

Economies of scale are also integral to the discussion on agglomeration. As companies grow and cluster together, they can benefit from lower production and service costs. Additionally, they gain from shared infrastructure like transport and logistics, as well as customized support services for the needs of specific industries. The group effect encourages companies to layers of complementary skills and services, allowing greater productivity and the creation of new jobs. For example, industries such as technology and manufacturing often experience higher growth rates in urban centers due to the synergistic effects of proximity to suppliers, customers and competitors. (Glaeser and Resseger, 2009). This competitive advantage can lead to an increase in market share, attracting both national and foreign investments, which is fundamental for the economic vitality of micro-regions (Porter, 1998).

The concentration of economic activities also presents significant *challenges* that require careful examination. While agglomeration can yield substantial benefits, these advantages are often unevenly distributed, potentially deepening social and economic inequalities both within and across regions.

Regional disparities constitute a significant issue arising from economic agglomerations (Castells-Quintana and Royuela, 2014; Mukhlis et al., 2018). As cities attract companies and talent, the consequent economic polarization can exacerbate income disparities within the region, because wealth accumulates within certain sectors at the expense of others (Iammarino et al., 2019; Nijman and Wei, 2020). This divergence often results in limited access to resources, investment, and employment opportunities for the less agglomerated areas. The influx of highly qualified workers together with a growing cost of living can marginalize low-income people, creating wealth and poverty enclaves. As individuals of higher income are clustered in these environments, the demand for low qualification work can decrease, effectively marginalizing low-income residents. The consequences include *social tensions* and social exclusion, forcing these populations to move to less desirable or more remote areas (*social displacement*) (Floererkemeier et al., 2021).

Addressing these *inequalities* can be achieved through solutions such as improved transport networks, enhanced digital connectivity, the expansion of essential public services, and targeted investments in underdeveloped regions (Castells-Quintana and Royuela, 2014; Wei, 2015; Chen and Haynes, 2017).

Local communities often face significant *social and economic challenges due to infrastructure development*. These challenges can include the relocation of people, changes in traditional livelihood patterns, environmental impacts, and an unequal distribution of benefits (Cerneia, 2000; Castells, 2002). Therefore, a thorough and balanced evaluation of these impacts is essential to ensure that infrastructure

development not only delivers economic advantages but also enhances social welfare and equity (Shrestha et al. 2022).

The economic agglomerations can create a *competitive disadvantage for small businesses*. As the largest companies consolidate their presence, smaller entities can have difficulty competing for resources and qualified work, resulting in an unequal distribution of employment opportunities within the agglomerated area (Rosenthal and Strange, 2010; Alcácer and Chung, 2014). This concentration of the industry can ultimately affect the resilience of local economies to economic recessions, since the excessive dependence of a few selected industries exposes them to systemic risks (Hassink, 2010; Smallbone et al., 2012).

Microregions can adopt policies that foster local entrepreneurship to counteract the external competitive pressures brought about by agglomeration. By supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the region can diversify its economic base, reducing reliance on the largest agglomerated companies that often dominate the economic landscape. Initiatives such as providing access to microfinance, establishing incubators, and facilitating networking opportunities can help cultivate an entrepreneurial ecosystem that thrives amidst the challenges of agglomeration.

In terms of *environmental implications*, economic agglomerations may present a double narrative. On the one hand, the concentration of economic activities can lead to negative externalities such as increased pollution and exhaustion of resources, negatively impacting local ecosystems (Liu et al., 2024). On the other hand, agglomerations can catalyse positive environmental initiatives. The close proximity of companies encourages collaborative efforts towards sustainable practices. This includes sharing resources, exchanging knowledge, adopting cleaner technologies, and developing regional policies that prioritize environmental well-being (Ahvenniemi et al., 2017; Ženka et al., 2019). Therefore, microregions can capitalize on the benefits of agglomeration to pursue more sustainable growth paths, enhancing both the quality of life for residents and the region's appeal to potential investors.

Economic agglomerations often act as double-edged swords, offering substantial benefits while also creating significant social challenges. On one hand, the influx of companies can boost local employment and stimulate economic activity, leading to higher wages and improved public services for residents. On the other hand, rapid industrial growth can exacerbate inequalities, cause urban displacement, increase social stratification, and lead to environmental degradation, with local governments struggling to keep up with infrastructure demands. These dynamics necessitate careful consideration and strategic policy interventions to ensure that the benefits of agglomeration are equitably distributed and contribute to the community's well-being.

4. BIHOR COUNTY – MICROREGIONAL PATTERNS AND THE SPATIAL LOGIC OF ECONOMIC AGGLOMERATION

Microregions offer key insights into localized patterns of social and economic change. This section explores the complex interplay between economic agglomerations and microregional development in Bihor County, Romania. It highlights the evolving dynamics of economic forces and emphasizes the critical importance of place-based growth strategies in adapting to broader economic trends and structural transformations.

Bihor County, situated in the north-western region of Romania, stands as a compelling example of economic agglomeration. Its strategic border position adjacent to Hungary, combined with a rich historical and multicultural heritage, has significantly

influenced its economic trajectory and strengthened its role as a catalyst for cross-border economic integration. In terms of economic performance, Bihor ranks as the second-largest contributor to GDP within the North-West Development Region and holds the 11th position nationally among Romanian counties in its contribution to the country's overall GDP (*Integrated Sustainable Development Strategy of Bihor County 2021–2027; North-West Regional Development Agency. Regional Development Plan 2021–2027*). The region illustrates the dynamic interplay between urban economic hubs – particularly in Oradea, the county's capital – and the surrounding areas, which frequently rely on the opportunities and growth spurred by these concentrated economic activities.

Economic agglomerations in Bihor County shape the region's socioeconomic landscape through a complex and multidimensional impact. These concentrations of economic activity not only enhance local economic performance but also generate far-reaching effects across sociocultural spheres, influencing migration trends and shaping patterns of community cohesion. Effective management of these changes requires the proactive engagement of relevant stakeholders to capitalize on emerging opportunities while mitigating the adverse consequences associated with accelerated development.

This section examines the strategies employed by county policymakers to *foster convergence, mitigate divergence* and enhance regional competitiveness by leveraging the benefits of economic agglomeration.

4.1. Fostering convergence in Bihor County

The economic landscape of the region has undergone a significant transformation with the *establishment of industrial parks*. These hubs not only attract substantial investment but also generate employment opportunities and foster workforce development. Supported by local government policies, these infrastructure initiatives enhance the region's appeal by offering business environments conducive to innovation and entrepreneurship.

The development of industrial business parks exemplifies a form of competitive economic agglomeration, functioning both as a magnet for investment and a catalyst for multiplier effects. These parks offer a range of advantages, including lower infrastructure and investment costs, access to a skilled yet cost-effective labor force, and strategic proximity to key sales markets, suppliers, highways, airports, and railway hubs. The integration of modern production methods and the emergence of new companies within these parks have also stimulated growth in related service sectors, significantly expanding employment opportunities across the region. Consequently, these parks serve as key hubs for job creation, attracting both local and foreign investors.

Table 1. Industrial business parks in Bihor County (Source: Oradea Local Development Agency, *Activity Report 2024*)

	Surface	Companies (2024)	Occupancy rate
Industrial Park Eurobusiness Oradea I	144.73 ha	53	100%
Industrial Park Eurobusiness Oradea II	78.76 ha	46	100%
Industrial Park Eurobusiness Oradea III	17 ha	27	100%

Industrial Park Eurobusiness Oradea IV	6.51 ha	0	0%
Tileagd Industrial Park	9.3 ha	3	70%
Săcuieni Industrial Park	5.03 ha	0	0%
Tămășeu Industrial Park	6.87 ha	0	0%
TOTAL	268.2 ha	129	

Beyond the currently operational parks, the Bihor County Council has launched the development of four smart specialization parks², offering significant new opportunities for investors. This initiative aims to generate employment across the county, ideally near residents' homes, fostering balanced growth in Oradea as well as in other parts of Bihor.

Table 2. Smart specialization parks in Bihor County (Source: Oradea Local Development Agency, *Activity Report 2024*)

	Surface	Parcels	Works' execution stage
Smart Specialisation Park Aleşd	8.5 ha	11	23%
Smart Specialisation Park Beiuş	17.5 ha	16	in development
Smart Specialisation Park Marghita	11 ha	9	51%
Smart Specialisation Park Ștei	13.6 ha	24	100%

Within these industrial parks, both domestic and foreign investors benefit from a range of administrative support and incentives. This includes proactive communication with local authorities, timely updates on state aid and EU funding programs, and guidance in navigating interactions with governmental and public institutions. Investors also gain access to tailored training programs, assistance with legal approvals and permits, and tax breaks designed to simplify procedures and accelerate implementation (Oradea Local Development Agency, *Board of Directors Activity Reports*).

In response to increasing competition among cities for investment, local leaders have adopted targeted strategies to enhance the region's attractiveness. These efforts include building residential complexes tailored to incoming professionals and establishing a multifunctional social center featuring a hotel, restaurant, conference rooms, fitness facilities, retail outlets, a medical office, parcel services, and early childhood education for employees' families (Oradea Local Development Agency, *Projects*).

The locational advantages of the industrial parks are twofold. First, Romania occupies a pivotal position along the emerging "new silk road" of economic growth, a transcontinental Eurasian trade corridor envisioned as a strategic platform for investment, infrastructure development, and international commerce. Second, the city of Oradea, situated in northwestern Romania near the Romanian-Hungarian border, benefits from enhanced accessibility to national transportation networks and direct integration into

² The smart specialization park is an industrial park that promotes developments and investments with an innovative edge, focusing on smart development through cutting-edge technology and innovation at both the process and product levels

major European trade routes. This geographic positioning facilitates cross-border economic interactions and strengthens the region's connectivity within broader European supply chains.

Bihor county benefits from an attractive and competitive business climate, supported largely by industrial parks that act as development engines (Oradea Local Development Agency, *Investors in Oradea*; Oradea Local Development Agency, *Board of Directors Activity Reports*). The industrial parks contribute significantly to:

- *job creation* – over 20.000 of the 96.000 local jobs have been generated by companies investing in Oradea and its Metropolitan Area
 - *business network diversification* – the presence of investors often attracts their suppliers and clients, reinforcing the agglomeration economy's multiplier effect
 - *investment growth* – cumulative investments in the industrial parks have surpassed €580 million
 - *regional economic expansion* – one-third of salary tax revenues are directed into the city's budget, fueling local development
 - *boosting national economic contribution* – the region's growing output has led to increased participation in Romania's GDP
 - *improving community well-being* – economic vitality has translated into enhanced quality of life for residents

Economic concentration serves as a *powerful driver of local business growth*, triggering a cascade of effects on entrepreneurship and innovation. The dynamic interplay among diverse industries encourages deep collaboration, sparking innovative ideas and business models that might not emerge in isolation. Moreover, the competitive environment cultivates a culture of continuous improvement, motivating local firms to enhance productivity and expand their service offerings. This agglomerated setting also facilitates robust networking among entrepreneurs, enabling small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to scale up and integrate into broader supply chains, further embedding their operations within the regional economy.

According to the *City Index 2024*, Oradea – the county's development engine – exhibits the highest entrepreneurial density among Romanian cities with populations under 200.000 (RisCo, 2024). This indicator – closely associated with regional economic performance and development – is significantly shaped by progressive local governance. The city's entrepreneurial vitality is reflected in its dynamic business environment; by the end of 2022, Oradea reported 8 active enterprises per 100 inhabitants, positioning it third nationally in terms of entrepreneurial density. This thriving business climate contributes to the city's notably low unemployment rate and underscores the effectiveness of its localized economic model.

Oradea exemplifies a well-structured and supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem, characterized by access to financial instruments, strategic public policies, fiscal incentives, business development programs, and advanced infrastructure. These elements collectively foster innovation and promote sustainable economic growth.

In the domain of technological entrepreneurship, Oradea ranks fourth nationally among cities with active tech startup communities. The city is increasingly recognized as a hub for startup activity and innovation. Its upward trajectory was highlighted in the *Startup Ecosystem Report 2025* by Startup Blink, an internationally acknowledged authority on startup ecosystems (Startup Blink, 2025). In the latest report, Oradea advanced 15 positions in the global rankings compared to the previous year, registering

the highest national growth rate of 22.1%. The city currently holds the 729th position out of 1,000 cities worldwide.

The development of business and technology park incubators has played a pivotal role in attracting startups and nurturing innovation. The region's conducive environment continues to draw entrepreneurs, investors, and skilled professionals. Key sectors – including information technology, software development, e-commerce, renewable energy, and tourism – are experiencing accelerated growth. The local startup ecosystem is further energized by an expanding network of co-working spaces, incubators, and accelerator programs, notably the Bright Labs Incubator, supported by the *Make IT in Oradea* initiative (Make IT in Oradea). These efforts are successfully engaging young entrepreneurs from across the region and the Romanian diaspora.

Moreover, strategic collaboration between the local university and career-oriented training centers has facilitated the development of a workforce aligned with contemporary market demands. This synergy enhances business performance and contributes to the city's economic resilience and long-term sustainability.

Economic agglomerations in the region have played a crucial role in *attracting both national and foreign investments*. By fostering a supportive environment for entrepreneurship, these groups have successfully drawn investors looking to leverage the benefits of a concentrated business setting.

Bihor County has consistently demonstrated its capacity to attract foreign direct investment, thereby reinforcing its position as a prominent economic agglomeration within Romania. As of the end of 2023, the county hosted a total of 10,335 foreign-owned enterprises, ranking fifth nationally in terms of foreign company presence (Bihor Online, 2025). This performance is indicative of a dynamic and resilient local economy, supported by institutional frameworks that facilitate international business development. Furthermore, the value of subscribed social capital in Bihor County reached approximately €1.4 million, positioning the county fourth at the national level (Bihor Online, 2025) and underscoring the region's economic potential and its sustained attractiveness to foreign investors.

Collectively, these indicators highlight Bihor County's emerging role as a leading destination for international capital inflows, even in the context of broader national economic uncertainties.

The presence of established companies can also pave the way for new entrants, as the newest companies benefit from the existing supply chains, customer bases and market insights developed by their more experienced counterparts.

The *development of infrastructure* in the region has been vital in driving economic growth, advancing social progress, and strengthening regional connectivity. Bihor County has witnessed significant improvements in infrastructure, such as road networks and digital connectivity, thanks to targeted investments inspired by the benefits derived from existing agglomerations (*North-West Regional Development Agency. Regional Development Plan 2021–2027; Integrated Sustainable Development Strategy of Bihor County 2021–2027; Project Portfolio of the Bihor County Council, 2025*).

To achieve these development goals, the Bihor County Council has an ongoing project portfolio valued at over 880 million euros (as of 2024), with completed projects worth more than 340 million euros in key areas such as road, railway and gas infrastructure, education, business environment, culture, and environmental protection (Bihor County Council. *List of Support Projects*; Transilvania Business, 2025). Key achievements to date include:

- opening of 51 kilometers of county roads and beltways, along with 9 kilometers of the Oradea Metropolitan ring road now open to traffic

- delivery of major infrastructure projects such as the Oradea School Campus and the Science and Technology Park

- expansion of the regional natural gas distribution network

- significant upgrades to Oradea Airport, including a new passenger terminal financed with €40 million in European funds and a 420-meter runway extension

- establishment of Romania's first air cargo terminal in Oradea, directly linked to both the airport and the Eurobusiness II Industrial Park

- operationalization of the Vama Borș II motorway crossing point, enhancing regional mobility and establishing a strategic connectivity corridor between Romania and the broader European space—driving economic and social progress in Oradea and its surrounding areas

The infrastructure improvements represent positive externalities of economic agglomeration that foster regional convergence. The improved transport networks, including the continuous expansion of Route E60 and the proximity to Oradea International Airport, have facilitated better market accessibility and streamlined the movement of goods and services. Since the completion of these infrastructure updates, local companies have reported a 20% increase in operational efficiency, attributed to reduced logistics costs and improved supply chains. Additionally, this upgraded infrastructure has had a spillover effect, attracting even more investments to the region as companies increasingly seek locations offering efficient logistics advantages.

Cross-border initiatives have significantly contributed to the synergy between Romanian and Hungarian regions, fostering economic agglomerations that reinforce and energize the local economy. The initiatives launched during 2007-2013, 2014-2020, and 2021-2027 programming periods illustrate a progressive landscape for the county of Bihor, which actively shapes the regional economic environment through cooperative strategies (*Interreg Romania-Hungary Programme*; *Bihor County Strategy*; *Interreg VI-A Programme Romania-Hungary 2021-2027*). The joint actions aimed to enhance the quality of life for the population in the cooperating territories, with a focus on innovation, healthcare, education, employment, and labour mobility. These cross-border partnerships leverage shared resources, skills, and infrastructures, creating a favorable environment for sustainable economic growth, including new roads for trade, tourism, and investments (Șoproni, 2023).

EU funds have been instrumental in driving innovation and technological advancements within local companies. The programs have led to an increase in the number of startups in Bihor County and the adoption of modern technologies by established companies. This has resulted in higher productivity, enabling local businesses to integrate into larger networks and fostering a collaborative economic environment that enhances regional competitiveness. The influx of funding not only assists local governments in executing development plans but also fosters public-private partnerships, creating a robust network of stakeholders committed to the region's economic vitality.

The dynamics of the labor market are closely tied to cross-border cooperation. In Bihor County, the workforce benefits from increased employment opportunities as regional economies become more interconnected (*North-West Regional Development Agency. Regional Development Plan 2021–2027; Integrated Sustainable Development Strategy of Bihor County 2021–2027*). The mobility of labor between Romania and Hungary facilitates the transfer of skills and promotes a more qualified workforce that

can quickly adapt to the needs of local industries (Bădulescu et al., 2014). The ability of workers to move across borders not only expands job opportunities but also enhances the quality of life for those engaged in cross-border work.

4.2. Mitigating divergence in Bihor County

In Bihor County, *economic polarization* is particularly evident between urban centers, especially Oradea, and the surrounding rural areas. Oradea serves as the county's economic engine, benefiting from its status as a regional center that attracts investment and promotes economic activity. Conversely, peripheral areas experience stagnation or minimum growth, characterized by high unemployment rates and limited access to resources and services (*Bihor County Statistical Yearbook 2024; Integrated Sustainable Development Strategy of Bihor County 2021–2027*). This dichotomy reflects broader trends observed internationally, where similar agglomeration models lead to pronounced inequalities (Boldea et al. 2012).

Moreover, these disparities have far-reaching effects beyond immediate economic performance; they impact social cohesion in the region. The inequalities create a divided economic landscape where opportunities are disproportionately available to those in urban agglomerations, leaving rural residents marginalized.

Regional disparities are exacerbated by limited public investment in the rural areas, as municipalities tend to prioritize funding for urban centers that promise faster economic returns. This results in a stark contrast in the quality and availability of essential services, such as education and healthcare, creating an environment where peripheral areas are often excluded from the economic cycle that fuels the growth of urban centers.

The impact of economic crises on regional disparities in Bihor cannot be overstated. Significant crises, including financial recessions and public health emergencies, have exacerbated regional inequalities (Antonescu and Florescu, 2024). During economic recessions, the vulnerabilities of peripheral regions are often magnified, as companies in less competitive and diversified sectors are more prone to failure.

The disparities in development within Bihor become evident when analyzing indicators such as income levels, employment rates, and industrial diversification in various urban and rural centers (*Integrated Sustainable Development Strategy of Bihor County 2021–2027; Bihor County Statistical Yearbook 2024; The Social and Economic Situation of Bihor County in the Year 2024; Monthly Statistical Bulletin of Bihor County – 2025*). Urban areas, like Oradea, have experienced solid economic growth, with increased investments in technology and services. In contrast, more rural areas, such as the eastern and western fringes of the region, have limited economic diversification and often rely on traditional sectors like agriculture. The lack of investment in these peripheral regions exacerbates the existing economic divide, leading to a scenario where urban fringe areas thrive while rural locations struggle.

Income inequality is particularly pronounced within Bihor County, as the economic benefits of agglomeration disproportionately favor those residing in the most developed urban centers (*Integrated Sustainable Development Strategy of Bihor County 2021–2027; The Social and Economic Situation of Bihor County in the Year 2024*). Urban areas enjoy the highest levels of investment, a better commercial climate, and greater accessibility to services, leading to higher average incomes. In contrast, peripheral rural areas often fall behind, suffering from decreasing economic opportunities and salary

stagnation. The persistent urban-rural income gap is a significant indicator of divergence, as populations in less favorable economic conditions may experience a decrease in living standards, exacerbating socio-economic challenges.

The labor market dynamics present several challenges. While the agglomeration of economic activities promotes job creation, it also leads to *disparities in salary levels and skill requirements*, exacerbating inequalities within the local workforce (*Integrated Sustainable Development Strategy of Bihor County 2021–2027; The Social and Economic Situation of Bihor County in the Year 2024*). The potential division between low and highly qualified workers necessitates specific political interventions to ensure that the benefits of economic agglomeration are distributed equitably. Addressing these disparities is crucial to maximize the positive impact of agglomeration on labor market dynamics, thereby contributing to a sustainable and inclusive regional development strategy.

These disparities extend beyond immediate economic performance. They affect social cohesion, lead to *socio-economic exclusion*, and result in decreased investment in education and skill development in rural micro-regions. This perpetuates cycles of poverty and hinders significant progress towards equitable development.

In light of these considerations, policies aimed at improving connectivity, accessibility and quality of life through infrastructure projects are essential to bridge the development gap within the county while leveraging the potential of urban agglomeration. Local authorities are pivotal in fostering economic agglomerations while mitigating their potential negative impacts on microregional development. Equally important is emphasizing the value of strategic, collaborative governance and cross-border initiatives to effectively tackle the challenges of uneven development (Șoproni, 2023; Chirodea et al., 2024; Pantea and Brie, 2020).

5. FINAL REMARKS. BIHOR COUNTY – FACING CHALLENGES, EMBRACING OPPORTUNITIES

The dynamics of economic agglomeration in Bihor County reveal a dual impact on microregional development, serving as both a catalyst for growth and a source of structural challenges. Spatial analysis of economic activity underscores a marked concentration in urban centers, particularly Oradea, which benefits from agglomeration economies such as knowledge spillovers, resource sharing, and heightened competition. These factors collectively enhance productivity and position the county as a vibrant microregion within Romania's broader economic landscape (Șoproni, 2023).

The synergy between manufacturing, agriculture, and services, supported by responsive governance and collaborative initiatives, demonstrates the county's capacity for integrated development. Engagement among local governments, businesses, and civil society has fostered governance models tailored to regional needs, while cross-border cooperation amplifies the positive externalities of agglomeration, reinforcing Bihor's role in regional integration.

The study *confirms the first research hypothesis (H1): economic agglomerations are pivotal in driving regional development*. Their influence extends beyond conventional indicators like employment and income, contributing to the strengthening of social structures and community resilience. As businesses grow and sharpen their competitive edge, the demand for skilled labor intensifies, prompting educational institutions to adapt curricula to meet evolving market needs. This reciprocal relationship

between business and education creates a virtuous cycle that underpins sustainable regional growth.

Moreover, the density of companies within the region fosters robust knowledge exchange, which plays a pivotal role in shaping labor market trends. Through the circulation of innovative ideas and exposure to diverse technologies and practices, employees acquire broader skill sets. This enhancement of human capital not only addresses immediate labor market needs but also serves as a cornerstone for enduring economic prosperity.

Bihor County exemplifies the transformative potential of economic agglomerations in fostering positive convergence outcomes, fulfilling the prerequisites to operate as a regional competitiveness hub. Through a multifaceted strategy that integrates job creation, infrastructure development, and the attraction of investment capital, the county has cultivated a resilient framework for sustained regional growth. These interlinked dynamics underscore the strategic advantages of concentrated economic activity within microregions and *substantiate the second research hypothesis (H2)*.

The boundary between the urban core and the surrounding areas highlights a dynamic relationship where the former drives economic activity and innovation, attracting both the workforce and resources from the peripheral regions. The presence of local and foreign companies in Oradea – the capital of the county – boosts employment opportunities in other areas, enabling residents to benefit from the economic vibrancy of the agglomeration. This integration fosters increased mobility, skill development, and a more resilient labor market.

While agglomerations can generate wealth and dynamism, they can also exacerbate inequalities and disadvantage areas that lack the infrastructural benefits of more urbanized regions. *The negative divergence observed in Bihor County underscores the importance of addressing regional disparities as a key aspect of development policy.* Comprehensive planning and political responses are needed to maximize potential benefits while mitigating adverse effects on local communities and economies.

Policymakers in the Bihor microregion have acknowledged the imperative to balance the benefits of economic agglomeration with inclusive approaches aimed at mitigating income disparities and economic marginalization. In response, they have adopted focused approaches such as infrastructure investment, the development of innovation ecosystems, and the enhancement of regional connectivity. These efforts have been carried out through a set of *coordinated initiatives* designed to promote positive economic convergence.

1. Development of Smart Specialization Parks. As part of the North-West Region's strategic vision to establish a regional innovation hub, smart specialization parks are being developed, extending into rural areas as well. These parks aim to broaden employment opportunities across the county, ensuring accessibility for local populations. Equipped with essential infrastructure, they enable businesses to create innovative products and services, leverage local resources, and promote circular economy principles.

Anticipated Impact – This initiative is expected to empower young people and local entrepreneurs to become key drivers of sustainable community development. By fostering innovation and economic vitality, it holds the potential to transform underdeveloped areas into dynamic centers of excellence.

2. Development of Regional and Local Infrastructure. These initiatives were designed to boost connectivity and accessibility across Bihor County. Improved transport links have delivered significant economic and social benefits, including stimulating growth, creating new jobs, and elevating overall quality of life.

Key achievements include the modernization and optimization of the public transport system – centered on building a contemporary, eco-friendly, and secure infrastructure in line with Europe's green and digital transition goals – upgrading Oradea Airport, digitizing public services, and enhancing Romania's integration with the wider European transport and communication networks.

3. Enhancing Human Capital. Cross-border programs have been leveraged to strengthen vocational training and promote educational exchanges, with the goal of aligning workforce skills more closely with labor market needs.

Outcomes – A notable rise in the pool of qualified professionals supporting local businesses, contributing to a more dynamic and competitive regional economy.

4. Integrating Tourism into Regional Development. Tourism has been strategically embedded into broader economic planning, with local assets – such as natural landscapes and cultural heritage – positioned as key drivers of diversification. Policymakers have increasingly recognized tourism's potential to stimulate growth and resilience.

Outcomes – Increased visitor numbers and investment flows have amplified the benefits of economic agglomeration, while also strengthening community involvement and fostering deeper collaboration within the local business ecosystem.

Given the multifaceted nature of economic agglomerations, their inherent duality becomes evident: while they can serve as engines of economic prosperity, they may also intensify social disparities and environmental pressures. Navigating this complex landscape requires balanced and adaptive policy approaches that seek to amplify the benefits of agglomeration while mitigating its adverse effects. To this end, policymakers must commit to ongoing research and proactive interventions to ensure that regional development strategies remain both inclusive and sustainable. Fostering collaboration among governmental institutions, private enterprises, and civil society is essential for crafting solutions that reflect diverse perspectives and local aspirations.

Drawing on the findings from Bihor County, our recommendations are intended to guide other microregions seeking sustainable and inclusive development. We highlight the importance of engaging local communities in development efforts, particularly by promoting inclusive mechanisms that enable meaningful public participation in decision-making. Policy frameworks should prioritize inclusive growth strategies that address the needs of underrepresented groups, including marginalized populations and rural communities. Such community-centered approaches are vital for strengthening social cohesion and enhancing local resilience. By enabling residents and businesses to jointly benefit from the economic opportunities generated by agglomeration, the microregion can position itself as a model for sustainable and inclusive regional development.

As a final reflection, Bihor County stands as a compelling microregional case through which the dual nature of economic agglomerations – convergence and divergence – can be critically examined. Its unique position within Romania's economic geography, characterized by both urban vitality and rural vulnerability, offers a rich terrain for understanding how concentrated economic activity can simultaneously drive growth and deepen disparities. The county's proactive policy environment, cross-border

engagement, and evolving governance models reflect a broader narrative of adaptation and resilience. By choosing Bihor as the representative study, this paper not only highlights the transformative potential of agglomeration economies but also underscores the importance of inclusive, community-centered strategies in shaping sustainable regional development. The lessons drawn from Bihor's experience provide valuable insights for other microregions seeking to harness the benefits of agglomeration while safeguarding social equity and long-term cohesion.

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THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA AND THE EUROPEAN FUTURE: THE DYNAMICS OF EU ACCESSION NEGOTIATIONS

*Alina STOICA**

Abstract. This study analyses the Republic of Moldova's path toward European Union (EU) integration, set against the backdrop of the current geopolitical context marked by instability and war on the continent's eastern borders. Since the initiation of EU accession negotiations, Moldova has undertaken a series of institutional, legal, and internal reforms essential to strengthen democracy and the rule of law. These changes have accelerated the country's approach to Europe, particularly in the wake of the Ukrainian conflict. As a result, Moldova's partnership with the EU has become increasingly strategic, evolving beyond economic, political, and identity-based motivations, and reflecting Chisinau's desire to integrate fully into the EU framework.

This research examines both the theoretical and historical aspects of EU-Moldova relations, highlighting the evolution of these interactions through key agreements and phases of bilateral cooperation. It also investigates Moldova's internal challenges, such as political instability, corruption, and the weakness of democratic institutions, alongside the opportunities provided by the EU's support in governance, research, education, and justice. Furthermore, the study explores the role of civil society in advancing participatory democracy and facilitating the process of Europeanization. This analysis serves as a foundation for further research on EU enlargement and the transformative impact it has had on the candidate countries within the Eastern Neighbourhood.

Keywords: European Union, Republic of Moldova, European integration, accession negotiations, civil society.

INTRODUCTION

In the current geopolitical landscape, the European Union's enlargement process serves as a fundamental pillar of stability, security, and prosperity in Eastern Europe. Beyond its undeniable economic role, the enlargement strategy functions as a transformative mechanism that promotes core European values such as democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and good governance. For the Republic of Moldova, this process is not merely a political objective but a historic opportunity to redefine its domestic institutions, economy, and society in line with European norms and standards.

Since gaining independence on August 27, 1991, Moldova's relationship with the EU has evolved from cautious cooperation to deepening integration. Over the past three decades, Moldovan authorities have consistently expressed their commitment to European integration through the adoption and implementation of a series of strategic

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agreements, including the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, the EU-Republic of Moldova Action Plan, and the pivotal Association Agreement signed in 2014, which incorporated the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) (Conferinta Interguvernamentalala, 2025:5). These frameworks have laid the groundwork for enhanced political dialogue, economic cooperation, and legal alignment, signaling Moldova's intent to fully participate in the European project. (Dulicher, 2025:2)

The acquisition of EU candidate status in 2022 and the subsequent launch of accession negotiations in 2024 mark crucial milestones on Moldova's European path. These steps were significantly influenced by a shifting regional security environment, notably the Russian Federation's military aggression against Ukraine. This conflict has not only heightened security concerns in Moldova but has also accelerated the European Union's agenda in its Eastern Neighborhood, underscoring the strategic importance of Moldova's integration as part of the broader European security architecture.

In parallel with these external pressures, internal dynamics have shifted as well. The election of President Maia Sandu in December 2020 has brought renewed political momentum and a stronger commitment to reform. Under her leadership, Moldova has demonstrated increased resilience in the face of complex challenges, ranging from political instability to socio-economic difficulties and external threats. Despite the inherent complexity of the accession process—which demands comprehensive reforms across legislative, institutional, and administrative domains—the country's resolve to pursue European integration appears more focused and sustained than ever before.

Moldova's stated objective of joining the European Union by 2030 reflects both ambition and realism, recognizing that accession is a long-term endeavor requiring the harmonization of national policies with the EU *acquis*, as well as the strengthening of democratic institutions and the rule of law. This target is supported not only by Moldova's own reform agenda but also by favorable regional dynamics and consistent support from European institutions and member states.

This paper aims to provide a thorough analysis of the accession negotiations process, situating Moldova's progress within the broader context of political, economic, and security transformations affecting the region. By employing a multifactorial approach, the study highlights the significant strides made by Moldova while critically assessing the persistent structural challenges—such as governance issues, corruption, and economic vulnerabilities—that may hinder its path toward EU membership. The ultimate goal is to evaluate Moldova's institutional and political capacity to sustain reforms and meet the stringent criteria required for full integration into the European Union.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between the EU and the Republic of Moldova began to attract academic interest around 2001-2002, reflecting a wider tendency for academic analysis to follow important changes at the political level, such as shifts between different geopolitical directions (pro-East/pro-West), institutional crises or reforms. Prior to this period, academic literature on the subject remained relatively scarce, corresponding to the limited and low-profile nature of EU–Moldova relations, which were initially shaped by the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement signed in 1994 and entering into force in 1998 (a general legal framework establishing the principles of political, economic and especially trade cooperation, valid for 10 years).

After declaring its independence in 1991, the Republic of Moldova found itself in a fragile geopolitical position, caught between the growing influence of the European Union and the persistent pressure from the Russian Federation. This situation led to a deep identity crisis and a politically unstable environment. Cristina Morari, in her work *Western Balkan Countries on the Road of European Integration: Results and Trends* (Morari, 2012: 576), argues that Moldova faced challenges similar to those experienced by the Western Balkan countries in the post-independence period and during their path toward European integration—such as institutional fragility, societal polarization, and geopolitical tensions. However, Moldova's case also presents distinct features, particularly related to debates over a potential unification with Romania, which further amplified the uncertainty regarding the country's strategic direction. In this context, Moldovan authorities were initially hesitant to openly express their European aspirations, fearing that such a move might further strain the domestic political scene and reignite unresolved identity dilemmas.

From an identity-based perspective, Andrei Avram and Dietmar Müller explore how states construct their international identity. Their analysis (Avram – Müller, 2009: 399–429) suggests that Moldova's trajectory toward EU membership has been shaped by Romania's successful accession, while also noting that in such contexts, political leaders often prioritize state interests over the individual concerns of citizens.

By 2009, Moldova was often portrayed as a country trapped between two spheres of influence, a perception rooted in both a lack of domestic political will and the EU's limited readiness to offer a concrete accession perspective (Korosteleva, 2010: 1267–1289). However, as Moldova's ties with the EU deepened, academic analysis also broadened to encompass specific aspects of the country's social, legal, and economic transformations.

In this context, domestic author Igor Munteanu (Munteanu, 2009: 7–19), writing shortly after the "Twitter Revolution" of 2009—triggered by the parliamentary elections of April that year, which signaled the decline of communism in Moldova—emphasizes the crucial role of external actors, particularly the European Union, in shaping Moldova's geopolitical identity. He highlights the importance of EU-led initiatives aimed at democratization and institutional strengthening.

Additional contributions in the academic literature explore the EU's normative identity and its role in guiding the enlargement process. Some scholars argue that the EU's historical responsibility toward Central Europe has influenced its enlargement trajectory, while others focus on the evolving nature of the Union's normative power in relation to its neighboring countries. (Sedelmeier, 2000)

Although the volume of research on EU–Moldova relations has grown over the past two decades, the topic has not yet gained prominence in mainstream European studies. Similarly, Moldova has remained on the margins of global political discourse.

Exploring the interplay of domestic and external factors influencing Moldova's development, Victor Croitoru (Croitoru, 2014: 147–154) assesses the country's geopolitical vulnerabilities in relation to major international actors. In the monograph *Foreign Policy of the Republic of Moldova in the Context of Integration Processes*, the authors examine Moldova's evolving relationships with Russia and the EU, highlighting both the benefits and limitations of the European Neighborhood Policy, as well as the potential for EU–Moldova cooperation. (Cebotari and all, 2008:180) The article provides a comprehensive analysis of how internal and external factors influence Moldova's development, highlighting the country's geopolitical vulnerabilities in relation to key

international actors. The study of Moldova's relationships with Russia and the European Union, along with an assessment of the benefits and limitations of the European Neighborhood Policy, contributes to understanding the complex context in which Moldova's identity and strategic trajectory are shaped. Thus, this perspective supports the article's aim to explore the external influences and internal dynamics that shape the country's European integration path and political transformation.

Besides the numerous challenges Moldova has faced, one of the most significant has been the consolidation of democracy. Numerous studies show that strong democratic governance significantly contributes to improving citizens' well-being by reducing inequality and poverty. For example, an empirical study by Daron Acemoglu (Acemoglu and all, 2023:1-15) and his collaborators indicates that, over the past 25 years, democracy has accounted for approximately a 20% increase in GDP per capita. Similarly, Carl Knutsen (Knutsen, 2021: 1505–1524) emphasizes that democratic regimes provide more stable and predictable economic growth trajectories over the long term.

However, in the case of the Republic of Moldova, democracy remains fragile and has not yet reached the threshold of democratic resilience—that is, the institutional capacity to withstand shocks without experiencing major systemic dysfunctions. Civil society responses to socio-political and economic challenges have been largely sporadic and inconsistent, highlighting the difficulties in consolidating a stable and durable democratic framework.

This reality is crucial for understanding Moldova's trajectory, as internal vulnerabilities affect both economic development and the country's ability to advance on the path of European integration (Merkel, 2023:1-15). Moreover, geopolitical analyses, such as those by Victor Croitoru, confirm that external influences and tensions between major actors like Russia and the European Union further complicate Moldova's internal context. Therefore, strengthening democratic institutions and ensuring continuous civil society engagement become imperative to securing a sustainable process of political transformation and European integration.

In this regard, Gherasim (Gherasim, 2025:25) identifies several factors hindering Moldova's democratic consolidation: widespread poverty, frequent political and institutional deadlocks, severe identity and territorial divisions, state capture, politically biased court rulings, money laundering, clientelism, and competing oligarchic elites with authoritarian tendencies. Within such a context, the term *democratic resilience* often remains a rhetorical construct employed by Brussels officials to describe democratic structures that, in practice, remain under strain.

On the political front, Moldova's center-right leadership has actively pursued closer relations with the EU. Although the general population tends to support EU integration, ethnic minority groups are more prone to Euroscepticism and more inclined to support left-leaning or pro-Russian political narratives. (Kosienkowski – Schreiber, 2024)

A theoretical contribution of notable relevance is offered by Professor Genoveva Vrabie (Vrabie, 2001), who reflects on the distinctions between state, national, and popular sovereignty in the context of European integration. She argues that limitations on state sovereignty—such as those involved in transferring competences to EU institutions—should not be interpreted as a loss of popular sovereignty, but rather as a reconfiguration of power in light of evolving institutional realities.

Therefore, the academic literature on EU–Moldova relations encompasses a diverse range of perspectives—from identity and geopolitical concerns to institutional

and economic dimensions. This study aims to revitalize the scholarly discussion on EU enlargement by offering a contextualized analysis of the Moldovan case amid the evolving dynamics of accession negotiations.

2. METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES

This paper analyzes the negotiation process of the Republic of Moldova's accession to the European Union, focusing on internal reforms and the current geopolitical context. The methodology is qualitative, based on documentary analysis of official sources, academic literature, and international reports.

The main objectives are to investigate the evolution of Moldova–EU relations from 1991 to the present, identify the political, institutional, and social challenges affecting negotiations, and assess the role of civil society and political actors in implementing reforms.

The literature highlights Moldova's fragile position between Russian and EU influences, identity crises, social polarization, difficulties in consolidating democracy, and the EU's normative power in the enlargement process. These aspects reflect the complexity of Moldova's European path, shaped by both internal and external factors.

3. WHAT IS THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA DOING TOWARDS ACCESSION?

Following the geopolitical context, generated by the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and Russia's threats, the Republic of Moldova has stepped up its efforts to join the European Union by officially submitting its application for membership on 3 March 2022, and on 23 June 2022, the European Council will grant it the status of candidate country, thus recognizing the country's European perspective. On June 25, 2024, Moldova officially started EU accession negotiations (Consiliul European).

It is important to note that the accession process is a complex phenomenon and requires the fulfillment of strict criteria, including the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the protection of minorities, as well as the existence of a functioning market economy.

The Republic of Moldova's accession path has been complemented by the implementation of key reforms in various areas:

3.1. Improving corporate governance

The goal is to safeguard shareholders and boost investor trust in the business climate in Moldova. Despite the fact that the word "Corporation" has been used in legislative and normative acts since 1991, the Republic of Moldova does not presently have a normative act that would give it legitimacy (Burlea, 2012?:204). The Republic of Moldova's current primary efforts are focused on enacting laws and implementing various reforms¹; however, despite the importance of these actions, local managers continue to ignore internal factors that contribute to economic success in the context of corporate management. It has been widely ignored and unappreciated in Moldova for many years. The most effective line of defense and active resistance to destructive

¹ We refer to the updating of corporate and commercial legislation, fiscal reform, the fight against corruption, judicial reform, modernization of public administration, development of the financial market, and the promotion of innovation and entrepreneurship. (n.n.)

processes in the current global financial-economic instability of the international markets is company management.

Every year, a number of international indicators are developed by different international organizations to demonstrate how well a country is doing in terms of its business climate. Moldova's economy was rated as mostly free and ranked 110th on the Index of Economic Freedom. This ranking shows that Moldova still faces many challenges to become an economy with a highly favorable business climate. Also, reports and analyses from organizations such as the Heritage Foundation and the World Bank frequently mention that excessive government interventions, widespread corruption, and bureaucracy negatively affect the business environment and the competitiveness of Moldova's economy. As this data demonstrates, government interference in the private sector hinders the achievement of development potential, making the economy susceptible to shifts in the political landscape. Most bureaucratic levels are rife with corruption, and political unrest has resulted in a fragmented financial approach. (Schwab – Martin, 2012:12) This stance suggests that there is potential for development. In terms of innovation, institutions, financial market development, market efficiency, and business sophistication, the state does modestly well. (*Ibidem*)

Even though the government of the Republic of Moldova now considers itself democratic and is working on reforms that would provide a favorable business climate, the relics of the Soviet economy nevertheless hinder the development of the economic environment. The social-political factors that keep the Republic of Moldova's economic environment less favorable than those of other European countries are political instability, corruption, and bureaucracy. (Minciună, 2014) The Republic of Moldova's primary goal in obtaining candidate nation status is to meet the Copenhagen criteria, which include creating a viable market economy inside the EU.

According to research by the European Commission (European Comission ...), it is both appropriate and necessary to further stimulate trade flow and make concessions in the form of trade liberalization measures for all products. By doing these things, the Union will improve its commercial relations with the Republic of Moldova and provide the short-term financial assistance that the nation and companies affected by Russia's war against Ukraine need.

Another concern is lowering bureaucracy and boosting openness by the aforementioned actions, that are intended to promote international trade and provide an advantageous business climate for investors and businesses. One of the most important actions taken refers to the completion of the bilateral screening procedure under Cluster 2, which is devoted to the EU Internal Market, and the bilateral screening session on Chapter 6, which is centered on Company Law, signaling an important turning point in the discussions for Moldova's EU membership. This activity focuses on important laws that help businesses run, such as those pertaining to financial reporting and corporate governance. (*Ziarul National*)

3.2. Harmonization of national legislation with the EU *acquis*

The bilateral screening process conducted in March 2025, focused on the company law chapter, highlighted the Republic of Moldova's commitment to harmonize its legislation with the European *acquis* standards. This step represents a crucial stage in aligning Moldovan corporate law with European norms, demonstrating concrete progress in the legislative approximation process. (Moldova Live, 2023)

The European Union actively supports Moldova's reform efforts through financial and technical assistance aimed at accelerating the implementation of necessary changes. Key areas where the EU exerts major influence include corporate governance, modernization of the tax administration, anti-corruption measures, and judicial reform. For example, EU-supported projects have facilitated improvements in tax legislation enforcement and helped combat tax evasion, thereby increasing transparency and efficiency in the fiscal system. (The process of harmonization and compliance ...)

However, the reform process has faced challenges such as institutional resistance, bureaucratic inertia, and persistent corruption, which have slowed the full implementation of legislative changes. Despite these obstacles, assessments by EU officials and international observers recognize significant progress. In March 2024, EU leaders publicly praised Moldova's advancement in meeting accession criteria and called for the rapid adoption of the negotiation framework to start accession talks.

In addition to legislative and institutional reforms, the EU has provided substantial humanitarian and political support, donating €13 million to assist those affected by the conflict in Ukraine. Moldova also activated the EU Civil Protection Mechanism to accommodate Ukrainian refugees, and EU member states have sent various essential supplies such as shelters, hygiene kits, and power generators.

Strategic cooperation between Moldova and Romania, especially through the Intergovernmental Commission for European Integration, has played a crucial role in aligning national structures with EU standards. Technical assistance provided by Romania during the legislative reform process was vital in facilitating continuity and cooperation between Moldovan and European institutions, thereby strengthening the reform process.

The completion of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) in 2019 opened significant opportunities for Moldova's economic development, consolidating the country's integration into the European market. (Gabura, 2023) Nevertheless, Moldova continues to rely on financial support from the EU to maintain political and economic stability during this transformative period.

3.3. Increasing transparency and cutting back on red tape

In the Republic of Moldova, good governance—including transparency, anti-corruption efforts, and participatory decision-making—has become a cornerstone of societal expectations following the collapse of the Soviet system. As decentralization progresses, the quality of local governance has gained increasing importance. Transparency is now demanded at all stages of administrative decision-making, with confidentiality remaining an exception strictly limited by law to protect interests such as public security, crime prevention, financial integrity, and individual privacy. (Dandış, 2005:36) Moldova's current legal framework reflects the dual role of transparency: both as a deterrent against corrupt practices that undermine public integrity and as a tool to evaluate the effectiveness of public administration.

Scholars like Rosca and Moldoveanu (Roșca – Moldoveanu, 2010:7-16) argue that modernizing management techniques and incorporating elements from the organizational culture of the commercial sector into public administration could reduce bureaucracy and increase efficiency. The implementation of key legislation, such as the Law on Access to Information and the Law on Transparency in Decision-Making, represents foundational steps toward a corruption-free society.

From an analytical standpoint, it is essential to examine the posture of governmental leaders regarding transparency and anti-corruption reforms. Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Moldova's leadership showed a formal commitment to these principles, but progress was uneven, often hampered by entrenched interests and political instability. Since the outbreak of the conflict, there has been a noticeable shift in rhetoric and policy emphasis, with the government increasingly prioritizing governance reforms as part of its broader European integration agenda. This shift is reflected in recent multipronged measures focusing on strengthening legislative frameworks, fostering cooperation with civil society, and enhancing institutional openness.

However, the extent to which these commitments translate into tangible improvements remains a matter of ongoing evaluation. Persistent challenges such as institutional resistance, political interference, and resource constraints continue to test Moldova's ability to fully implement and sustain transparency reforms. Thus, while the government's evolving posture indicates progress, sustained efforts and independent oversight remain crucial to advancing good governance in Moldova's complex political context.

3.4. Implementation of European educational programs

The Republic of Moldova claims that education is a national priority or the cornerstone for the development and propagation of new cultural and universal human values, the expansion of human capital, the formation of a knowledge-based society, and the establishment of national consciousness and identity. The degree of education has a significant impact on life quality and offers opportunities for each person to realize their full potential.

Education—more specifically, the creation of a successful education strategy for the years 2021–2030—remains one of the state's top objectives for the long-term health of society. (Ministerul Educatiei si cercetarii al Republicii Moldova ...) The 2021–2030 Education Development Strategy "Education-2030" outlines the government of the Republic of Moldova's educational strategy, explains how it will be implemented between 2021 and 2030, and details the anticipated effects on the state and society (*Ibidem*). Giving every Republic of Moldovan citizen the opportunity to gain the skills necessary to realize their full potential in their social, professional, familial, and personal lives as well as to readily adapt to the demands of the modern world—particularly those related to sustainable development—is the strategic goal in the field of education.

The Bologna Process is a European initiative that the Republic of Moldova joined in 2005. The state took on the responsibility of updating and modifying university education to meet European standards and criteria as a result of this membership. The changes that have been made have brought Moldova's higher education system far closer to the European model. The ECTS system, which permits academic credits to be equivalent across all higher education institutions, was one of the first policies put into place. (Învățământul Superior în Moldova ...)

The Republic of Moldova has actively participated in a number of EU projects, marking significant progress toward European integration. Erasmus+ Programme and Horizon Europe are a few of the most pertinent programs; they offer tangible advantages in the areas of public safety, education, and research.

Together with Republic of Moldova other Eastern partner nations—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine—have been included in Erasmus+ since 2014 (Țoca – Mărcuța, 2025). For students, educators, and youth from the Republic of

Moldova, Erasmus+ is a fantastic opportunity. The program supports the professional and personal growth of participants via collaboration initiatives, academic mobility, and volunteer work. In addition, it promotes cross-cultural communication and a closer adherence to European ideals, which raises the standard of education in Moldova. The Republic of Moldova's youth, educators, and students all benefit from Erasmus+. Through collaboration projects, academic mobility, and volunteer work, this program helps individuals grow both personally and professionally. In addition, it promotes cross-cultural communication and a closer adherence to European ideals, which raises the standard of education in Moldova.

As part of the Council of Europe, European Union and Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe programs, the Ministry of Education signed bilateral cooperation protocols with the governments of Romania, France, Germany, Italy, the Czech Republic, Poland, and the United States, as well as with other countries' ministries and non-governmental organizations Moraru – Drain, 2011:146). A number of conventions can be used by the Republic of Moldova to promote academic mobility.

Through Horizon Europe, the largest research and innovation program in the EU, Moldova gets access to international scientific resources, partnerships, and networks. Participation in this project not only modernizes scientific infrastructure and supports local researchers, but it also encourages innovation. In doing so, the Republic of Moldova becomes part of a wider scientific community capable of offering innovative solutions to global issues.

On October 27, 2021, the European Union and the Republic of Moldova signed the Horizon Europe association agreement. This alliance strengthens the EU-Moldova partnership and develops the "Global Approach to Research and Innovation" to achieve common objectives, including the twin green and digital transformations (*The Republic of Moldova joins Horizon ...*). Due to their categorization as an Associated Country, Moldovan research organizations are able to participate in Horizon Europe on an equal basis with organizations from EU Member States.

According to the Association Agreement of the Republic of Moldova's participation in Horizon Europe, the information relates to the new technique for calculating the financial contribution by establishing an automated adjustment mechanism of the Republic of Moldova's initial operational contribution (Agreement between the European Union, of the one part and the Republic of Moldova).

3.5. Strengthening civil society to develop a participatory democracy

A strong civil society is essential to a functioning participatory democracy (Stoica, 2013), which is relevant to Moldova's aspirations to join the European Union and adopt European ideals. Promoting democratic ideals, encouraging transparency between citizens and government, and keeping an eye on the policy-making process are all vital functions of civil society. In this regard, in a separate study previously published in the journal *Civil Szemle*, I conducted a SWOT analysis aimed at highlighting the role of civil society in the Republic of Moldova, in order to better understand its current potential and limitations. (Stoica – Barth, 2025:140)

One of the key characteristics of Moldovan civil society is the presence of several non-governmental organizations working in a range of fields, including as civic education, human rights, and state transparency. Many of these organizations get financial and technical help from a variety of international partners, such as the EU and a number of

international foundations that fund projects that promote civic involvement and democratic values (Dezvoltarea societății civile la nivel local a Republicii Moldova ...).

However, the Republic of Moldova's civil society has several challenges. Many organizations' efficacy and survival are constrained by their inadequate institutional capability, insufficient financial and human resources, and dependence on outside financing. Furthermore, the sector's fragmentation and ineffective cross-sector cooperation may restrict civil society's overall influence (Tăbărtă, 2025). Strong opportunities for the development of civil society are presented by the European integration process. Access to European programs, including funding for citizen engagement and participatory democracy, will enable the action to create projects that include citizens in decision-making. Furthermore, social media and digital technology open up channels for transparency and community mobilization. On the other hand, foreign meddling and political instability may jeopardize the growth of civil society. People's faith in democratic institutions and civil society groups can be eroded by polarization and disinformation efforts. (Dulschi, 2019)

The freedoms of association, assembly, and expression may be restricted in some situations by restrictive laws that restrict the activities of non-governmental organizations.

For the Republic of Moldova to develop a long-lasting participatory democracy, civil society must be strengthened. Civil society may achieve its full potential in promoting accountability, transparency, and inclusive government by addressing its risks and shortcomings while building on its chances and strengths.

CONCLUSIONS

The Republic of Moldova demonstrates a strong commitment to overcoming the numerous challenges associated with European Union accession through the implementation of substantial institutional, legal, and internal reforms. The accession process is viewed not only as a diplomatic goal but also as a catalyst for the country's modernization and socio-economic development. The objective of completing accession negotiations by 2030 would pave the way for full EU membership.

The European Union has consistently recognized the Republic of Moldova as a European state, reaffirming its place within the European family of nations. Moldova continues to deepen its cooperation with countries in Southeastern Europe, thereby contributing to the construction of a shared political, economic, and security architecture in the region.

Consolidating domestic policies is essential for the country's development, and internal stability depends on governmental institutions promoting the principles of ethnic inclusion, social cohesion, and national dignity. The EU-Moldova partnership, the result of over three decades of gradual evolution, is supported by a complex framework of agreements and cooperation programs covering multiple sectors and initiatives.

Given its limited resources and geopolitical vulnerabilities, Moldova's national security would greatly benefit from reforms and strategic partnerships supported by the EU and NATO, which would help mitigate external threats and strengthen internal resilience.

A fundamental aspect of the European project is the free movement of persons, which represents not only a legal right but also a manifestation of human dignity in the context of globalization. The Europeanization of Moldovan society—understood as the internalization and practical application of European norms and values—is a cornerstone

of the integration process and must encompass not only legal and economic dimensions but also cultural and civic aspects.

Finally, Moldova can draw valuable lessons from Romania's accession experience by adopting best practices and avoiding previously identified pitfalls, thus accelerating and enhancing its pre-accession journey and strengthening the European vocation of its citizens.

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III. SECURITY VERSUS OPENNESS OF BORDERS. SOCIO-ECONOMIC FEATURES AND DIFFERENCES

László BÓI, Szabolcs MÁTYÁS ⇔ *Predictive Accident Forecasting Software in Hungary and Serbia*

Anca OLTEAN ⇔ *The image of Romania's adhesion to Schengen space reflected in the newspaper "Adevărul" (2024-2025)*

István POLGÁR ⇔ *Social Responsibility and Territorial Cooperation in the Western Balkans*

Constantin-Vasile ȚOCA, Cosmin CHIRIAC ⇔ *Lessons from Romanian - Hungarian cross-border cooperation for EU membership candidate countries*

Ioan ZIRBO ⇔ *Christian–Muslim Dialogue in North Macedonia in the Context of European Aspirations*

PREDICTIVE ACCIDENT FORECASTING SOFTWARE IN HUNGARY AND SERBIA

László BÓI*
Szabolcs MÁTYÁS**

Abstract. This paper examines predictive software tools developed in Hungary and Serbia for forecasting traffic accidents. Using artificial intelligence and statistical analysis, these systems aim to identify high-risk locations and reduce accident rates. The Serbian ANN1 and ANN2 models use neural networks to predict accident numbers and severity, while Hungary's Sopianae software integrates historical data with lunar and weather factors. These predictive technologies are particularly valuable in regions where traditional traffic safety methods have proven insufficient, and where law enforcement resources are limited. Both systems enhance preventive policing and support traffic safety planning. By analyzing temporal and spatial accident patterns, authorities can deploy patrol units more effectively and proactively reduce risks. The study evaluates the potential of predictive analytics to support the EU's long-term road safety goals. Results highlight the importance of data-driven decision-making and the need for international cooperation in preventing traffic accidents. Additionally, the paper explores the origins of predictive policing in Hungary, predating well-known American initiatives, and presents preliminary results from the Sopianae system's application in Pécs. By promoting innovation and cross-border collaboration, these tools may significantly contribute to reducing fatalities and improving public safety, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, where predictive solutions remain underutilized.

Keywords: predictive policing, traffic, Serbia, Hungary, accident

1. INTRODUCTION

Most people have witnessed a traffic accident or have even been involved in one themselves. In most cases, accidents result in property damage only, without personal injury. However, thousands of serious and fatal traffic accidents occur each year in most European countries. If we were to sum up the total damage caused by these accidents, the final amount would be measured in billions of euros. In the case of an accident, one typically considers the damage to the vehicles, which is usually covered by insurance – if one exists. However, in many cases, infrastructure such as lampposts and other public property is also damaged, and the state bears the cost of repair. Injured individuals are often unable to work and may require long-term hospital care, which again results in significant expenses paid by the state (Mohammed, 2023: 70). Additionally, road closures caused by accidents usually lead to traffic delays that last for hours, forcing drivers to

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take detours, which entails extra costs. When someone dies in a traffic accident, it is a tremendous loss – not only financially but also morally – for society as a whole.

With the above, the authors aim to illustrate that preventing traffic accidents is a shared societal interest that concerns everyone. This is why traffic safety systems must operate as efficiently as possible (Sugiyanto – Santi, 2017: 110).

Predictive policing has the potential to emerge as one of the most significant domains in the 21st century due to several compelling reasons. Firstly, the advancement of data technology in the 21st century has led to an exponential increase in the volume and quality of data available. This proliferation of data, coupled with the development of sophisticated analytical tools, enables law enforcement agencies to make more accurate and effective predictions regarding the locations and times of potential criminal activities. Secondly, the evolution of machine learning and artificial intelligence technologies has enhanced the capability of predictive systems to recognize complex patterns and make precise forecasts. This technological progress aids law enforcement in the optimal allocation of resources and the preemption of criminal activities. Thirdly, the capability for real-time data analysis provided by modern technologies allows law enforcement to respond immediately to changing conditions and crime patterns. This responsiveness increases operational efficiency and reduces reaction times. Fourthly, predictive policing facilitates the optimization of police resources by focusing on the likely locations and times of criminal activities. This targeted approach minimizes unnecessary patrols and increases police presence in areas with the greatest need, thereby enhancing overall effectiveness. Fifthly, the societal impact of reducing crime and enhancing safety cannot be overstated. Safer environments improve the quality of life, attract investments, and foster economic growth, thereby benefiting communities at large. Lastly, continuous innovation and technological development promise to make predictive systems even more accurate and effective in the future. This ongoing evolution suggests that predictive policing will have an increasingly significant impact on crime prevention and public safety efforts. In summary, the combination of technological advancements, data analytics, and the potential for significant societal benefits positions predictive policing as a potentially pivotal area in the fight against crime and the enhancement of public safety in the 21st century (Farkas – Sallai, 2021: 275).

2. WHAT DOES PREDICTIVE POLICING MEAN?

At first glance, the question posed in the title may seem simple, and one might be tempted to provide a straightforward, definition-like answer. The most frequently cited interpretation is the one by Perry, which states the following:

"Predictive policing is the application of analytical techniques – particularly quantitative techniques – to identify likely targets for police intervention and prevent crime or solve past crimes by making statistical predictions." (Perry, W. L. et al. 2013: 15.) Its very interesting that the predictive system was introduced in the prison system as well, called predictive tool for reintegration of inmates (Czenczer, 2009: 8).

There is, however, a notable limitation in the above definition. When Perry and his co-authors first formulated the concept of predictive policing, they primarily focused on forecasting crimes and identifying potential offenders. At that time, they did not yet consider that predictive methods could also be applied to non-criminal public safety issues, such as forecasting traffic accidents. While the core elements of Perry's definition remain valid over a decade later, they require an update to reflect new fields of application.

This conceptual gap was addressed by Szabolcs Mátyás, who, in a forthcoming 2025 textbook on predictive policing, proposed the following expanded definition (the book had not yet been published at the time of writing this paper):

"A GIS application based on mathematical and statistical principles that – also enabling the application of artificial intelligence – predicts the expected location and time of crimes, as well as the possible range of victims and perpetrators, based on past crime data, with a certain percentage of error; predictive forecasting also can predict the expected location, time and type of traffic accidents." (Mátyás in press)

This revised definition explicitly broadens the scope of predictive forecasting beyond crime, recognizing that traffic accidents – as spatio-temporal events with identifiable patterns – can also be predicted using similar methodologies. Thus, predictive policing is no longer limited to crime prevention but is evolving into a wider, more versatile tool in public safety management.

Reducing the number of road traffic accidents is a key factor in evaluating the efficiency of police organizations; therefore, a predictive approach is particularly emphasized in this context (Tihanyi – Vári, 2025: 121).

3. SOME THOUGHTS ON THE ORIGINS OF PREDICTIVE POLICING

When we look at predictive policing historical sources written in English and other languages, they almost always "lead" the reader to the United States (Perry et al., 2013; Szikinger, 2016). These sources claim that the American retail giant Walmart noticed that weather changes (e.g., rainy, sunny, dry) influenced the types of food and other goods people bought. A clear correlation was found between rainy weather and the sale of rubber boots and umbrellas. However, it was more challenging to find a connection between the weather and the sales of Strawberry Pop-Tarts. This iconic sweet treat became the first product whose demand was successfully forecasted — specifically when more or less of it would be purchased. Once this prediction proved effective, the logic followed: if it is possible to predict when people will buy more Strawberry Pop-Tarts, then perhaps it is also possible to predict when and where crimes will occur. This marked the inception of the PredPol software (although it wasn't initially called that, and it has since ceased operation).

This is the story that appears in almost every academic article about predictive policing. However, the reality is different. The first functional predictive software was developed in Hungary. In 2004, it was created by Ferenc Traub, a police officer at the Budapest Police Headquarters, who developed the software in his spare time. In the early 2000s, car theft was a significant problem in Hungary (Mátyás, 2017a: 500). In District III, where Ferenc Traub worked, numerous vehicles were stolen every week (Mátyás, 2017b: 220). At the time, the police lacked proper equipment and had too few officers, making it impossible for them to combat this wave of crime successfully. Thanks to the software, the number of vehicle thefts dropped. The program was capable of predicting five types of crimes. It was used for many years and proved highly effective. District III is also home to the Sziget Festival grounds – Europe's largest open-air festival. For several years in a row, there were instances where no crimes occurred in the streets surrounding the festival (Traub, 2004: 6; Traub, 2005: 4; Molnár, 2016: 6).

The software was introduced to other countries by foreign police officers visiting the area during the Sziget Festival. It was taken to Germany, France, the Czech Republic, Poland, and the Netherlands. However, there is no available information on whether it was used in those countries.

Eventually, the use of the software was discontinued. Partly because Ferenc Traub retired and his deputy left the police force. Additionally, in the second half of the 2000s, crime rates began to decline rapidly nationwide, resulting in a lack of sufficient data for the software to operate effectively. For any predictive software to function accurately, it requires a substantial amount of historical data.

Based on the above, it is clear that the origins of predictive policing should not be credited to the Americans but rather to Hungary's Ferenc Traub, who created such software as early as 2004.

4. THE IMPORTANCE OF PREDICTIVE ANALYTICS IN TRAFFIC ACCIDENT PREVENTION

Accurate forecasting and thorough risk analysis are crucial tools in preventing traffic accidents. Predictive analytics can, within a certain margin of error, anticipate the likelihood of accidents and identify the contributing risk factors. This technology enables authorities to generate forecasts that serve as a foundation for preventive measures, such as increased patrol presence, warning systems, or optimized road maintenance. Forecasting accidents is particularly crucial in countries where transport infrastructure is underdeveloped, and the economic impact of accidents is especially severe (Kaliraja et al., 2022: 1784).

In both Hungary and Serbia, traffic accidents pose a significant public safety issue. The number of serious and fatal accidents in both countries remains above the European average. While this study does not seek to explore all the underlying causes in-depth, factors such as aging vehicles, poor road conditions, and aggressive driving behavior – commonly observed in both nations – are worth noting. As motorization increases and more vehicles fill the roads, traditional accident prevention strategies are proving insufficient. Thus, both Serbia and Hungary have been seeking new approaches to reduce accident rates (Szabó – Bíró, 2024: 12).

In many countries, predictive algorithms are already in use for traffic accident forecasting. However, such methods remain relatively rare in Central and Southeastern Europe. This study presents a scientific experiment conducted in Serbia and Hungary, aiming to demonstrate how predictive software could contribute to a decrease in serious and fatal road accidents. The paper references predictive algorithms applied in both countries. Still, it focuses more specifically on the Hungarian solution since only one prior study has been published about it in a foreign language.

5. THE VISION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

"2. SAFE MOBILITY: Putting safety first

Safety is fundamental to any transport system; it must always be the top priority. As mobility continues to grow and is radically transformed by digitisation, decarbonisation and innovation, the opportunities to further improve safety performance must be seized.

They undertook to set a target of halving the number of serious injuries in the EU by 2030, compared to the 2020 baseline.

Road safety in the EU has improved significantly in recent decades, thanks to actions at the EU, national, regional, and local levels. Between 2001 and 2010, the number of road fatalities in the EU decreased by 43 percent, and between 2010 and 2017, by another 20 percent. Nonetheless, 25,300 people still lost their lives on EU roads in 2017, equivalent to some 70 lives lost per day, and about 135,000 people were seriously

injured, including a large percentage of pedestrians, cyclists, and motorcyclists. These figures represent an unacceptable humanitarian and social cost. In monetary terms, the annual cost of road fatalities and serious injuries has been estimated to exceed EUR 120 billion, equivalent to approximately 1 percent of GDP.¹

The EU's long-term goal will remain moving as close as possible to zero fatalities in road transport by 2050 ("Vision Zero"). The same should be achieved for serious injuries. The EU will also pursue new interim targets to reduce the number of road deaths by 50 per cent between 2020 and 2030 as well as to reduce the number of serious injuries by 50 per cent in the same period (using the new common definition of serious injury agreed with all Member States)." (European Commission 2018)

According to official European Union documents, traffic accidents cause significant social and economic damage in all member states, resulting in annual losses of several billion euros. Although Serbia is not an EU member state, the principles outlined by the EU are still relevant, as it is in the fundamental interest of every country to reduce the number of traffic accidents – particularly those resulting in serious injuries or fatalities.

The European Commission's 2018 policy document outlines highly ambitious goals: by 2030, the number of road fatalities is expected to be halved compared to 2020, and by 2050, the EU aims to achieve zero road deaths. The authors of this paper argue that these goals are unrealistic. Based on current statistical trends, it is unlikely that the number of fatalities will be halved by 2030, and it is even more improbable that zero road deaths will be achieved by 2050. The available data do not support the EU's "vision." Nevertheless, efforts to reduce traffic accidents remain essential. Every possible tool should be utilized to get as close as possible to these targets, even if they may not be fully attainable. One such tool is the use of predictive algorithms, which can support more effective prevention and decision-making in traffic safety management (European Commission 2018).

6. NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES, SIMILAR PROBLEMS

Serbia and Hungary differ from one another in many respects; however, they share several common characteristics, particularly in terms of road safety. In this study, the authors briefly outline the most relevant similarities that affect traffic accident patterns in both countries.

As shown in Table 1, there is no significant difference in the overall size or population of the two countries. Yet in 2024, Serbia – despite having a smaller population – recorded a higher number of personal injury accidents (Serbia: 18,574; Hungary: 14,678) and fatal road accidents (Serbia: 498 fatalities; Hungary: 446 fatalities) than Hungary. When calculating these figures per one million inhabitants, the difference becomes even more pronounced. The rate of personal injury accidents in Serbia is almost

¹ Although from a criminal law perspective these acts are not classified as road traffic accidents, it is nevertheless important to note that in 2016, a new form of terrorist tactic emerged in Europe: the Vehicle-Ramming Attack. In contrast to typical road traffic incidents, which are generally the result of negligence, these attacks are characterized by intentional conduct. According to the provisions of the Criminal Code, such acts fulfil the statutory definition of terrorism, yet they are perpetrated on public roads using vehicles, and result in fatal outcomes (Vajda, 2017: 180; Vajda, 2022: 22).

twice that of Hungary (2814.2 vs. 1589.9). In contrast, the frequency of fatal accidents is over 1.5 times higher in Serbia compared to Hungary (75.5 vs. 46.5). Furthermore, the proportion of serious road accidents is approximately 20% lower in Hungary compared to Serbia (URL 1, 2).

Table 1. Main traffic statistical indicators of Serbia and Hungary (Source: URL 1, 2, 3, 4)

	Hungary	Serbia
Area (km²)	93,000	77,474
population (million people) (2024)	9,6	6,6
Personal injury accidents (cases) (1 million people) (2024)	14,687 (1589,9)	18,574 (2814,2)
Fatal accidents (number of deaths) (1 million persons) (2024)	446 (46,5)	498 (75,5)
Number of serious traffic accidents (cases) (1 million people)	4143 (431,6)	3524 (534,0)
average age of vehicles (year)	16,2	17

Hungarian traffic safety indicators are significantly better compared to those of Serbia; however, when measured against the EU average, Hungary still ranks among the worst-performing countries. The underlying causes of these high values are often similar. In many cases, poor road quality (Ürmösné, 2024: 150) is directly linked to the occurrence of accidents. In both countries, a considerable proportion of roads need renovation. The average age of vehicles is another important contributing factor. In both Serbia and Hungary, the average vehicle age exceeds the EU average of 12.5 years, which increases the risk of accidents, as older vehicles are typically less equipped with modern safety features. Another significant risk factor is aggressive driving behavior. Although it is difficult to quantify and objectively measure the aggressiveness of driving styles in a particular country, it is widely acknowledged that drivers in Balkan countries tend to drive more dynamically and assertively. In Hungary, notable differences in driving behavior can be observed between the eastern and western regions of the country (URL 3, 4).

6.1. The Serbian ANN1 and ANN2 Models

The Serbian software is based on artificial neural networks (ANN). It was developed to reduce the number of traffic accidents and to support transportation planning, particularly on newly constructed road sections. The software predicts the number of traffic accidents as well as the severity of their consequences, including fatalities, injuries, and property damage. Two separate models were created: ANN1 and ANN2. The ANN1 model is designed for two-lane roads (non-motorways), whereas ANN2 is designed explicitly for motorways (Gatarić et al., 2023: 3).

The software relies on several indicators that contribute to its predictive capability. These include road length, terrain type, road width, average daily traffic volume, and speed limit. The research was conducted in two countries: Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika Srpska).

The two models focus on different predictive goals. The ANN1 model forecasts the number of accidents, while ANN2 predicts not only the number of accidents but also the number of fatalities, serious injuries, and property damage cases. To ensure model

accuracy, more than 100,000 different configurations were tested. Both models are capable of predicting accidents and their severity with high precision. Additionally, they can identify road segments that are considered particularly hazardous. One of the most critical questions in predictive modeling is determining which indicators are most relevant for forecasting accidents or crimes and what weight each of these indicators holds in the prediction. Since not all factors contribute equally, their relative importance must be analyzed. In this particular software, road length was found to be the most influential indicator (Gatarić et al., 2023: 7).

The software is useful not only for law enforcement but also for traffic authorities. The model can be applied to both existing and planned roads. For newly constructed roads, where no historical accident data is yet available, the model's predictions are especially valuable. In such cases, forecasts are generated based on expected traffic volumes and road geometry.

According to the developers, the model is effective in both urban and non-urban environments. Furthermore, its applicability is not limited to Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina; it can also be implemented in other countries. The developers emphasize the model's efficiency and potential cost savings, highlighting its usefulness in supporting transportation policy decisions (Gatarić et al., 2023: 11).

6.2. The Hungarian Sopianae software²

The Sopianae software was developed to forecast traffic accidents in Hungary, with the primary goal of enhancing the efficiency of police operations. Developed by teachers at Ludovika University of Public Service (Budapest), the system was created in response to a noticeable decline in traditional crimes, such as burglaries and thefts, while traffic accidents remain a significant public safety issue. The National Media and Infocommunications Authority funded the project, and testing has been conducted by the Pécs Police Department using real accident data.

Technically, Sopianae consists of a Microsoft SQL-based database and a Windows Form application written in C#. The software operates independently and offline without relying on external systems or networks. Forecasts are based on the statistical analysis of previous traffic accident data, including the date, time, location, accident type, weather conditions, and a unique factor: the phase of the Moon. Developers included lunar phases because studies suggest a correlation between full moons and behavioral or physiological changes that may increase the risk of accidents.

Sopianae includes eight core features: accident registration, daily forecast, action plan, statistical analysis, patrol zone guide, backup function, data editor, and exit. The accident registration interface uses codes from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, ensuring standardized input for causes, vehicle types, and outcomes. The daily forecast function supports patrol planning by identifying high-risk streets and providing printable suggestions for deployment. The action plan module focuses on weekly patterns, determining the days with the highest accident risk and allocating resources accordingly.

Commanders can generate and edit Word documents summarizing action plans, including assigned officers and vehicles. The statistical function allows monthly comparisons by police unit or district, with data visualized through clear graphs and charts. The patrol guide helps determine jurisdictional boundaries, supporting file

² This chapter is based on the summary of – in press – book chapter titled "The Sopianae Software" by Szabolcs Mátyás and Zita Traub.

management and administrative processes. The backup module ensures that recorded data is regularly saved to avoid losses, and the editor allows for live updates to data, such as adding new streets or updating accident causes.

Although Sopianae was developed as a prototype for the city of Pécs, its flexible architecture allows it to be adapted to other areas. It could be used in border policing, urban traffic control, or even criminal investigations, provided that the data models are customized to fit the specific context. The primary objective of the software is to facilitate predictive policing, support data-driven decision-making, and prevent traffic accidents through proactive interventions. In this regard, Sopianae serves not only as a data tool but as a complete decision-support system. It demonstrates how modern technology and predictive analytics can directly contribute to public safety.

6.2.1. Results so far

This subsection provides a brief overview of the results achieved using the Sopianae software at the Pécs Police Department. The term "results" should be used cautiously in the context of predictive policing, as any reported success can be easily challenged. The difficulty lies in proving whether a decrease in accidents (or crimes) was truly the result of predictive forecasting. According to the authors, growing resistance to predictive software is mainly due to concerns among civil rights advocates that crime-predicting algorithms are discriminatory. As a result, many cities have ceased using such software. In addition, civil rights groups have demanded to know the algorithms behind these systems. Since these are considered trade secrets and development companies often refuse to disclose them, many have questioned the effectiveness of these programs.

It must be acknowledged that demonstrating precise effectiveness is indeed difficult. For example, if a city reports ten fewer robberies than the previous year, one might argue that this reduction would have occurred even without the use of predictive software. To resolve this debate, ideally, one would need two identical cities – with the same people, buildings, roads, and so on – one using the software and the other not. At the end of the year, the crime rates could be compared. Naturally, this is impossible because a city exists only once.

A valid question arises: how can we verify that predictive forecasting works and is effective? One approach is to compare the figures to those from the previous year. If the numbers decline, it is a good sign, although some may argue the decrease would have occurred anyway. Year-to-year fluctuations in crime and accident rates are not uncommon. Therefore, it is not enough to consider a drop in numbers alone. It is worth examining whether surrounding municipalities also saw a decline in incidents. If not – and only the city using the predictive software saw improvement – then it is reasonable to assume the software played a role. If this pattern repeats over several years, consistently showing reductions only in the location using the system, there can be little doubt that the software is working effectively.

In the case of Sopianae, less than one year of data is available, as the software was officially launched on November 30, 2024. However, it had already been operating for one month, providing forecasts that were used to plan patrol routes. Based on data from this short period, five fewer people died within the jurisdiction of the Pécs Police Department compared to the previous year, and six fewer people were seriously injured in traffic accidents (according to oral communication from Károly Böröcz). These results are extremely promising and are encouraging for the software developers. The figures for surrounding municipalities were not as favorable, although these other towns in

Baranya County are generally smaller and tend to experience different types of accidents. According to the authors, the software needs at least two years of data to produce the most accurate predictions. After that period, it will be worthwhile to compare the results from Pécs to those of other large Hungarian cities to draw meaningful conclusions.

The software's creators believe the initial results are promising, but the test period must be completed to confirm this. Only then will it become clear which indicators have strong predictive value? Some indicators may need to be removed, while others may need to be added, and the weighting of certain variables may require adjustment.

7. SUMMARY

Road traffic accidents continue to cause significant social and economic losses worldwide, making their prevention a shared public priority. In both Hungary and Serbia, the number of severe and fatal traffic accidents consistently exceeds the EU average, highlighting the need for new, innovative solutions. This study presents two predictive software systems designed to forecast accidents and support law enforcement and transportation policy. The Serbian ANN1 and ANN2 models, based on artificial neural networks, are capable of predicting accident frequency and severity, as well as identifying high-risk road sections. Hungary's Sopianae software analyzes historical accident data, factoring in weather conditions, lunar phases, and temporal patterns. Both systems aim to enable more efficient resource allocation and more targeted preventive actions. The European Union's long-term objective—halving road fatalities by 2030 and achieving zero deaths by 2050—is deemed unrealistic by the authors, yet serves as a guiding vision. Predictive algorithms can contribute to this goal, especially in countries with less developed infrastructure or aging vehicle fleets. The featured software tools can be beneficial not only to police departments but also to municipalities and transportation planners. The article highlights the importance of data-driven decision-making in traffic safety and advocates for enhanced international cooperation in predictive analytics and accident prevention strategies.

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used OpenAI's ChatGPT to assist in drafting and language refinement.

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THE IMAGE OF ROMANIA'S ADHESION TO SCHENGEN SPACE REFLECTED IN THE NEWSPAPER "ADEVĂRUL" (2024-2025)

*Anca OLTEAN**

Abstract: The online archives of the daily newspaper *Adevărul* provided us interesting articles during all the year 2024-2025 concerning the Romania's chances to adhere to Schengen space. Voices of European and national politician represented in the country or at the level of European institutions expressed their points of view, opinions, interrogations concerning the future of Romania as full member of European Union and in the future, later on, of Schengen space. The encouragements of European leaders and also their skepticism are very well debated in the pages of the journal *Adevărul*. The entering of Romania in Schengen space is presented as a national achievement of Romania and a guarantee that new perspectives for economy, security, and workers mobility will expand.

Keywords: development, cross-border, integration, cooperation, societal

I tried to gather a few articles published in the newspaper *Adevărul*¹ during 2024-2025 from the archives of this journal published online and having at basis this first-hand material to make a press account of the sketch of Romania adherence to Schengen space as it is revealed in a part of the Romanian press. The battle of Romanian officials to see their country in Schengen space is described in this press review. See below, a few of the opinions presented in Romanian press (journal *Adevărul*) regarding the entrance of Romania in Schengen space.

From March 29, 2024, in the newspaper *Adevărul*, in the article of Valentin Bolocan, *România intră în Schengen. Cum vom călători începând de duminică/ Romania enters Schengen (n.n. space). How we will travell starting with Sunday*, it is explained that Romania has to enter to sea and aerial Schengen space. In what concerns the aerial traffic it will not exist anymore controls of documents only spontaneous verification of documents (randomly). In airports will exist policemen but not for usual control. There will be aleatory controls to identify people with false travelling documents. These controls verify the legality of documents and drug traffic. (Bolocan, 2024)

From March 30, 2024, in the article written by George Andrei Cristescu in the journal *Adevărul, Noaptea în care România intră în spațiul Schengen aerian și maritim. Cum vor călători românii începând cu ora 00.00/ / The night in which Romania enters to aerial and sea Schengen space. How they will travell Romanians starting with the hour 00.00*, is mentioned the entrance of Romania in aerial and sea Schengen space while on

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¹ The articles we analyzed were identified in the online collection of the journal *Adevărul*, 2024-2025, adevarul.ro.

Friday, the prime-minister Marcel Ciolacu was present at Timișoara, at the International Airport, talking about this victory of Romanians, asserting that Romania opts out for full adherence to the Schengen space. (Cristescu, 2024)

From March 31, 2024, in the article of Ana-Maria Gherghiță from the newspaper *Adevărul, România a intrat în Schengen, Primii călători care nu au mai fost supuși controalelor la frontieră VIDEO/ Romania has entered Schengen (n.n. space)*. The first travellers that were not submitted to border controls VIDEO, it is revealed that Romania has entered the Schengen space, namely aerial and sea space.

From May, 9, 2024, in the article written by Laura Macavei in the journal *Adevărul, Bătaia pe muncitori. Intrarea în Schengen ne-ar putea lăsa și fără puțina forță de muncă pe care o mai avem,/ The fight for workers. The entrance in Schengen could leave us without the very few workforce we still have*, it is revealed that Romania entered in Schengen space in what it concerns its aerial and sea space but this thing can bring us an inconvenience, the foreigners who work in our country can migrate in other countries to work. The author shows that, after Siria, Romania is on the second place in the world in what it concerns the flow of the working force outside the country. In the same time, shows Laura Macavei immigrants, sometimes non-Europeans, came to Romania hoping to get a job. The issue, says the author, is that the Romanian state don't have such policies to keep the workers in the country. (Macavei, 2024)

From July, 12, 2024, in the article of Teodora Marinescu from the newspaper *Adevărul, România beneficiază de sprijinul deplin al Franței pentru intrarea în spațiul Schengen terestru. Ce mesaj a transmis ambasadorul francez/ Romania is benefiting by the full support of France for the entrance in pedestrian Schengen space. What message transmitted the French ambassador*, it is pointed out the full support of France in the view of the full adherence of Romania to pedestrian Schengen in the opinion of French ambassador to Romania, Nicolas Warnery at the reception organized with the occasion of France national day. This speech of the French ambassador happened in the context of the beginning of the negotiations of adherence to the European Union of Ukraine and Republic of Moldova. The opinion of the French ambassador is that France will support the adherence of Romania to OECD in 2024. The ambassador warmly thanked to Olympics and sportives for their contribution to the image of Romania abroad. (Marinescu, 2024)

From July, 20, 2024, in the article of Dana Arambescu of the journal *Adevărul, Cum se schimbă șansele de intrare completă în Schengen cu doi vicepreședinți în PE. Ștefănuță: "Cred că va trebui să așteptăm alegerile parlamentare din Austria"/ How they are changed the chances of full entrance in Schengen with two vice-presidents in PE (n.n. see European Parliament). Ștefănuță: „I think we will have to wait the parliamentary elections from Austria”*, it is revealed that, Romania, will have major political gains after the elections of the Eurodeputies Nicu Ștefănuță and Victor Negrescu and it is expected that Romania to have an easier path on its way to full adherence to Schengen space. These two Eurodeputies were both named as vice-presidents of the European Parliament, asserts the author. Ștefănuță thinks we have to wait the parliamentary elections from Austria that will take place in the autumn of 2024 in order to see the perspective of Romania's entrance in the pedestrian Schengen space. (Arambescu, 2024)

From July, 22, 2024 in the article of Ana-Maria Gherghiță from the newspaper *Adevărul, namely Când ar putea avea loc intrarea României în spațiul Schengen terestru. Cătălin Predoiu : "Suntem mai bine plasați decât anul trecut"/ When it could take place*

the adherence of Romania in the pedestrian Schengen space. Cătălin Predoiu: “”We are better placed than last year”, it is mentioned the fact that the minister of internal affairs, Cătălin Predoiu asserted that Romania is enjoying a more favourable position than last year in what it concerns its full adherence to Schengen space according to the opinion of Agerpress. At that hour, Romania has entered already in aerial and sea Schengen space, asserts the author. According to Cătălin Predoiu, Romania will enter to pedestrian Schengen space in 2025. This happens in 2025, in a more complex situation than last year, when the European Commission is about to be formed, process that will probably end in the autumn. (Gheorghită, 2024)

From September 26, 2024, in the newspaper “Adevărul”, the author Alex Vlaicu writes the article *Comisia Europeană susține că România este pregătită pentru aderarea deplină la Schengen/ European Commission sustains that Romania is ready for full adherence to Schengen space.* It is revealed the declaration of the European Commission, from September 26, 2024, that, Romania and Bulgaria are ready to enter the Schengen space. The border control at the internal frontiers of Bulgaria, Romania and other states should be eliminated is the opinion of the European Commission. Ten days ago, Germany introduced border controls at all pedestrian frontiers in order to combat illegal immigration. (Vlaicu, 2024)

From September, 28, 2024, in the journal “Adevărul”, in the article of Cristina Stancu, *Cum au încercat să intre ilegal în spațiul Schengen, prin România, un cetățean palestinian și unul tunisian/ How it tried to enter illegally in the Schengen space, through Romania, a palestinian citizen and a tunisian one*, it is shown that the frontier policemen from the International Airport Henri Coandă from Bucharest identified two citizens (a palestinian and a tunisian) who tried to pass illegally in Schengen space using false travelling documents. The two people were forbidden to enter in Schengen space being forced to return to Amman, in Jordan. (Stancu, 2024)

From Octomber 2, 2024, in the newspaper “Adevărul”, the author Alex Vlaicu, in the article *Europarlamentarul Victor Negrescu, în urma alegerilor din Austria: “Aderarea la Schengen devine aproape imposibilă”/ The Eurodeputee Victor Negrescu after the elections from Austria: “The adherence to Schengen becomes almost impossible”* reveals the opinion of the vice-president of European Parliament, Victor Negrescu, considering that, the Romania's adherence to pedestrian Schengen space, is almost impossible in the context when, in Austria, right wing extreme would form the government. FPÖ, a nationalist and anti-immigration party, won the first place in elections in Austria, this aspect being a worrying factor. Concerning the opinion of Austrian officials regarding the adherence of Romania to Schengen space, the leadership of this country opposed for longer time to this adherence and finally agreed to Romania's integration into Schengen space only in what it concerns aerial and sea frontiers. (Vlaicu, 2024)

From Octomber 4, 2024, in the journal “Adevărul”, the author Alex Vlaicu writes the article *Consiliul JAI discută săptămâna viitoare dacă România poate intra în spațiul Schengen terestrul/ The Council JAI debates next week if Romania can enter into pedestrian Schengen.* It is mentioned the Council of Justice and Home Affairs from Luxemburg which will debate the implementation of *acquis communautaire* in Bulgaria and Romania. European Commission will present Schengen Barometer, a bi-annual report regarding the evolutions developed in Schengen space, but also the threats emergent in Schengen space. (Vlaicu, 2024)

From Octomber 7, 2024, in the journal “Adevărul”, the author Cristina Stancu, in the article *România trebuie să adere la Schengen cu frontierele terestre până la sfârșitul anului, spune comisarul european pentru afaceri interne/ Romania has to adhere to Schengen until the end of the year, says the European commissioner for internal affairs*, it is revealed the declaration of the European Commissioner for Internal Affairs that Romania and Bulgaria has to adhere to Schengen space until the year 2024. The European commissioner declared he is happy to live in Schengen space. He pleaded for the cause of Romania and Bulgaria to adhere to Schengen space. (Stancu, 2024)

From Octomber 8, 2024, in the journal “Adevărul”, the author Dana Arambescu, in the article *Video. Care sunt șansele României să intre în Schengen anul acesta. Agenda Consiliului JAI din 10 octombrie/ Video. Which are the chances of Romania to enter in Schengen this year. The Agenda of the Council of JAI from Octomber 10*, reveals the fact that Romania is in a critical point in what it concerns the adherence to Schengen space regarding the pedestrian frontiers and this will be the topic of debate from Octomber 10, 2024 at the meeting of the Council of Justice and Home Affairs. Daniel Buda, deputee of Liberal Party was asked if there are signals at the level European Popular Party concerning the positive answer of Austria regarding the adherence of Romania and Bulgaria to Schengen. The idea of adherence to Schengen space will be debated in the Council of Justice and Home Affairs and, in December, the final decision regarding these states will be taken. In the opinion of liberal deputee Buda, the adherence of Romania to Schengen space will help to the strengthening of external frontiers of the European Union. Previously, the aerial and sea frontiers with Romania and Bulgaria, were removed on December, 2023. Austria opposed before the moment when the article was written to the adherence of Romania and Bulgaria to Schengen space. The new European Commission lead by Ursula von der Leyen would probably generate a change of attitude in the politics of Austria regarding the enlargement of Schengen space. The author asserts that the reunion of the Council for Justice and Home Affairs from Luxemburg from October 10 is very important for the issue of Schengen space. (Arambescu, 2024)

From Octomber 10, 2024, in the journal “Adevărul”, the author Cristina Stanca, in the article *Video. România află joi dacă îndeplinește condițiile pentru adera la Schengen terestru. Vești proaste din partea Austriei/ Video. Romania finds out on Thursday if it fullfils the conditions for adherence to pedestrian Schengen. Bad news coming from Austria's side*, says that, after the meeting from Luxembour, from Octomber 2024, Romania will find out if it fullfils the conditions to adhere to pedestrian Schengen space. The opinion of the Austrian minister for internal affairs, Gerhard Karner is that Romania and Bulgaria should not be admitted yet into Schengen space while Cătălin Predoiu, Romanian minister for Internal Affairs is optimistic before the Council of Justice and Home Affairs from Luxemburg, considering that, Romanian state, is ready to adhere to Schengen space. During this summit, the European Comission will present a bi-annual report considering the evolution of the Schengen space. The Hungarian Presidency of the European Union will present how it was applied to community acquis in Bulgaria and Romania. In the opinion of the Romanian prime-minister, Marcel Ciolacu, 2024 is the year when Romania will enter to Schengen. (Stanca, 2024)

From Octomber 10, 2024, in the journal “Adevărul”, in the article *Chiar înaintea ședinței JAI, reprezentantul Austriei declară că nu e încă momentul ca România și Bulgaria să intre în Schengen/ Right after the meeting of JAI, the representative of Austria declares that it is not still the moment that Romania and Bulgaria to enter in Schengen*, the author Florentina Grigore writes about the fact that Austrian opinion

regarding the adherence of Romania and Bulgaria to Schengen, expressed before this meeting of JAI, was not favourable to these two countries. The pedestrian frontiers with Romania and Bulgaria were maintained for longer time. The opinion of the President of European Commission, Ursula von de Leyen, was more favourable regarding the adherence of Romania to Schengen space. Nevertheless, Romania is enjoying the support of several European officialities and this fact might lead to future adherence of Romania to Schengen space, considered the author. (Grigore, 2024)

From October 11, 2024, in the journal "Adevărul", the author Ioana Ion, in the article *Anunțul Bruxelles-ului după ce Austria a pus din nou frâna aderării României la Schengen/ The announcement of Bruxelles after Austria put an end to Romania's adherence to Schengen*, reveals that Romania was, again, rejected in its attempt to adhere to Schengen space, mainly because of the opposition of Austria. At December 30, 2023, the Council of the European Union decided the release the border internal controll at Romania's and Bulgaria's aerial and sea borders. The Council of the European Union will decide when the internal pedestrian frontiers of the European Union with Romania and Bulgaria will become open. Before the meeting of the Council of Justice and Home Affairs from December 12-13 2024, Austria and its minister of internal affairs, Gerhard Karner, opposed to the full adherence of Romania and Bulgaria to Schengen space. He considered that some progresses have been achieved but, Romania and Bulgaria were not, in his opinion, at that time, ready for entering into Schengen space. (Ion, 2024)

From November 7, 2024, in the newspaper *Adevărul*, the author Briana Teodorescu, in the article *Noutăți privind calendarul aderării României la Schengen terestră: Se amâna pentru Paște- "Sunt niște softuri de implementat"/ News regarding the callender of Romania's adherence to Schengen space. It is delayed for Eastern* "There are some softs to implement", it revealed that Romania is waiting for the decision to be accepted to Schengen space from December 13, decisions taken by the European Council of Justice and Home Affairs. The opinion of the Romanian prime-minister, Marcel Ciolacu, is that border controls at the periphery of the European Union could take place in spring 2025. Last month, the prime-minister Marcel Ciolacu was optimistic regarding the accession of Romania to Schengen space until the end of this year. (Teodorescu, 2024)

From November 15, 2024, in the journal *Adevărul*, in the article *Lasconi i-a scris lui Nehammer: "Nu doar Romania pierde din cauza actualei frontiere Schengen, ci și Austria"/ Lasconi wrote to Nehammer: "Not only Romania will loose because of the actual Schengen frontier, but also Austria."*, the author Maria Dinu reveals and the president of political group USR and one of the candidates to Romanian Presidency, Elena Lasconi, wrote to Austrian chancellor, Karl Nehammer, that, taking into consideration that Austria is one of the largest investor in Romania, the Romania's entrance in Schengen space will improve much more the commercial figures of the two countries. Elena Lasconi considers that Romania's entrance to Schengen space is a right and a responsibility. Austria is the second largest investor in Romania and the volume of imports and exports between the two countries might increase considerably because of this entrance of Romania in Schengen area. (Dinu, 2024)

From November 22, 2024, in the newspaper *Adevărul*, the journalist Ștefan Lică publishes the article *Ce înseamnă pentru România aderarea deplină la Spațiul Schengen. Beneficiile aduse fiecărui român și companiilor/ What it means for Romania the full adherence to Schengen Space. The benefits brought to each Romanian and companies.* The article reveals the fact that, Romania is about to enter into Schengen space, after it adhered firstly to sea and aerial European space of free movement, gaining economic

advantages. (Lică, 2024) Romania's entrance into Schengen space, shows the author, will bring a series of benefits for country's economy. It will be created a single external frontier of the European Union, crossing the border of the European Union without further restrictions. Economic companies and the firms of transport will gain an advantage because of the fact that Romanians will be excepted from customs control. Private investors will see with good eyes the entrance of Romania to Schengen space, considers the author. (Lică, 2024) Border control delayed the transit of private companies and they now see with positive eyes the end of customs duties and lost time for formalities of crossing the border. Another asset gained by Romania after the entrance to Schengen space, asserts the author, will be the freedom of the movement of Romanian citizens.

From November 23, 2024, in the journal *Adevărul*, Alina Mitran, in the article *România intră în spațiul Schengen la 17 ani de la aderarea în Uniunea Europeană. Care au fost piedicile/ ANALIZĂ/ Romania enters in the Schengen space at 17 years after the entrance in European Union. Which were the obstacles/ ANALYSIS*, the author Alina Mitran asserts that, there is only a single step to the final decision to accept Romania into Schengen space, at the Council for Justice and Home Affairs from December 12. The prime-minister Marcel Ciolacu thanked to the Hungarian prime-minister Victor Orban for his support in what it concerns the full adherence of Romania to the Schengen space. (Mitran, 2024). Hungary was the country who, at that time, detained the presidency of European Union. The opinion of the Romanian minister was that Romanian-Hungarian economic relations will be accelerated by the adherence of Romania to Schengen. Romania through the voice of prime-minister, Marcel Ciolacu, promised to Austrian chancellor, Karl Nehammer that Romania will undertake the responsibility to protect the external frontiers of the European Union. In the opinion of Victor Orban is that all the barriers that hindered the process of Romania's adherence to Schengen space were eliminated. In the opinion of Viktor Orban, in the cross-border areal economic cooperation between the two countries will be enhanced due to Romania's adherence to Schengen space. After the end of pandemic, in 2021, the Romanian president Klaus Iohannis asserted that the entrance of Romania in Schengen space will stay as a necessity on the political agenda of Romania. It followed a favourable resolution in the European Parliament with the view of Romania's entrance to Schengen space. The favourable opinion of Austria in favor of Romania's cause, formulated by chancellor Nehammer, put Romania's problem in a favourable light. Romania and Bulgaria will be the guardian of external frontiers of the European Union, is the opinion of the author. The frontiers from the boundaries with Romania and Bulgaria will be maintained for 6 months after January 1, 2025. (Mitran, 2024)

From November 27, 2024 in the journal *Adevărul*, the author Florentina Grigore, in the article *România mai face un pas spre Spațiul Schengen: "Ambasadorii UE au acordat aderarea completă"/ Romania makes another step towards the Schengen Space: "The ambassadors of EU agreed the complete adherence"* says that, Austria was the last country who opposed to the adherence of Romania to EU. The decision of acceptance of Romania in the Schengen space will be ratified by the Council of Justice and Internal Affairs of the European Union. (Grigore, 2024)

From November 27, 2024 in the journal *Adevărul*, the article *Premierul PSD Marcel Ciolacu: din 2025, românii vor călători liber nu doar în Schengen, ci și în SUA/ The prime-minister of Social Democratic Party Marcel Ciolacu: from 2025, the Romanians will travel freely not only in Schengen, but also in United States*, is it mentioned the information provided by Marcel Ciolacu that, after the entrance of

Romania in Schengen space, the Romanians will travel freely without visa in USA. (***, 2024)

From December 12, 2024 in the newspaper *Adevărul* from December 12, 2024, in the article of Denis Grigorescu, *Ce beneficii aduce pentru România aderarea la spațiul terestru Schengen de la 1 ianuarie 2025/ What benefits it brings for Romania the adherence to Schengen space from January 1 2025*, it is mentioned the fact that the adherence of Romania to Schengen space will bring a series of benefits to Romanian state in the economic field. Freedom of movement is an other asset we gained. The transport and commercial firms will not lose time anymore for customs control within the territory of the European Union. It is expected that, because of the adherence of Romania to Schengen space, the number of foreign investors in Romania will increase. Almost 400 millions of people can now move freely on the territory of the European Union. (Grigorescu, 2024)

From December 12, 2024, in the journal *Adevărul*, in the article *România a fost admisă pe deplin în spațiul Schengen/ Romania was admitted fully in the Schengen space*, the author mentions the fact that the Council of European Union decided, in the morning of December 12, 2024, the full adherence of Romania to the Schengen space, starting with the date of January 1, 2025. Austria opposed for the last years to the enlargement of Romania to Schengen space. The minister Ciolacu said, about the entrance of Romania in Schengen space, that, this decision will bring new opportunities for business world and much more new jobs for Romanian citizens. Although Romania fulfilled since two years the criterias for adherence to Schengen space, it was admitted as a full member of Schengen area only at January 1, 2025 and, in the opinion of the prime-minister Marcel Ciolacu, Romania lost 2% of gross domestic product as for the delays at the borders of the European Union due to customs duties previously. (***, 2024)

From December 14, 2024, the newspaper *Adevărul* publishes the article of Ștefan Lică, *Ce ar fi însemnat pentru România un nou eșec în Schengen și cum putem depăși criza politică: "Am fost primii care am decis să-l susținem" / What it would have meant for Romania a new failure in Schengen and how we can surpass the political crisis: "We were the first who decide to support it"*, that explains the opinion of Professor Valentin Naumescu that Nicușor Dan should win the elections in Romania. Professor Naumescu was interviewed about the Schengen problem and the political crisis in Romania. Mentioning the adherence of Romania to Schengen space, Professor Naumescu says that for six months on will exist certain customary controls within the boundaries of the European Union. (Lică, 2024)

From December, 20, 2024, the newspaper *Adevărul* publishes the article of Ștefan Borcea, *Comisia Europeană afirmă că reintroducerea controalelor la frontierele interne este posibilă/ The European Commission asserts asserts that the reintroduction of controls at internal frontiers is possible*, it is asserted that the border internal controls from the frontier with Bulgaria and Romania will be eliminated starting with January 1, 2025. Other European states such as Germany, Austria, France, Slovenia, Italy, Holland, Denmark and Sweden reintroduced border controls at their internal frontiers, at their decision. (Borcea, 2024)

From December 25, 2024, Cornelia Mazilu, in the newspaper *Adevărul*, in the article *Zeci de puncte de frontieră vor fi închise definitiv de la 1 ianuarie, după aderarea la Schengen. Iată lista completă a acestora/ Several points of frontiers will be closed from January 1, after the adherence to Schengen. See the complete list of them*, it is

underlined that Romania will close 30 points of frontier from the Romanian-Hungarian border and Romanian-Bulgarian frontier after Romania's acceptance into Schengen space. The infrastructure of frontier points will be maintained. (Mazilu, 2024)

From January 1, 2025, in the article of Maria Dinu from the journal *Adevărul*, *Ministrul Predoiu a trecut simbolic granița cu Bulgaria de Revelion, într-o ceremonie la frontieră Giurgiu-Ruse/ Minister Predoiu passed symbolically the boundary with Bulgaria for Revelion, in a ceremony at the frontier Giurgiu-Ruse*, the minister of Internal Affairs of Romania, Cătălin Predoiu, opened the frontier between Romania and Bulgaria at the point of frontier Giurgiu-Ruse, after the adherence of Romania to the Schengen space, event that occurred in January 1, 2025. The frontier controls on the territory Romania –Bulgaria will cease to exist, concludes the author. Starting with the night of January 1, 2025 Romania will eliminate all the border controls with the rest of Schengen space members. (Dinu, 2025)

From January 2, 2025, in the article of Ștefan Borcea from the journal *Adevărul*, *Marcel Ciolacu susține că dispariția punctelor de frontieră cu Bulgaria și România reprezintă garanția că exporturile românești vor avansa puternic/ Marcel Ciolacu sustains that the disappearance of the frontier points with Bulgaria and Romania represents the guarantee that Romanian exports will advance strongly*, the prime-minister, Marcel Ciolacu, mentions the positive impulse for national economy that Romania's entrance into Schengen (n.n. space) will bring. The disappearance of the frontier barriers from the boundary with Hungary and Bulgaria will advance the Romanian exports this year (2025), concludes the author. (Borcea, 2025)

From January 15, 2025, in the newspaper *Adevărul*, we find the article of Ștefan Lică, *Efectul neașteptat după intrarea României în Schengen. Economist: "Am zâmbit când i-am auzit pe unii că e bine"/ The unexpected event after the entrance of Romania in Schengen. Economist: "I smiled when I heard some people that it is OK."* The idea of the article is that, there are beneficial aspects brought by Romania's entrance in Schengen space, but also disputable elements taken into discussion by the economist Radu Georgescu. Economy will grow as a consequence of adherence to Schengen space, but the fact that Romania has a commercial deficit, and there is an imbalance between exports and imports, the benefits for economy will not be as expected. The imports of Romania from EU are higher than exports. Americans have also a deficit in the balance of trade, but they introduced taxes for imports of almost 25%, explains Radu Georgescu. (Lică, 2025)

From 7 February, 2025, in the newspaper *Adevărul*, we have the article of Alex Vlaicu, *Mai mulți cetățeni, fără documente pentru spațiul Schengen, depistați la Giurgiu. Încercau să intre în România ajutați de un bulgar/ Several citizens, without documents for Schengen space, identified at Giurgiu were trying to enter in Romania helped by a Bulgarian*. It is revealed the fact that, a Romanian policeman from Giurgiu identified foreign citizens without valid documents trying to cross the border. The article signals cases of citizens of sirian and iranian nationality, who were not having on them documents of travel valid for Schengen space. The author notices an increase of the situations of these kind. (Vlaicu, 2025)

We summarized thus a few of the ideas debated in Romanian press (journal *Adevărul*) with the view of Romania's adhesion to Schengen space. It is a part of a political reality reflected in online media. Romania will finalize a process started 30 years ago when it made known its intention to apply for full membership in the European Union. A difficult transition from communism to democracy and European integration which, as

we all hope, to start some real benefits after the pandemic context and all of difficulties we passed through in these transition years.

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SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND TERRITORIAL COOPERATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

István POLGÁR*

Abstract. One of the great challenges of contemporary Europe is related to the process of integration and the need for European integration of different communities and regions. Evaluations conducted have shown that there is a great need for expertise and policies regarding the development of the European integration process. New geopolitical realities, associated with a process of national-identity emancipation, have led to the redrawing of political maps in South East Europe. Slowly, societies from this space matured and the injuries of the past began to heal. Even though there are still many open wounds, a reconciliation process has begun at the level of public discourse, at the political level and even at the level of identity.

On the other hand, social responsibility and territorial cooperation in the Western Balkans are critical topics and deeply intertwined, driven by EU accession, fostering regional stability for regional development, peacebuilding, and fostering greater integration into the European Union. Nowadays, civil society represents one of the most actively discussed concepts in the field of social sciences. Several researchers underline the importance of the civil society in the social responsibility phenomenon.

Keywords: European integration, National sovereignty, Western Balkans, Federalization, Border politics

INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY

The main conflicts of the twentieth century occurred mainly because of political and ideological reasons. The borders of states became real insurmountable barriers not only for enemies, but several times also for their own citizens. This character of the borders created rather the role of elements that prevented the emergence of common activities and values. Although from a strategic point of view, strictly from the perspective of border regions, they were directly interested in developing a strategy based on cooperation with neighboring regions. Nevertheless, the specificity of Europe is given not only by the diversity of cultural and historical realities, but also by the existence of numerous borders between states.

The creation of today's status quo from the European continent is the result of a long and complex process. Over the years, this process has been influenced by numerous historical, political, economic and social factors. The understanding and good management of borders and neighborhood relations had a key role in the European construction process. The expansion of the European community has gradually changed the situation of the external borders of the EU. These changes produced socio-economic and political transformations that generated many opportunities in the field of regional development, but also created many potential problems and tensions. The new conjuncture created in an

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expanded Europe emphasizes the need for long-term commitments to support local and regional cross-border cooperation initiatives.

The issue of territorial and transnational cooperation in general goes beyond geographical, economic and legal approaches. If we intend to treat the phenomenon from a specific point of view, we will find ambiguities and uncertainties regarding the role of states and the functioning of some institutions in the process of territorial and transnational cooperation and partnerships (Polgár, Brie, 2023).

On the other hand, social responsibility and territorial cooperation in the Western Balkans are critical topics and deeply intertwined, driven by EU accession, fostering regional stability for regional development, peacebuilding, and fostering greater integration into the European Union. These concepts intersect with various economic, social, and political issues in a region, which has a complex history and a diverse cultural landscape. Through the combined outcomes and initiatives generated by social responsibility and territorial cooperation, better governance systems can be created, focusing on joint solutions for youth, environment, economic development, rule of law, and infrastructure, ultimately aiming to bridge gaps in local capacities, improve public services, and build social cohesion by tackling fragmentation and encouraging shared ownership for sustainable development.

Methodologically, the emphasis of our analysis primarily falls on the legitimacy of this type of cooperation and initiatives derived from social responsibility and territorial cooperation. In this regard, we use the pro and counter arguments of the states that support new initiatives but also the ones that challenge it. Last but not least, special attention is paid to the EU's perspective, in the context of its official position through the Berlin Process.

The purpose of this research is to analyse the unfolding of the negotiations regarding the operationalization of new regional cooperation initiatives which involve social responsibility. The paper proposes the following objectives:

- Carrying out a conceptual analysis, with concrete references to the realities of the Western Balkans, regarding new forms of cooperation and regionalism
- Identifying the role of the deadlock over the uncertain prospects of EU accession for the emergence of new cooperation initiatives
- Analysis of the pro and counter arguments within the new regional cooperation initiatives including social responsibility

The main question is configured around the phenomena of territorial cooperation: Is there any tendency towards new cooperation models in the Balkan space? The other research question is: Does the new cooperation models represent another step towards European integration?

CONTEXT, HISTORICAL ELEMENTS AND BACKGROUND OF TERRITORIAL COOPERATION

The fall of communism and the disintegration of Yugoslavia have amplified in a first stage-the process of identity emancipation and the emergence of new cleavages in the Balkans. Against the background of conflicts and the desire for socio-economic development, the societies of the new Balkan states have repositioned themselves in favor of a reconciling identity dialogue (Brie, Jusufi, Polgar, 2021). This process has also been favored by the aspirations for European integration that these peoples have. Today, most states in the Western Balkan are waiting to be integrated into the EU. However, the process of European integration is not a simple one and requires, in addition to the EU's openness to make this integration (the numerous internal crises of the EU in the last decade, but also the need for

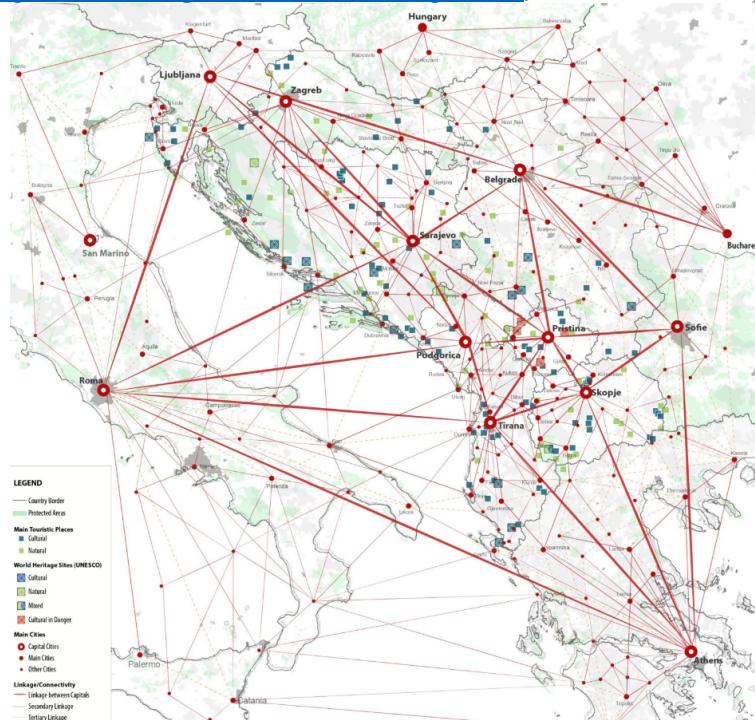
institutional reform have slowed down / stopped the enlargement process) an integrating realignment of all identity communities within these states (Atanasov, 2022).

Also, history has taught the Western Balkan nations to be suspicious, especially of their neighbours. Some of that suspicion has re-emerged recently considering the tensions on the Serbian and Kosovar border which are blocking the EU membership talks. The EU, with some exceptions, has fallen silent on the case several border incidents (Atanasov, 2022). In the absence of the EU membership, the countries of the region are asked to do more for their own reforms in their own. This for the countries of the region has meant that they will need to wrap up their problems by their own. However, it is impossible for the countries of the region so much dependent on the outside world experiencing constant crises with neighbouring states to sustain their internal economic and political stabilities. Thus, the emerging foreign policy context and culture can be characterized as Hobbesian, which has a deep mistrust of the international system and relies on self-help for solving problems (Herta, Corpadean, 2019).

Still, the countries of the Western Balkan region: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia share a common objective, to be part of the EU. This commonly shared goal is valid and represents the future despite the huge diversity which characterize the Balkan space.

Even if in the past years the process was promising, the actual situation show that this is a highly contested and unfinished project. The refugee crisis and the growing geopolitical interest of other actors has turned EUs attention and put the Western Balkans back in the focus and on the political map of Europe, underlining the strategic importance of the region for Europe's security and stability.

Map. 1. Regional Cooperation – WB Visioning Territorial Futures in the context of the EU (Source: Regional Studies Association, *The Western Balkan Network on Territorial Governance – a regional initiative for cooperation*, <https://www.regionalstudies.org/news/blog-the-western-balkan-network-on-territorial-governance-a-regional-initiative-for-cooperation/>, accessed in 19.05.25)



THE IDEA OF TERRITORIAL AND REGIONAL COOPERATION

The idea of regional cooperation or regionalism, seen as policy cooperation in different areas among geographically proximate neighbours (Bozhilova, 2009), has been a main tendency in the foreign policies of the countries, particularly in Europe, starting from early 20th century. The initial ideas of regionalism were concerned with the ambition of achieving coherence among the countries within a specific region, as is the establishment of the European Communities in the 1950s. In this initial phase, the concept of regionalism also featured aspects of regional fragmentation and competition, arising in particular as a result of the rivalry between the West and East in the Cold War circumstances (Gunnarson, 2000).

With the end of the Cold War, the idea of regionalism gave way to what became known as New Regionalism. The end of the bipolarity fostered a more decentralized international system with the countries and the regions increasingly enjoying more freedoms in their foreign policy choices. Thus, the New Regionalism has seen regionalization in the direction of the establishment of the multipolar world (Gunnarson, 2000), as a source for achievement of Regionness (Hettne, Soderbaum, 2000) with the capacity of a region to articulate its interests through relevant institutions (Hettne, Soderbaum, 1998).

The above external explanations of regional cooperation are particularly important in cases of conflictual or post-conflict, developing and aid dependent societies like the Western Balkans (Anastasakis, Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2002). These external sources are not necessarily the only factors, however. It is also possible that the regional relations are derived from the internal economic and political dynamics of a region or of a country. In reality, the intra-regional factors probably interact and thus shape each other. All regions have their characteristic paths of economic and political development that impact on intra-regional politics.

Regionalism can be also market-driven for instance as a reaction against challenges imposed by globalization either to protect against the competitive pressures or to benefit from them (Mittelman, 1996). Regionalism has been further encouraged by the democratization and new attitudes towards international cooperation in which absolute rather than relative gains have come to dominate (Rosecrance, 1991). In addition, authoritarian leaders can exploit regionalism to boost their domestic regimes (Debre, 2021). Thus, the New Regionalism (Kneuer, Demmelhuber, Peresson, Zumbrägel, 2018) features a diverse and multi-dimensional cooperation as it has come to involve many actors, including both state and non-state actors, cooperation is exercised in the fields of both high and low politics (Anastasakis, Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2002) and with both external and internal incentives in play that have kept the regional cooperation alive (Libman, Obydemkova, 2018).

The regional cooperation initiatives, deriving from Neo-Realism explanation that considers regions to be defined by the physical boundaries of their members, are heavily defined by relative material power of the member states and their respective national interests (Russo, Stoddard, 2018). In this way, the regional cooperation boils down to a movement between the desire for domination (Stoddard, 2017), on the one hand, and of emancipation in the struggle for core and peripheral positions, on the other (Vayrinen, 1997).

In these circumstances, tensions occur between large and small member states that both may try to augment regional cooperation to strengthen their economic and political positions respectively (Ambrosio, 2008). Their struggle is for relative gains and

regional cooperation is pursued to establish a regional industrial base, enhance bargaining power, lock in domestic political reforms, or avoid national isolation (Clinton, 1995).

There are also critical political attitudes towards regionalism in play that are also often shaped by the negative historical experiences (Duus, 1993).

THE HISTORY AND PRACTICE OF TERRITORIAL AND REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

The main area of EU involvement in the Western Balkans happened at the beginning of the 90s and it had a humanitarian nature. The EU adopted a regional approach towards Southeastern European countries, whereby the main aim was to achieve basic stability and prosperity for the region as a whole (Collins, 2009). At that time, the region had been witnessing a chain of violent interethnic conflicts, so stability was obviously the minimum condition for further cooperation with the EU. One of the first European initiatives to stabilize SEE was launched in 1996, called the Royaumont Process, its aim was to support the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreements and to promote regional projects in the field of civil society, culture and human rights (Petričušić, 2005).

Later, the EU encouraged reforms in the region which were meant to serve as pre-conditions for accession into the EU (Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2002). It became clear that the countries from the region needed to establish bilateral and multilateral relationships among themselves, and therefore the EU attempted to launch “a regional multilateral tool”. This tool was The Stability Pact. Launched in 1999, the Stability Pact was an initiative that drew together the EU and some other partner states with the aim of bringing peace, stability and economic development to the Balkans.

The backbone of the EU's strategy towards the Western Balkans after the post Kosovo crisis was the introduction of the Stabilization and Association process. This process promotes stability within the region and facilitates a closer association of the Western Balkan countries with the EU, and ultimately assists countries in their preparation for EU membership (Petričušić, 2005).

In 2000, a new EU financial instrument, the Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilization strategy was set up. The initiative represented a financial instrument used to manage EU assistance by the WB countries (Petričušić, 2005).

The New Regionalism has been emerging pattern all around the world, but it has been in particular evident and dominant in Europe, where existing regional cooperation institutions such as the European Communities/European Union, NATO and the CSCE/OSCE were strengthened and new regional and sub-regional arrangements emerged in various parts of Europe, (Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2002) including in the Balkans, the southeast corner of the European continent. The Western Balkans, a geo-political term coined starting from early years of the 21st century, is a sub-region that refers to the six Balkan countries located in the western side of the Balkan peninsula that have not yet been able to achieve membership in the European Union. These include Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia (Brie, Jusufi, Polgar, 2023).

The Western Balkans has had interesting features as regards the regional cooperation. In over thirty years since the end of the Cold War, this region has seen changes in its name from Balkans to South East Europe to Western Balkans for re-branding purposes (Svetozlar, 2009). It has not been a permanent fixture; its political-

territorial shape has changed, and has moved from one zone of economic and political development to another. Its shape has been dynamic, with constant reproduction (Bechev, 2004).

The intra-regional economic integration has been limited. The trade and economic relations among the countries of the region is very minimal. For all countries of the region, trade with the EU is far more significant (Seroka, 2008). Thus, the Western Balkans is an emerging region rather than full-fledged regional arrangement as it has not yet fully developed its economic and political potential (Favaretto, 2000). However, increasingly, this region has faced the new challenges in the direction of marketisation and democratisation, and there are emerging regional preferences (Pippidi, 1999).

A question arises on whether Western Balkans region has a centre either within itself or outside the region. Responses to this question reveal whether this region has autonomy in relation to major powers and core economies or not (Vayrinen, 1997). The conventional wisdom says that this region's economies and polities are in transition to dependence on the EU. The alternative vision however, formulated by the founders of Open Balkan initiative, which is the case of this study, suggests that, while external orientation to the EU remains a dominant trend, but in the absence of the EU membership, there is a place for an alternative vision, which searches for regional self-organisation and limited dependence to outside the world (Tsoukalis, 1999).

For more than 30 years since the end of the Cold War and disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1991, the region of Western Balkans has witnessed series of external and internal efforts to foster the regional cooperation. There is no major regional initiative that has been inherited from communist times. All the existing and functional regional cooperation initiatives are established in the post-Cold War era, and with few exceptions, have mainly been initiated with the assistance of the actors external to the region, including the EU, NATO and the US.

The dominant international actors engaged in the region have been experimenting with alternative regional strategies and approaches which have not always been consistent and have had limited or unsuccessful results (Anastasaki, Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2002). While the initiatives that concern the wider region of Balkans or of South East Europe include many and have longer history, such as the Regional Cooperation Council or the South East Europe Cooperation Process, the initiatives that are limited to the six Western Balkan countries are only recently established and they include the initiatives such as the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, Open Balkan, the Western Balkans Fund and few others.

Due to historical differences, the legacy of Yugoslav wars of 1990s and the ethnic cleavages, the region does not fulfil qualifications for a Security Community where there is a shared sense of belonging combined with development of common political and foreign policy practices and behaviour (Vucetic, 2001). National identities in the Western Balkans have been defined and have operated in opposition to each other (Todorova, 2004). The disintegration process still continues in the region. The definition of borders is still unclear.

All in all, the region of the Western Balkans is diversified and composed by a variety of countries and governmental authorities. Such a regional context limits the capacity of its actors to define regional objectives and pursue regional cooperation. There has been also limited economic ability to initiate and sustain regional initiatives. Something is clear and that is the countries of the region have not been able to deal with

the trans-border threats without the support of the external factors such as the EU, NATO and the US.

Nevertheless, there is wide conviction that the issues and problems - economic, political and security - in the Western Balkans cannot be resolved on a national basis alone. They are regional in character and therefore require additional regional measures (Anastasakis, Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2002).

Despite the fact that it is not yet a Security Community, the idea of genuine regional cooperation stems from the fact that regional cooperation is a relations-related matter. Inter-state relations are about how states relate to each other not only in terms of common objectives, but also in terms of dangers and risks.

The Western Balkans is enmeshed in a web of interdependence in terms of problems and desires. In the Western Balkans we have indivisibility situation, where a set of states have major problems so interlinked that these problems cannot reasonably be resolved apart from one another. Aware of this situation, the commitment for territorial cooperation has been dominant feature of the foreign policies of the countries of the region. It is seen as important point in the entire process of the European integration, as the source for stability, security, democracy and prosperity, and as an important confidence building measure among the countries (Anastasakis, Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2002).

The snowball effects of territorial cooperation coming from the northern Europe also have enhanced the agenda for regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. The benefits seen by countries of Central Europe from initiatives such as Visegrad Group or Central European Free Trade Agreement have encouraged the countries of the region to follow the suit (Dangerfield, 2004).

The countries thus have started to demonstrate a considerable readiness to pledge and commit substantial effort for regional cooperation. The Regional Youth Cooperation Office, Open Balkan and the Western Balkans Fund are results of this emerging trend (Brie, Jusufi, Polgar, 2023).

IMPASSE IN THE EU MEMBERSHIP PROSPECTS AS CAUSALITY FOR FORMATION OF A NEW REGIONAL COOPERATION INITIATIVES.

The region of the Western Balkans, despite the fact that it is a major sub-region of Europe and is surrounded by EU member states, has remained out of EU borders. The European integration process has moved, but very slowly. More than twenty years have passed since the EU made the promise for their membership in 1999. At the time of writing this study, two of the six countries hold accession talks (Montenegro, Serbia), two others are candidate states (Albania, North Macedonia) and remaining two have not yet achieved a candidacy status (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo). A region where the EU defined its foreign and security policy in post-Cold War era has remained a grey area at the heart of Europe. Culprits can be found both in EU and in the region. The process has recently been burdened with the persistence of old disputes, but also with the emergence of new quarrels, such as the one imposed by the EU member Bulgaria on North Macedonia, over the issues of history, identity and language (Rizaov, 2021).

The EU membership has been vital goal for the six Western Balkan states. The EU's condition-setting approach made a huge impact on the design of the democratisation reforms in the region. The EU also through its wider political, economic and security presence in the region provided incentive for the development of the European integration-oriented strategies. It also played a significant role in resolution of

the political turmoil's happening constantly in these countries. However, the integration process of these countries fell into trap as they were exposed to be crisis management countries for the EU rather than as countries to which the EU should enlarge, which damaged their integration prospects. This legacy has continued to harm their European integration prospects. Once the countries are recipients of the EU crisis management, it is difficult to expect a change in the paradigm from a crisis to a member.

Parallel to the absence of the EU membership prospects, the Western Balkans have experienced economic crisis considering the COVID-19 pandemic that engulfed the region starting from March 2020 onwards. It has been already two years where the countries have experienced high rates of infections and deaths in world records arising from the pandemic, with implications to investments, energy resources, remittances, industrial production, employment and growth. In these circumstances, the corruption as a phenomenon has leapt to the top of voters' concerns (360 stepeni, 2021).

Overall, the public is scared and uncertain. And the implications of the failures on the economic side, with the absence of the European integration leverage, have forced the region's governments to be more pragmatist and less value-driven.

The wider perception, in both the EU and the Western Balkans, is that the EU membership is difficult to happen in near future or in medium term (Stratulat, Kmezić, Tzifakis, Bonomi, Nechev, 2020).

And it may not happen at all, considering the offer made by the EU leaders to Western Balkans to join the European Economic Area rather than the EU, an offer which has been rejected by the Western Balkan leaders (DW-North Macedonia, 2021). Absence of EU membership progress in both the reality and in the perceptions of the public has decreased the credibility and leverage of the EU in the region, laying the basis for criticism of the EU role and for emergence of alternative thinking in the minds of the Western Balkan leaders. In this case for some of the leaders the intra-regional economic integration can be considered as a substitute to the absence of the European integration (Semini, 2021).

THE BERLIN PROCESS AS A NEW REGIONAL APPROACH

Nowadays the six Western Balkan countries, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia in terms of international relations and cooperation policies are having the same objective. This objective is called European Union and the integration to it. This process is long and complicated, since these countries still face divisions, both infrastructural and political, and are confronted, among other things, by a difficult economic situation, permanent bilateral disputes and instability (European Parliament).

The Berlin process was set up in 2014 as a platform for high-level cooperation between high official representatives of the Western Balkan Six and their peers in Berlin Process host countries. The Process also involves the EU institutions, international financial institutions and the region's civil society, youth and businesses. The Berlin Process was initiated to utilize the potential of increased regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. The idea was to foster specific projects in order to increase connectivity in the region, as well as good neighborly relations and interpersonal relationships, while subsequently supporting the EU integration. This initiative is not a part of the EU's Stabilization and Accession Process, but supplements as an independent format which is also focusing on the region as a whole (Deutsche Zussamenarbeit, 2022).

The main plan of the initiative was to focus on issues of economic and regional cooperation. In organizational terms, it consists of a series of meetings at which representatives of individual EU member states, EU institutions, and international financial institutions meet with governments as well as local civil society representatives from the Western Balkans. The cooperation format develops recommendations and strategies for the adoption of new regional ties and the implementation of already established strategies and agreements. It also focuses on opportunities to allow Western Balkans to benefit on short term by the European context, financial frame and partnership, even without being part of the EU. These characteristics give the specific of the initiative, which keeps as a central point economic issues and regional cooperation, because within the EU, the prevailing view is that economic cooperation can stabilize the region and bring it closer to the EU's internal market (Vulovic, 2022).

The principal fields on which the initiative should generate development are focusing on:

- resolution of outstanding bilateral and internal issues
- achieving reconciliation within and between the societies in the region
- enhancing regional economic cooperation
- laying the foundations for sustainable growth

With eleven years after its launch, the Berlin Process has already produced many ambitious ideas, such as the common regional market. The implementation of these plans and agreements by the Western Balkan states has often stopped and stagnated. Even though to strengthen cooperation between the states of the region and with the EU has become even more important in light of Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

There are several reasons because the initiative scores low. In the following we will try to list some of the main reasons of the stagnation.

One of the main issues regarding the Berlin Process concerns the socio-economic development and the regional cooperation, which do not explicitly go hand in hand with the EU integration process of the Western Balkans. The very poor infrastructure, the lack of public investment, in sewage systems, waste disposal or energy production, high poverty and social inequality in the region are not supported by the Berlin Process, making it inefficient.

The second issue because of which the initiative fails to achieve more progress is the fact that WB states perceived the initiative as a substitute for EU enlargement and integration. Even if no member state neither the EU announced it as an alternative for the integration, the timing was very bad and support the scepticism within the WB countries. The Berlin Process was launched exactly after the suspension of EU enlargement (Jovanovici, Holzner, 2023).

The third reason can be explained by the fact that the initiative was perceived from the beginning as a strategy or plan given by foreign actors after a very low level of consultation with the WB countries. Even the name of the initiative is meaningful, raising the belief of the general public that all the initiative is a paternalistic project dominated from abroad, in which local actors simply follow the instructions (Jovanovici, Holzner, 2023).

The fourth issue concerns the local political willingness towards the initiative. This also scores low. Local political leaders' involvement in the design and implementation of the initiative was very low. These have very limited tools and instruments to interfere or to promote the initiative. This happens especially because the

Berlin Process is primarily focusing on macro level regional cooperation, not on small local economies with a weak growth potential (Jovanovici, Holzner, 2023).

For many of the European member states, and especially for Germany, as the initiator, the Berlin Process still represents a priority. At a political declaration level, the Berlin Process is still accepted as the centrepiece for WB integration (European Western Balkans, 2021). Any regional cooperation is beneficial especially which has an inclusive character and its open to all six countries in the region. Therefore, many European member states will continue to strongly support the Action Plan of the Common Regional Market. On the other hand, the political leaders of the six Western Balkan countries reaffirmed the commitment to this historic project at the last Summit of the Berlin Process.

The EU's position regarding the Berlin Process is not different. The EU publicly welcome the initiative, to strengthen regional cooperation, in some of the most important elements in the European perspective of the Western Balkans and an integral part of the stabilization and association process. In this regard, it is important for the countries to be able to move forward and create a common regional market, a commitment undertaken by all 6 Balkan leaders. This can help the acceleration of cohesion and convergence in these countries and it would contribute to speed up the negotiation process (Politico, 2021).

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Social responsibility in the Western Balkans has grown notably over the past two decades, shaped by post-transition reforms, EU integration goals, and strong community traditions.

The new socio-political realities, associated with a process of consolidation and strengthening democracy, have led to the redrawing of the social structures in the Balkan space. Competition and mutual distrust marked these societies. Still, the idea of liberal democracy started to be more and more implemented (Polgar, Jusufi, 2023).

Civil society was reborn after the fall of communism, but still was affected by the lack of financial support and a proper legislative framework. The idea that democracy, the rule of law and civil society are not similar or connected might seem incorrect or strange to some, especially nowadays, when these concepts are perceived as the foundation of democracy (Polgar, Jusufi, 2023).

Western Balkan region, in general, represent a good testing ground for analysing the impact of civil society over the democratisation process. First, all the countries have been and still are home for major disputes and efforts to accelerate democratisation. Second, all of countries, civil society was not built from scratch after 1990. Although these states did not inherit a proper civil society, a solid and comprehensively institutionalized sphere can be discovered, which included trade unions, professional associations, organizations representing different social and interest groups (Nimu-Pârvulescu -Todor 2016).

In the communist period these types of organizations had many members, subsidiaries, since the participation in the activities was mandatory. Basically, the associative life was imposed and controlled by the party and in this way became politicized, bureaucratized and used for propaganda.

Third, the civil society is much more attentive to the process of social responsibility. Therefore, if a role by civil society is expected in boosting social responsibility, this is likely to be detected in the western Balkan neighbourhood, where

the societies themselves and international actors have actively sought to contribute to the democratisation process.

The level of social responsibility reflects a different content of meaning according to the type of politics. Nowadays it has become clear that in the political discourse, there is a lively debate about the value content of social responsibility, which is also presents the different attitudes in the East and in the West of the European continent (Polgar, Jusufi, 2023).

In the new annual report on the state of democracy in the world, Freedom House ranks the states of the Western Balkans in the category of states with a "hybrid regime" and in the category of states with a semi-consolidated democratic regime with an under average level and presence of social responsibility. Based on the report, in most of the Western Balkan states there is a decline of the social responsibility phenomenon (Freedom House 2022). While these regimes combine elements of democracy and authoritarian rule, they are analytically distinct from both. They may be democratic in the minimal sense that they feature regular, competitive elections, but their dysfunctional institutions are unable to deliver the definitive components of a liberal democracy: checks and balances, the rule of law, and robust protections for the rights and liberties of all (Freedom House 2022).

In the past decade, in WB countries we could witness several antidemocratic and illiberal practices. Civil society from these countries are confronting permanent disquieting threats. However, the individuals and groups that compose each country's civil society have remained steadfast in their efforts to hold bad actors accountable and promote the public good.

The emergence of civil society has been a major feature of the social responsibility phenomenon. While a large amount of work has been developed on the significance social responsibility in the development of a democratic regime, the question of its relationship with the democratisation tendencies on one hand and autocratisation on the other has been answered in limited ways, at least as it relates to recent major developments that have affected the quality of social responsibility in the Western Balkans. While there has been a rapid and extensive spread of civil society institutions and practices in the region, the 'internalisation' of the 'norm' of civil society has emerged as a benchmark in assessing the capacities of civil society to bring or contribute to a change. Thus, the role of civil society in social responsibility democratisation and autocratisation tendencies can be further enlightened with the application of the benchmark of internalisation of the norm of civil society (Polgar, Jusufi, 2023).

What constitutes a norm of civil society in the social responsibility phenomenon? The explanation below builds on Katzenstein's definition of international norms as "collective expectations for the proper behaviour of actors with a given identity" (Katzenstein, 1996: 5). While there has been broad agreement among democracies on the necessity of the existence of social responsibility through civil society in a democracy, a feature of autocratisation has been the contestation and violation of civil society as a norm.

Normative change does not occur immediately. According to the literature, the norm-like cycle includes three phases, namely the emergence, cascade, and internalisation phases (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). The cycle begins with the formulation of a new norm(s), continues with compliance to the new norm by the states and ends with the internalisation of the new norm; for example, increased independence of the civil society.

However, the nature, culture, and dynamics of civil society, provide the government actors with numerous points of co-optation or capture of civil society. Civil society has its own organisational culture and dynamics and has a tendency to accommodate or remain receptive to new demands of the government. In this direction, the autocratization tendencies tend to contest the diffusion of civil society norms, resulting in a halting of internalisation of the norms related to civil society.

Social responsibility in the Western Balkans is developing through civil society but uneven. It is strongest where EU integration pressure, active civil society, and international business intersect. Continued progress depends on stronger institutions, economic stability, and sustained public engagement.

CONCLUSIONS

European enlargement through the accession of the Western Balkan states to the EU has been announced as a central goal of EU policy, but also that of the six countries concerned. Accession to the European Union has proved to be, through its own mechanisms for accession negotiations, an important motivating factor with a large impact on the process of implementing structural reforms and democratizing this region. The political integration of the Western Balkans is, as in other cases, preceded by an economic, cultural, educational or security integration that all these Balkan states have been in need of. Deepening integration through opening up and conducting accession negotiations has most often also meant a process of stabilization and resolution of the political turmoil that is constantly encountered in these states.

However, the integration process of these countries fell into trap as they were exposed to be crisis management countries for the EU rather than as countries to which the EU should enlarge, which damaged their integration prospects. This legacy has continued to harm their European integration prospects. Once the countries are recipients of the EU crisis management, it is difficult to expect a change in the paradigm from a crisis to a member.

All the Western Balkans countries have Stabilization and Association Agreements with the EU, opening up trade and aligning the region with EU standards and also very important, provides the overall framework for the relations of the EU with these countries. The EU, through its policies and financial instruments also provides political and financial support for the countries of the region to foster good neighbor relations and build shared prosperity through regional integration. In addition to its strong political support for the Western Balkans and the Berlin Process, the EU supports regional co-operation organizations, to boost economic development, improve connectivity, and enhance security and many other benefits across the region.

This research has illustrated the importance of social responsibility and territorial cooperation initiatives and presented how the cooperation initiatives like The Berlin Process has faced difficulties in claiming its relevance and legitimacy. We consider that this study contributes to the literature on social responsibility and territorial cooperation arrangements and on the role of the legitimacy in their functioning. This study shows that the factors of legitimacy such as social responsibility is indeed challenging the legitimacy of territorial cooperation arrangements. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that other regional cooperation arrangements are better representative or inclusive, but the specific context and circumstances that surround the perception and the negotiations regarding The Berlin Process have underlined the importance of the consultation and representativity.

Regarding the research questions, drawn at the methodological part of the paper, we consider the Q1 is answered through the fact that territorial cooperation has been one of the greatest achievements in the Western Balkans. The combination of the shared objectives for the integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions and the relatively high level of regional integration is what makes the Western Balkans different, better, today from other transition regions. In terms of Q2, due to the objective needs of the Western Balkans, and since stronger regional cooperation and good neighbor relations are explicit requirements for the Western Balkans aspirant countries in their EU membership bids, we can definitely affirm that the process of regional cooperation will increase in the future. The importance of regional cooperation is underlined by two key benefits. First, it reduces tension and strengthens regional stability, which in turn is a key precondition for sustainable development and second, it brings various practical benefits as the fulfillment of the accession criteria's.

The inability of both sides, the European Union on the one hand, and the Western Balkan states on the other, to find solutions to deepen the integration process has led to the need to legitimize a new roadmap. Adapting to new realities, including new EU demands, is a difficult process and most often creates frustration and mistrust.

We can conclude that if neither European integration nor other territorial cooperation systems will succeed, good-neighbourly relations can be damaged and threaten the European security. Not least, the European geopolitical and geostrategic interests in the WB will be reduced making place for the influence of other global powers. Absence of EU membership progress in both the reality and in the perceptions of the public has decreased the credibility and leverage of the EU in the region, laying the basis for criticism of the EU role and for emergence of alternative thinking in the minds of the Western Balkan leaders.

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LESSONS FROM ROMANIAN - HUNGARIAN CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION FOR EU MEMBERSHIP CANDIDATE COUNTRIES

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Abstract. *The European Union, through its policies, programmes and instruments specific to cross-border cooperation provides member and candidate states funding aimed at supporting neighbouring border areas to implement projects that, through their results, would help underdeveloped areas achieve results that would improve their economic and social status. All these results should help balance out the level of development of the various regions of the European Union, while also increasing their quality of life.*

The Romania - Hungarian border is a rich source of good practice examples, covering three long budget funding time frames. Some of these showed remarkable results, reflected through improved social, economic, educational, infrastructural indicators, to name a few. Out of the projects implemented at the Romanian – Hungarian border, funded through the European Regional Development Fund, we are focusing on a small group of projects that stand out through representativity and impact within this geographical area.

The objective of this paper is to offer expertise in the field of cross-border cooperation projects, reflected through relevant examples of good practice and lessons learned. This should provide a useful source of ideas and practices to be implemented in the near future in relevant border areas.

Keywords: CBC, cross-border cooperation projects, lessons learned, EU candidacy

INTRODUCTION

European integration represents a complex and multidimensional process, that aims not only to harmonize the legislative and economic dimensions between the member states, but also to promote territorial and social cohesion at the level of the European Union (EU). In this context, cross-border cooperation serves as an essential strategic tool, helping balance out regional disparities and promoting sustainable development (Țoca et al., 2017a; Țoca et al., 2017b). The EU, through its history, has developed a series of specific mechanisms, that target national border areas, often characterized by lower levels of economic development, underdeveloped infrastructure and limited access to public services. Cross-border cooperation is sustained by the EU mainly through the INTERREG programme, funded through the European Development Fund (ERDF) budget allocations. At the same time, the EU encourages direct partnerships between local authorities, public institutions, NGOs and the

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academic environment from neighbouring states, with the aim of generating joint projects that respond to local needs.

The Romanian - Hungarian border serves as a relevant example for the application of the principles of cross-border cooperation, through the mechanisms and funding of the European Union, manifested in various forms, such as through Euroregions or through the European grouping of territorial cooperation (EGTC). Some of the relevant Euroregions for this border area are the Carpathian Euroregion (Oltean et al., 2022) and the Dunăre-Mureş, Criş-Tisa and Bihor-Hajdu Bihar Euroregions (Țoca et al., 2021; Dogot, 2007, Chiriac et al., 2022). Relevant EGTCs for this border region are: the Bánát – Triplex Confinium Limited Liability EGTC, the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation “Gateway Europe” – limited liability (EGTC “Gateway Europe”) (EGTC Gate to Europe Ltd.), European Common Future Building European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation with Limited Liability (European Common Future Building EGTC) and the European Border Cities European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation Limited Liability (European Border Cities EGTC) (Țoca et al., 2012; Țoca, 2013).

Cross-border cooperation is a heavily studied topic, as the European Union already has a consistent history in developing policies to promote collaboration at multiple hierarchical levels, and cooperation programmes were created to enact these policies (Fogarasi, 2025). Cross-border cooperation at the Romanian – Hungarian border was also under the focus of academia, from various perspectives, however, the research efforts that focus on the results of CBC are limited.

The projects implemented through the Hungary - Romania Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007-2013 emphasized certain internal or external weaknesses such as unclear evaluation criteria for the assumed indicators, legislation changes, unprepared project staff, nevertheless, the quality of the implemented projects increased (Feier et al., 2016), most probably due to previously acquired experience. On another note, cross-border cooperation is not necessarily identified as the main driver for the evolution of the two neighbouring border areas, with limited coordination and also limited involvement of minorities (Istenes-Benczi, 2024). Nevertheless, they are not fruitless, and their contribution is important.

There are papers that focus on the effects of CBC projects for very specific fields of intervention. In projects targeting rural tourism, the outcomes reflect a narrow approach, concentrating on individual attractions, without considering the integration into larger promotion strategies, which could have a limited effect in attracting foreign tourists, nevertheless, proving successful considering their resilience after the funding ended (Bădulescu et al., 2018: 202). There were also efforts that focused on the improvement of workforce competence, those the effects of such endeavours aren't observable in the short term, especially if funding is limited (Chirodea et al., 2013: 79).

These initiatives, based on European funds, have contributed to a common regional identity, to increased mobility, and to the consolidation of mutual trust between neighbouring communities, sitting on both sides of the Romanian - Hungarian border. Such initiatives can serve as examples, lessons, or models for EU candidate countries, in several aspects: efficient administrative organization, obtaining and managing EU funds, community involvement and sustainable partnerships. Furthermore, these lessons can also serve as bridges for dialogue and collaboration between member state and candidate country institutions, facilitating the transfer of expertise and accelerating the process of European integration.

The Romanian - Hungarian border serves as an appropriate case study due to its dynamism, making it one of the most relevant cross-border cooperation areas in Central and Eastern Europe from this perspective, but also due its position as a space where historic, cultural, economic, and geopolitical interests converge.

To be more specific, the aspects listed below justify our choice:

- As an area of transition between Central Europe and the Balkans, and due to the shifting role of this border area, between two former candidate countries, one candidate and one member country, and, finally, two member countries, the geographical position and its recent history, this area served as a perfect laboratory for testing the efficiency of European cohesion policies.
- The cooperation expertise was consolidated through several successive EU budgeting timeframes: 2004-2007, 2007-2013, 2014-2020, and 2021-2027 (Merce et al., 2025; Chirodea et al. 2022; Chirodea et al. 2021).
- The results of cross-border cooperation within the area are well documented through clear performance indicators and independent evaluations, available in public databases, and monitorization, visibility and dissemination reports.
- Cultural diversity with reconciliation potential: the border area is characterized by ethnic and cultural diversity, composed of communities that learned to collaborate in a constructive and sustainable manner. Through this, cross-border cooperation contributed to reducing historic tensions and consolidating a common regional identity.
- Replicability for candidate countries represents one final argument in favour of this area, as partnership models, implementation mechanisms and community engagement strategies tested in this area in various cooperation instances can be adapted by current candidate countries.

To sum up, the main objective of this research is to contribute to the in-depth understanding of the mechanisms of cross-border cooperation in the context of the cohesion policies of the EU, by providing a valuable analytical and practical framework for EU candidate countries, with a focus on the Romanian-Hungarian border, with the purpose of identifying good practices, lessons learned and replicable models of cooperation, especially through the results of implemented projects.

To this end, our analysis focuses on two EU budget timeframes: 2007-2013 and 2014-2020. The main instrument for territorial cooperation is the European Regional Development Fund (Chirodea et al., 2022; Chirodea et al., 2021). Two programmes served this purpose at the Romanian Hungarian border: Hungary - Romania Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007-2013 and the Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary 2014-2020 (Toca et al., 2016; Polgár et al. 2025: 191-202).

By analysing the outcomes of the projects developed in this timeframe at the Romanian-Hungarian border, we will uncover lessons for EU candidate countries, that will help in better coordinating future efforts targeted towards cross-border cooperation, an essential pilar of the cohesion policies of the EU, aiming to alleviate regional disparities, promote sustainable development and consolidate good neighbourhood between candidate and member states.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As already stated, our objective for this study is to gain meaningful insights from the experience of the Romanian - Hungarian border area in the development of

cross-border cooperation partnerships and the resulting projects. Our analysis relies on data regarding the outcomes of the projects implemented under the Hungary - Romania Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007-2013 and the Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary 2014-2020 programmes, funded through ERDF.

We relied on a mix method approach, including quantitative and qualitative methods. More specifically, the process implied collecting data regarding the results of all projects implemented under the specified programmes, extracting relevant information from this data through content analysis, and analysing the existing and extracted quantitative data.

The data was collected from the official websites of the two programmes (Results - Interreg). In the instance of the 2007-2013 cooperation programme, a short R script was used, which relies on the rvest and tidyverse libraries for gathering and cleaning up the collected data. In the case of the 2014-2020 cooperation programme, the data was available in spreadsheet format, so the cleanup process was performed in Microsoft Excel. General project related data, data related to project partners and project results were converted into csv files and were further processed in Python through Exploratory Data Analysis, to gain insights regarding the projects implemented in the two timeframes. Further, projects with large budgets were also analysed to gain further insights regarding their outcome.

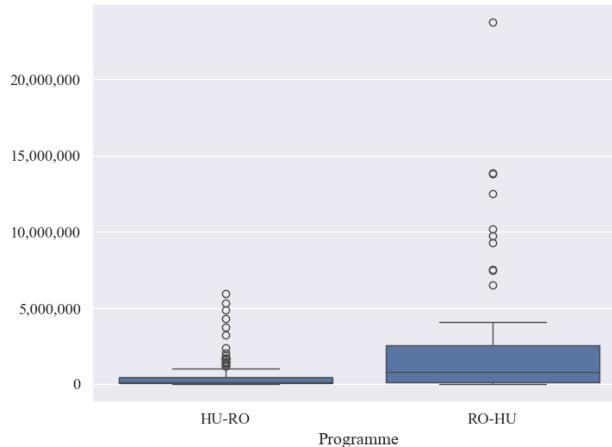
The geographical area covered by the two ERDF funded programmes includes four counties on each side of the Romanian - Hungarian border. They are: Satu mare, Bihor, Arad and Timiș on the Romanian side, and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, Hajdú-Bihar, Békés and Csongrád-Csanád on the Hungarian side.

Though institution building is extremely important in creating an environment which promotes collaboration in border areas, analysing the success of such objectives requires an overarching effort (Polgár, 2022: 11).

DATA ANALYSIS. DISCUSSION

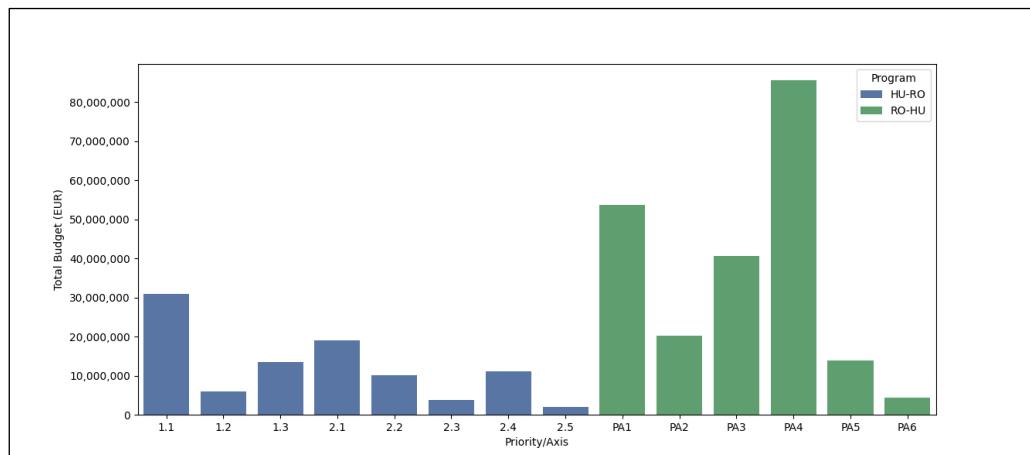
The total number of projects implemented through the two programmes included in this research is 301. Out of these projects, 193 were implemented in the first timeframe, under the Hungary - Romania Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007-2013, and 108 in the second timeframe, under the Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary Programme 2014-2020. Even though significantly fewer projects were implemented in the second timeframe, the total budget allocated to these projects was more than double than the total budget allocated to the projects from the first timeframe. Consequently, individual projects received larger funding in the second time frame (Figure 1), which could be interpreted in various ways: more generous funding per project in the more recent programme, improved abilities of attracting and managing large budget projects, perhaps a more strategic distribution of efforts to implement cross-border cooperation projects, but it also means that there is less space for the implementation of smaller projects by actors that do not require large budgets.

Figure 1. Boxplot presenting the distribution of project budgets, by programme. (HU-RO: Hungary - Romania Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007-2013, RO-HU: Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary Programme 2014-2020) (Own elaboration based on data from http://www.huro-cbc.eu/en/financed_projects/ and <https://interreg-rohu.eu/en/results/>).



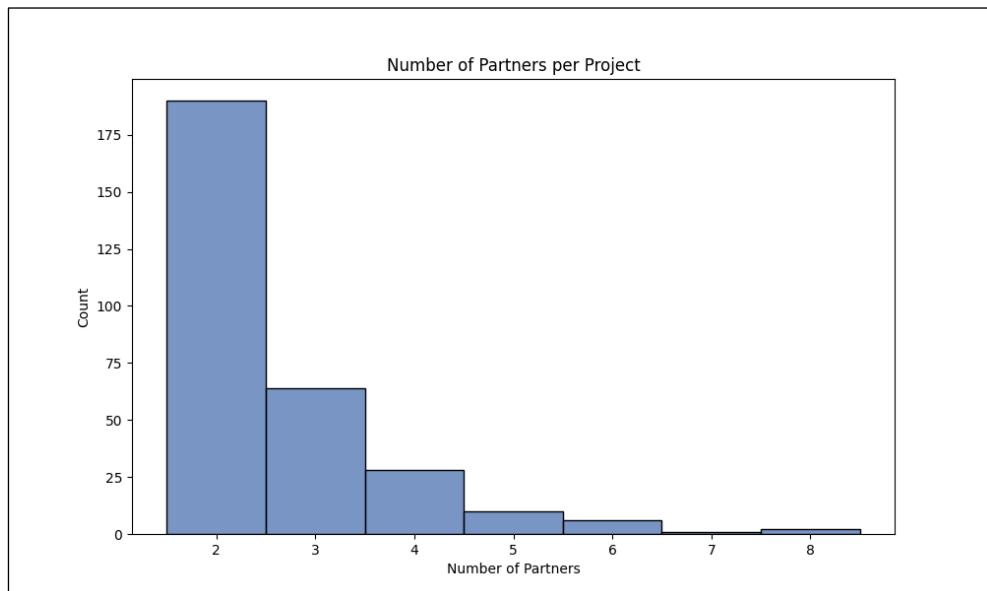
As shown in Figure 2 below, in the first timeframe, the largest budget went in the direction of transport infrastructure (1.1), followed by projects dedicated to cross-border cooperation in the business sector (2.1), environment protection (1.3) and health care (2.4). In the second timeframe, the projects targeting the improvement of health-care service totalled the largest budget by far, amounting to more than 80 million euro (PA4), followed by projects dedicated to the protection of common values and services (PA1) and by projects dedicated to improved employment and cross-border labour mobility (PA3).

Figure 2. Total budget allocation for projects implemented under the Hungary - Romania Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007-2013 and the Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary Programme 2014-2020, aggregated by Key Area of Intervention and Priority Axis, respectively (Own elaboration based on data from http://www.huro-cbc.eu/en/financed_projects/ and <https://interreg-rohu.eu/en/results/>).



More on the organizational side, the vast majority of projects were implemented by two or three partners, projects with large number of partners being the exception in most cases. In fact, there is a low positive correlation between the number of partners in a project and the allocated budget in each of the two timeframes (around 0.2 in both time frames), and a little higher for the entire data set, which includes the projects of both time frames, together (around 0.27).

Figure 2. Frequency of number of partners per project under the Hungary - Romania Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007-2013 and the Interreg V-A Romania-Hungary Programme 2014-2020 (Own elaboration based on data from http://www.huro-cbc.eu/en/financed_projects/ and <https://interreg-rohu.eu/en/results/>).



In the 2007-2013 cross-border cooperation programme, most participants and project leaders are public administration institutions, Intercommunity Development Associations (IDA) and Non-governmental organizations. However, in the 2014-2020 cross-border cooperation programme, this classification changed to some extent. Thus, public administration institutions are still the most frequent participants and project leaders, by far. They are followed by NGOs, IDAs and public health institutions as the most frequent project members, and by IDAs, public health institutions and NGO as project leaders.

By analysing the outcomes of the projects, we have identified multiple fields of interventions they have touched. Even though the field of intervention is decided mainly by the Key Area of Intervention or Priority Axis, the outcomes may have a more diverse impact, and that is true for quite a few of the projects developed through the two programmes at the Romanian – Hungarian border. For each project, we have identified up to 3 fields of intervention. One important finding from this research is that a significant part of the projects had an educational component (more than half in the first timeframe and two thirds in the second timeframe), regardless of the implication of educational

institutions or not. This component is important from many points of view, whether we are talking about transfer of know-how in various fields such as the protection of the environment, healthcare, administration, combating unemployment by requalification, improving the employability of minority groups, enhancing the educational offer for the preuniversity and university students, amongst others.

Further insights regarding the results of cross-border cooperation projects, and the lessons they bring, are identified by analysing the results of selected projects, mainly those with the highest budgets.

OUTCOMES OF INDIVIDUAL PROJECTS

Looking at the top three projects by budget in each programme, a few aspects become evident (Table 1). First, the individual sums by project are greater in the RO-HU programme (2014-2020), compared to the HU-RO programme (2007-2013), aspect revealed by the fact that more projects were financed in the first timeframe, even though the total budget by programme was larger in the second timeframe. Second, some of the biggest efforts went towards improving essential infrastructure in the second timeframe, while in the first one, they went more towards enhancing the economic, cultural and tourism sectors.

Even though the EU funds are available for various types of organizations, as we have seen, local public administration entities are, in most cases, leaders or members in cross-border cooperation projects. More specifically, 168 out of the 301 projects implemented in this time frame include at least one public administration entity amongst its members. The outcomes of the selected projects is also a reflection of the presence of public administration entities, as they are partners with strategic interests. This is reflected also by the outcomes of the projects we have analysed. Improving essential public services, developing the road infrastructure, developing industrial parks, promoting and enhancing tourist objectives and activities, are elements that are an integral part of the development strategies of territorial administrative units.

Table 1. Top three projects by budget, in each programme (Own elaboration based on data from http://www.huro-cbc.eu/en/financed_projects/ and <https://interreg-rohu.eu/en/results/>).

Project code	Fields of intervention	Target groups	Total budget (EUR)	Achieved, measurable indexes
ROHU-457	Public safety, risk management	Emergency services, public authorities, population in risk areas	23,746,994.18	- 2 centres of intervention for emergency situations built - 10 specialty vehicles acquired - 150 people trained in risk management
ROHU-444	Health, medical research	Medical personnel, researchers, patients, health institutions	13,836,221.00	- 1 medical research centre modernized - 3 laboratories equipped - 5 institutional partnerships created

ROHU-443	Road infrastructure, urban mobility	Inhabitants from cross-border areas, local authorities, carriers	13,813,965.84	- 2 border roads rehabilitated (over 20 km) - 1 new bridge built - 4 public transportation stations modernized
HURO/1101/037/1.1.1	Economic development, support for small and medium enterprises	Small and medium enterprises, Entrepreneurs, Local investors	5,949,018.33	- 1 industrial park extended - support for 25 enterprises - 100 jobs created
HURO/0802/091_AF	Culture, cross-border cooperation	Local communities, Cultural organizations, young people, NGOs	5,311,316.49	- 3 cultural centres renovated - 12 cross-border events organized - 500 participants to joint activities
HURO/0802/103_AF	Tourism, Regional promotion	Tourists, Tourism agencies, Local authorities, Rural population	4,890,320.47	- 2 tourist routes created - 1 mobile app launched - 8 promotional materials distributed

These programmes usually cover various areas of intervention, which offer the possibility to the relevant eligible applicants from the targeted geographical areas, to direct efforts towards aspects that need improvement. Once again, between the two programmes, there is an evident difference between the financed budgets. Furthermore, certain target areas naturally require larger budgets, while others don't. Cooperation between local authorities or other relevant actors from the border areas is an important aspect in building trust, partnerships, protocols and creating strategies for the future, however, they don't require the same amount of spending as infrastructure development or other similar objectives.

Table 2. Top project by budget, in each Priority Axis/Key Aria of Intervention (Own elaboration based on data from http://www.huro-cbc.eu/en/financed_projects/ and <https://interreg-rohu.eu/en/results/>).

Axis/ KAI	Project code	Fields of intervention	Target group	Total budget (€)	Achieved, measurable indexes
1.1	HURO/1101/037/1.1.1	Economic development, support for SMEs	SMEs, local entrepreneurs	5,949,018.33	- 1 industrial park extended - 25 supported enterprises - 100 jobs created
1.2	HURO/1101/002/1.2.1	Research and innovation	Research institutions, universities	886,145.40	- 3 joint projects - 2 equipped laboratories
1.3	HURO/0802/072_AF	Environment and energy	Local authorities, rural population	1,700,000.00	- 5 rehabilitated public buildings

					- 20% energy consumption reduction -3 information sessions for local communities
2.1	HURO/1101/043/2.1.1	Education and vocational training	Students, teachers, educational institutions	3,770,186.57	- 2 schools renovated - 300 students involved
2.2	HURO/0802/092_AF	Public health	Patients, medical staff	1,205,495.05	- 1 equipped medical centre - 5.000 consultations/year
2.3	HURO/1001/278/2.3.2	Social inclusion	Vulnerable people, NGOs	170,000.00	- 50 people advised - 10 social workshops
2.4	HURO/1101/036/2.4.1	Tourism and heritage	Tourists, local communities	1,886,989.03	- 3 tourist routes - 1 mobile app
2.5	HURO/0801/101	Institutional cooperation	Local administrations, NGOs	322,449.44	- 4 bilateral meetings - 2 signed agreements
PA1	ROHU-456	Research and innovation	Universities, research institutes	12,504,461.95	- 1 research centre - 10 pilot projects
PA2	ROHU-444	Health	Hospitals, patients, medical staff	13,836,221.00	- 3 hospitals renovated - 15.000 patients/year
PA3	ROHU-421	Employment and mobility	Unemployed, employers, local authorities	7,507,873.22	- 2 training centres - 500 trained people
PA4	ROHU-457	Public safety	Emergency services, population	23,746,994.18	- 2 Inspectorate for Emergency Situations centres - 10 specialty vehicles - 150 people trained in risk management
PA5	ROHU-11	Environment and natural resources	Rural population, authorities	2,685,559.00	- 3 areas protected - 5 awareness campaigns
PA6	ROHU-297	Culture and tourism	Cultural managers, tourists	390,775.00	- 6 cultural partners - 1 cross-border festival

The individual projects listed above reveal important insights into relevant factors for cross-border cooperation, in various fields of interest, that similar potential beneficiaries from current candidate countries such as the West Balkans can learn from:

- Support for SMEs is paramount for any economy, as they represent the “backbone” of any economy (World Bank SME Finance, 2025), thus local authorities should identify ways to help them evolve and create opportunities for new SMEs to be created.

- In the field of health services, coordination between local authorities and medical entities on both sides of the border, to either complement each other or develop similar services, can lead to increased access to public services for the inhabitants of cross-border areas.

- Natural resources and the environment do not follow administrative separation. Thus, coordination in this field is extremely important as local actions can have both positive and negative effects in neighbouring areas. Furthermore, protecting the environment helps in improving sustainability of the targeted geographical areas.

- Education is also extremely important, and as mentioned, it goes beyond the standard institutional approach, as it can help in combatting unemployment through reconversions, integrating young adults, transfer of know-how and in many other ways, all relevant for countries that want to improve their level of development, such as EU candidate countries.

- Governance can also improve significantly from such experiences. Collaboration through cross-border cooperation projects can be beneficial not only from the point of view of collaboration between similar institutions from neighbouring countries, but also by nurturing collaboration between institutions from the same country, distributed on various levels in the administrative hierarchy, and by creating a space for collaboration with NGOs, or private entities.

CONCLUSIONS

In the context of EU enlargement and the recent geopolitical challenges, consolidating cross-border cooperation becomes a priority, especially for candidate countries that can benefit from expertise and models validated in other border areas within the EU.

Even though the cross-border cooperation policies, and the instruments through which they are enacted, generated important results in border areas, they are not without challenges, such as delays in programme initiation, difficulties in coordination between partners, reduced complementarity with other European initiatives, to name a few. Nevertheless, these should not become insurmountable blockers.

As strategic recommendations with the purpose of maximising impact at the level of the West Balkans, the following aspects should be considered:

- Developing bilateral and multilateral cooperation programmes.
- Collaborating with various stakeholders (NGOs, private entities) from the area.
- Including, as much as possible, educational activities, as it is a factor that drives development.
- Learning from previous cooperation programmes such as the Romanian – Hungarian model.
- Supporting an economic environment in which the local economy can develop in a sustainable manner.

- Applying multidimensional evaluation mechanisms with the purpose of selecting the projects with the most transformative potential within the region.
- Enhancing the administrative capacity of local administrations to efficiently absorb European funds.
- Promoting pilot projects, with multiplication power and replication potential in various fields of interest such as health, education, environment, infrastructure and others.

The Romanian – Hungarian border area is a rich source of inspiration and learning opportunities for cross-border cooperation for candidate countries, emphasizing consistency, collaboration, openness, strategy, education, all aspects that any candidate country should rely on to foster success and drive development.

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CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE IN NORTH MACEDONIA IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN ASPIRATIONS

*Ioan ZIRBO**

Abstract. The paper intends to present the evolution of pandemic of Covid-19 during the year 2022 and its effects upon Romanian society in overall as presented by the Romanian newspaper “România liberă”. The online archives of the newspaper “România liberă” present the context of the pandemic’s evolution in Romania during the years 2020-2022 with an accent on the year 2022, period which we researched further for the present article. The issue of vaccination, the outburst of different varriants of the virus Covid 19, the public isolation and endemic fear generated by the means of mass media campaign which also helped and raised the citizens’ awarenress regarding the emergence of this virus, were a few coordinates of evolution of public life in the pandemic context. The restrictions imposed to the population including also the international travelling were bypassed by the fact that most people of Romania took the vaccine and, in this case, the resistance in front of new varriants of the virus was much more higher. It was a kind of hybrid war that we won and seemed to reach an end, but the battle was in fact to be stronger than before as individuals in front of emergent challenges. The article intends to present the internal and external context of the evolution of pandemic, with a focus on Romania’s evolution towards the end of the pandemic.

Keywords: Romanian press, Pandemic, Covid-19, Romania, European states, vaccination, impact, civil society.

INTRODUCTION

North Macedonia represents one of the most complex religious and ethnic landscapes in the contemporary Balkans, where two major religious communities coexist: Christians (predominantly Orthodox) and Muslims, mainly Sunni. According to the 2021 official census, approximately 46.1% of the population identifies as Orthodox Christian and 32.2% as Muslim (State Statistical Office of North Macedonia, 2022). This diversity—rooted in centuries of Byzantine and Ottoman influence—has produced both periods of cooperation and episodes of tension, culminating in the 2001 interethnic conflict, which was resolved through the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OSCE, 2011).

Today, in a regional context marked by political and identity-related fragilities, social cohesion between the two communities is essential for strengthening democracy and internal stability. North Macedonia’s aspiration to join the European Union further amplifies the relevance of interreligious dialogue. European policies on minority protection, social cohesion, and interfaith dialogue form an integral part of the political accession criteria, and the European Commission continuously monitors how the state manages religious diversity (European Commission, 2024a). At the same time,

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international reports on religious freedom indicate that interreligious relations remain a sensitive area, with differing perceptions between communities and ongoing risks of politicization (U.S. Department of State, 2023:2).

In this context, the present study explores how interreligious dialogue-rooted in hope and reconciliation-can contribute to social peace and to North Macedonia's progress on its path toward European integration.

THE CONTEXT OF THE TOPIC AND THE STAKES OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

North Macedonia represents one of the most diverse and sensitive confessional landscapes in South-Eastern Europe, where religious and ethnic identities significantly overlap. According to the 2021 census, approximately 46.1% of citizens identify as Orthodox Christians and 32.2% as Muslims (State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022). This plural distribution has historically created a complex terrain of interaction, cooperation, but also tension, particularly during periods of political instability or state transformation.

The European integration of North Macedonia goes beyond the technical dimension of fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria and extends to the state's capacity to ensure internal stability, minority protection, and interreligious dialogue. The European Union places significant emphasis on how candidate states manage religious diversity, as this forms part of the architecture of European values—pluralism, religious freedom, social cohesion, and the rule of law (European Commission, 2014a:9).

Encouraging trends regarding the EU's enlargement and the accession prospects of the region have not generated a corresponding increase in public support for EU membership within the country.

- In 2023, **60% of North Macedonia's citizens support EU accession**, the lowest percentage recorded so far.
 - The decline in support for accession has **not significantly increased eurosceptic attitudes**, as only **12% of the population is openly eurosceptic**.
 - The **undecided or apathetic population has grown** over the past three years to approximately **30%**.
 - There is a **significant gap between the two major ethnic communities**—Macedonians and Albanians—in terms of support for EU membership.
 - **57% of ethnic Macedonians** support EU accession.
 - A considerably **higher percentage of Albanians (78%)** are in favor of accession.
 - The number of **undecided respondents is increasing** in both ethnic groups.
 - Respondents with **higher education and higher incomes** tend to be more supportive of EU accession.
 - Only **53% of young people (18–24 years old)** support EU accession.
 - EU membership is considered **very important by 40%** of the population.
 - For **20% of citizens**, EU accession is **not important at all**.
 - Overall, **ethnic Macedonians are more pessimistic and critical** toward the accession process than ethnic Albanians.
 - **66% of the population** believes that the country is **not prepared** for EU membership (Damjanovski, 2023:5).

In this context, **interreligious dialogue provides a constructive framework for rapprochement**. Both Christianity and Islam share narratives of final justice, peace, and

universal moral responsibility. These convergences can function as **symbolic bridges between communities**, helping to reduce tensions and to create a climate favorable to European integration, which requires the capacity to build an inclusive and stable society.

European integration depends not only on legal reforms but also on the **quality of social and interreligious dialogue**. The VIBE 2023 Report shows that North Macedonia faces **strong social and media polarization**, which affects the society's ability to manage religious diversity and sustain dialogue between communities.

This polarization represents a major obstacle to fulfilling the EU criteria related to social cohesion, the rule of law, and minority protection (VIBE, 2023:3).

THE RELEVANCE OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE FOR PROMOTING EUROPEAN VALUES: PEACE, COHESION, PLURALISM

The fundamental values of the European Union are human dignity, freedom, equality, the rule of law, and respect for minorities. These values presuppose a culture of dialogue capable of transcending confessional and ethnic boundaries (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 326/391 (26 October 2012), 7–9). In this sense, dialogue seeks to identify a common language which, without erasing doctrinal and confessional differences, affirms a shared ethical horizon: ultimate good, moral responsibility, and the hope for a society in which conflict is overcome.

In multiconfessional societies such as North Macedonia, where relations between the majority Christian and minority Muslim communities directly influence internal stability, interreligious dialogue can contribute to shaping identity narratives in a cooperative direction. Mircea Brie notes that in Europe's border regions, ethno-confessional identity becomes a sensitive factor, and intercultural and religious dialogue is essential for preventing marginalization and conflict (Brie, 2011:11–12). Within this framework, appealing to shared values can reduce perceptions of otherness and strengthen social cohesion. Moreover, European policies encourage interreligious dialogue as a tool for preventing radicalization and extremism.

Therefore, interreligious discourse—where the hope for a common future transcends confessional boundaries and creates the premises for a genuine culture of peace—serves as a cultural and symbolic instrument that can contribute to promoting European values in candidate states such as North Macedonia.

METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY IN RELATION TO EU CRITERIA

The study employs an interdisciplinary methodology, combining sociological analysis of interreligious discourses with approaches from political science and European studies. The research begins with an interpretation of the specialized literature on Christian–Muslim relations, intercultural dialogue, and religious identities in the Balkan region, integrating relevant contributions such as those of Mircea Brie (Brie, 2011). In parallel, reports of the European Commission and documents related to the political accession criteria—particularly those concerning minority protection and social cohesion—are examined (European Commission, 2024a).

On an empirical level, the study relies on official statistical data (2021 Census) and recent surveys on public perceptions of the European Union and interreligious relations, published by organizations such as the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the International Republican Institute (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2023). These sources

make it possible to correlate the internal dynamics of interreligious dialogue with the degree of alignment to European values. Alongside these statistical datasets and surveys, the VIBE index is also used as an empirical reference because it provides indicators on access to information, describes levels of civic education, evaluates the ability of institutions to respond to social issues, and measures the degree of polarization.

The delimitations of this research correspond to EU criteria: the study does not aim to evaluate the technical aspects of the *acquis communautaire* but focuses exclusively on the **social and cultural dimensions of the accession process**, particularly interfaith dialogue, ethno-religious cohesion, and North Macedonia's capacity to align with the European values of pluralism, social peace, and respect for diversity. Pluralism and democratic stability (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2021).

CHAPTER I. THE RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL CONFIGURATION OF NORTH MACEDONIA

North Macedonia is a deeply diverse state from both a religious and ethnic standpoint—a situation that directly shapes the country's social, identity-related, and political dynamics. According to the 2021 census, the resident population consists of approximately **46.1% Orthodox Christians** and **32.2% Muslims**, representing the largest Muslim community by proportion in Europe outside majority-Muslim states (State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022:12). Religious differences frequently overlap with ethnic structures: approximately **46.1% of the population is Orthodox Christian** (the majority of whom are ethnic Macedonians), while around **32.2% is Muslim**, primarily Albanians, but also Turks, Roma, and Bosniaks (State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia, *Census of Population, Households and Dwellings 2021: Book XIII – Religious Affiliation* (Skopje: State Statistical Office, 2022), 12).

This overlap between religious and ethnic identity generates a specific social sensitivity, which Mircea Brie describes as characteristic of “borderland spaces,” where interaction between communities is not only cultural but also influences the political and institutional architecture of the state (Brie, 2011:11–12). For this reason, in North Macedonia religion becomes both a factor of internal cohesion and a potential catalyst for tensions (see more Brie, 2023; Brie; Jusufi and Polgár, 2023: 69–97; Brie; Jusufi and Polgár, 2021: 65–72).

The current social context is also marked by the legacy of the **2001 conflict**, which revealed vulnerabilities in relations between the majority Christian and the Albanian Muslim communities. The **Ohrid Framework Agreement**, which ended the conflict, introduced institutional mechanisms meant to improve minority political representation and reduce structural imbalances. Nevertheless, recent reports show that **interethnic mistrust persists**, and social cohesion continues to depend on dialogue between religious communities (European Commission, 2024a:12–13; Brie, Jusufi and Polgar, 2021).

In parallel, processes of modernization, mobility, migration, and media expansion are shaping religious identities (Polgar, 2023). Although religion remains essential in defining community belonging, society is experiencing increasing polarization, particularly in online environments, where identity narratives can be politically manipulated. According to the VIBE 2023 index, “**media polarization and the proliferation of disinformation contribute to the consolidation of divergent perceptions between the Christian and Muslim communities in a society where**

access to information is only ‘moderately vibrant’” (VIBE, 2023:3–6). These realities show that relations between Christians and Muslims cannot be analyzed separately from the broader social, urban, educational, and economic context.

Therefore, the religious and social configuration of North Macedonia represents a key component of state stability and an important indicator of its capacity to align with European values concerning pluralism, minority protection, and community cohesion (Brie and Blaga, 2015: 255–273).

1.1. Demographic Structure: Christians and Muslims (Current Statistics)

Religious demography must be interpreted within the country’s broader social context. The **Vibrant Information Barometer 2023** indicates that North Macedonia lacks a coherent public sphere, as “**the state does not have a unified society, but social segments that live in parallel realities**” (VIBE, 2023:3). This finding is highly relevant to the relationship between the Christian and Muslim communities, as religious and ethnic differences often overlap with distinct informational ecosystems.

Moreover, the report highlights that “**the polarization of society makes discussion and communication difficult and almost impossible,**” which also affects how the two religious communities perceive interreligious dialogue, trust, and cooperation. Thus, the demographic structure must be viewed not only numerically, but in relation to social polarization, strong religious identities, and a fragmented informational context (VIBE, 2023:4).

Therefore, the presence of the two major religious communities—Christian and Muslim—is a central element of North Macedonia’s social architecture and constitutes the analytical foundation for studying interreligious relations and the potential for cohesion within the context of European integration.

1.2. The Ethnic Dimension of Religious Belonging

In North Macedonia, religious affiliation strongly overlaps with ethnic identity: the majority of Orthodox Christians are ethnic Macedonians, while most Muslims belong to the Albanian community, as well as to Turkish, Roma, or Bosniak groups (U.S. Department of State, 2023). This correspondence between ethnicity and religion means that interreligious relations essentially reflect the dynamics of interethnic relations (Barth; Brie; Dărăbăneanu & Polgár (2019)).

Recent studies confirm that these two communities perceive the country’s strategic orientation and European trajectory differently. According to the KAS–IDSCS analysis, **62% of Albanians** (predominantly Muslim) declare themselves oriented toward the West, whereas only **33% of Macedonians** (predominantly Christian) share this view; additionally, **46% of Macedonians** believe that the country “belongs neither to the East nor the West” (Velinovska and Sofeska, 2025:17). Likewise, Albanians are significantly more supportive of the reforms required for EU accession, while Macedonians tend to show more reserved or even skeptical attitudes (Velinovska and Sofeska, 2025:10).

These differences show that **ethno-religious identity** influences social perceptions, political priorities, and attitudes toward European integration. Therefore, **interreligious dialogue cannot be separated from interethnic dialogue**, as the two dimensions are interdependent within the social structure of North Macedonia.

1.3. The Evolution of Interreligious Relations (History, Tensions, Reconciliation)

Interreligious relations in North Macedonia have developed within a historical context marked by coexistence but also by periods of tension between the majority Christian–Macedonian and Muslim–Albanian communities. Sociological studies show that interpersonal relations are, in essence, cultural relations, and that religious identities function as expressions of broader ethno-cultural identities (Vejseli, 2024:111).

Although cultural diversity is a defining characteristic of the state, it has historically generated difficulties in communication and integration. In her analysis, Mirlinda Vejseli notes that in North Macedonia, “**social cohesion is often perceived as difficult because of differences in language, culture, and religious practices**,” and tensions arise especially in areas such as language, education, and institutional representation (Vejseli, 2024:112). This finding reflects the reality in which religion and ethnicity form closely interconnected identity structures.

The literature highlights that interreligious dialogue becomes challenging when participants perceive themselves as representatives of “**cultures that stand in an antagonistic relationship**,” particularly...

...where the memory of historical conflicts or perceptions of injustice and discrimination persist (Vejseli, 2024:113). This aspect is evident in North Macedonia, where Christian–Muslim relations are influenced by Macedonian–Albanian political tensions, intensified particularly before and after the Ohrid Framework Agreement.

However, positive trends are also evident, namely that multiculturalism is **not** perceived as an artificial construct imposed from above, but as a natural part of the country’s historical identity (OSCE Mission to Skopje, pp.4–6). S. Stojanov emphasizes that “**cultural diversity is naturally embedded in the very social fabric of North Macedonia**,” suggesting that interreligious relations have genuine potential for reconciliation and cooperation when supported through sustained dialogue (Stojanov, 2024:245).

Therefore, the evolution of interreligious relations reflects a fragile balance between historical coexistence and identity tensions, and the consolidation of social peace depends on strengthening intercultural dialogue and recognizing the contribution of each community to the country’s collective heritage.

CHAPTER II. INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF SOCIAL COHESION IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

According to the requirements of the European Union, every member state—and any country aspiring to membership—is obliged to uphold European values through combating disinformation, protecting fundamental rights, encouraging civic participation, strengthening social cohesion, and promoting intercultural and interreligious dialogue. However, **North Macedonia has not fulfilled this criterion**, according to the **European Commission, North Macedonia 2024 Reports** (European Commission, 2024a: 5–7), which state that institutional responses are slow, corruption undermines trust, the media landscape is fragmented and vulnerable, and society is strongly polarized (Brie, 2009).

“In the context of a polarized society, where public discourse is dominated by mutual accusations and a lack of constructive dialogue, identifying a common narrative oriented toward hope and reconciliation can counteract current polarization and also align with the European values of pluralism and social cohesion” (VIBE, 2023:19–20).

2.1. Christian–Muslim Dialogue Between Tension and Cooperation

Christian–Muslim dialogue in North Macedonia unfolds in a context marked by social polarization, low levels of trust in public institutions, and divergent perceptions between the main ethno-religious communities. One of the central factors is **institutional fragility**, which undermines public confidence in the state's ability to mediate conflicts and support social cohesion. Surveys show that **68% of citizens do not trust local authorities**, and **83% do not trust the judicial system**, which limits the role of institutions as mediators of interreligious dialogue (Regional Cooperation Council, 2024:24–27).

To this is added the high level of distrust in Parliament, with **76% of respondents** stating that they do not trust the legislature, while the perception that the media is politically influenced is shared by **64% of adults** (European Commission, 2024b:8–13). These perceptions amplify the divide between religious communities by fueling a climate of suspicion and by weakening credible channels of information.

Another major obstacle is the lack of trust in civil society: **54% of respondents** state that they do not trust civil society organizations (Regional Cooperation Council, 2024:35), which reduces the ability of NGOs to function as neutral platforms for dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Trust in the police also fails to provide a stable framework, since **61% of citizens tend not to trust** this institution (Regional Cooperation Council, 2024:12), even though its role in managing community tensions is crucial.

Nevertheless, despite the apparent tensions, there are also favorable premises for cooperation, namely the way multiculturalism is perceived as an organic part of Macedonian identity. According to S. Stojanov, “**cultural diversity is naturally embedded in the social structure of North Macedonia**,” suggesting that interreligious dialogue has real potential when supported by stable institutions and professional mediation (Brie and Brie, 2008: 95–107; Stojanov, 2024: 254).

Thus, Christian–Muslim dialogue is positioned between **tension**, generated by polarization and weak institutions, and **collaboration**, supported by the tradition of coexistence and by the structurally multicultural character of society.

2.2. The Potential of Interreligious Dialogue in Strengthening Social Peace in North Macedonia

In a society characterized by deep polarization and low trust in public institutions, **interreligious discourse can function as a tool for reconciliation and cohesion**. Both Christianity and Islam contain theological narratives centered on shared themes such as ultimate peace, justice, moral reward, and communal responsibility, which provide a useful symbolic framework for interreligious dialogue (Rotaru, 2016:45–47).

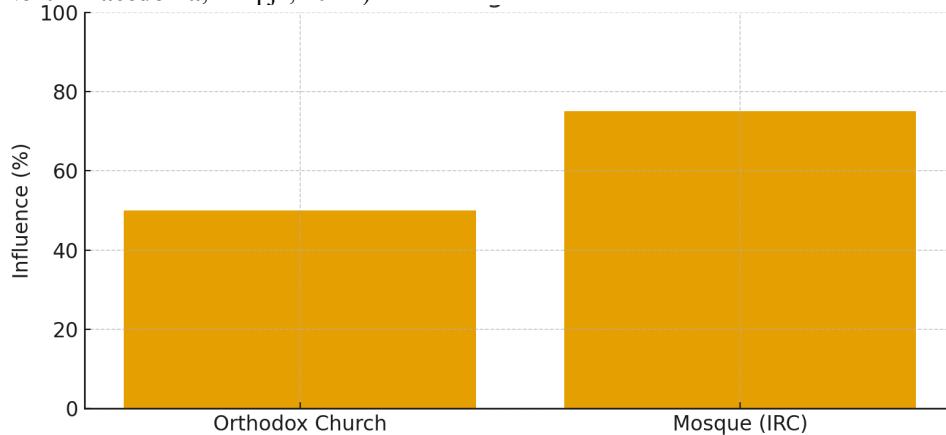
This need becomes particularly evident in the context of institutional fragility and social skepticism. In such a landscape, **religious institutions remain among the few community centers with relatively stable credibility**, giving them the potential to act as social mediators.

Culturally, interreligious tensions are often expressions of deeper ethno-cultural differences. Vejseli notes that dialogue becomes difficult where communities perceive each other as belonging to “**cultures in an antagonistic relationship**” (Vejseli, 2024:113). Yet the author also highlights that cultural diversity is perceived as an **organic element of national identity**, suggesting a real foundation for long-term reconciliation.

However, such interreligious cohesion will be reliable only when supported by a **shared narrative framework**.

Constructive dialogue can provide a “**common moral code**” between the Christian and Muslim communities, creating the conditions for cooperation, trust, and stability in a fragile social context. In the absence of strong political cohesion, this becomes a major symbolic resource for building social peace and aligning North Macedonia with **European values of pluralism and fundamental rights**.

Fig. 1. Estimated Influence of the Two Main Religious Institutions on Individuals (Source: *Perceptions of the Citizens about the Position of the Islamic Religious Community*, Skopje, 2023, *Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis”, Religious Dynamics and Social Trust in North Macedonia*, Skopje, 2024.)



- Orthodox Church: ~50% influence
- Mosque (Islamic Religious Community - IRC): ~75% influence

CHAPTER III. ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS REGARDING CHRISTIAN–MUSLIM RELATIONS BASED ON SURVEY DATA

3.1. Specialized Study on the Muslim Community

The Muslim community in North Macedonia is dominated by the Albanian population, and religious identity is deeply intertwined with ethnic identity, functioning as a cultural and social marker (Vejseli, 2024:112–113). The level of religiosity is high: **66.7% of Muslims state that they trust the Islamic Religious Community (IRC)**, and **over 70% consider religion to have a major influence on their lives** (KAS, 2023:4-6). Religious practices are widely observed, and almost all respondents identify with the Sunni tradition.

However, beyond religiosity, there is a critical perception concerning the relationship between religion and politics. **56.6% of Muslims** believe that the IRC is politically influenced, particularly by the DUI party-reflecting internal tensions between the institution’s spiritual role and its instrumentalization in the public sphere.

Regarding identity, surveys show that **for 42.6% of believers, religion is more important than ethnicity**, indicating the centrality of religious belonging in defining personal identity (KAS, 2023:5). Politically and socially, Muslims-especially Albanians-are significantly more oriented toward the West. According to KAS-IDSCS data, **62% of Albanians believe that North Macedonia belongs to the West**. Moreover, **47%**

support constitutional changes in line with European norms (Velinovska and Sofeska, 2025:17).

Overall, the Muslim community presents a profile characterized by strong religiosity, trust in religious institutions, a critical stance toward politicization, and high support for European integration - making it an essential actor in interreligious dialogue.

3.2. Specialized Study on the Christian Community

The Christian community in North Macedonia is dominated by ethnic Macedonians, and religious identity is closely linked to national identity. In contrast to the Muslim community, trust in Christian religious institutions remains relatively stable; however, perceptions regarding the direction of the country and the EU integration process are considerably more reserved (VIBE, 2023:3–4).

A first key element is the community's distinct geopolitical orientation compared to that of Albanians. According to the IDSCS & KAS report, only **33% of ethnic Macedonians** (predominantly Christian) believe that North Macedonia "belongs to the West," while **46%** state that the country belongs neither to the East nor the West, expressing a non-aligned identity position (IDSCS & KAS, 2025:17). This orientation is also reflected in the lower support for the reforms required for EU accession. As indicated by the **IRI Western Balkans Poll 2024**, Macedonians are significantly more pessimistic than Albanians regarding the country's overall direction: only **27%** believe that North Macedonia is moving in a good direction, while approximately **62%** perceive the direction as wrong (IRI, 2024:36). This negative perception also shapes the willingness for interreligious and interethnic dialogue.

Regarding institutional trust, Christians follow the general population trend: very low trust in Parliament (**76% "tend not to trust"**) and a widespread perception that the media is politically influenced (**64%**). These elements narrow the public space for dialogue and encourage the community to withdraw into traditional structures—including religious ones—which remain stable identity anchors (European Commission, 2024b:13).

Socially, Macedonian Christians show a higher level of general distrust compared to Muslims. **Balkan Barometer 2024** indicates that **68%** of North Macedonian citizens do not trust local authorities—a percentage particularly high among Macedonians—explaining their reluctance toward domestic reforms proposed in the EU integration process (RCC, 2024:27).

Overall, the Christian community is characterized by a **more conservative profile**, a **non-aligned geopolitical orientation**, **high institutional distrust**, and **heightened pessimism regarding the country's future**. In the context of interreligious dialogue, these attitudes explain the tense dynamics between communities while also highlighting the need for well-structured dialogue platforms aimed at reducing divergent perceptions.

3.3. Analysis of Public Perceptions of Christian–Muslim Relations

Public perceptions regarding relations between Christians and Muslims in North Macedonia are strongly influenced by the ethnic context, the polarization of the public sphere, and the general level of institutional distrust. Demographically, the territorial and ethnic distribution often shapes patterns of intercommunity contact, as shown by studies on societal diversity ethnic distribution: mixed areas tend to foster cooperation, while homogeneous territories generate segregation and social distance (Islam and Polgár, 2023; Trnavcevic et al., 2024:4–6).

On the social level, data from the **IRI Western Balkans Poll 2024** reveal a major difference between community perceptions: only **27% of Macedonians** believe that the country is moving in the right direction, compared to almost **48% of Albanians**. This gap—driven by differing levels of optimism—produces parallel visions of the national future and indirectly affects the willingness for interreligious dialogue (IRI, 2024:36).

Regarding institutional trust, both **Balkan Barometer 2024** and **Eurobarometer 101** indicate a structural crisis: **68%** of citizens do not trust local authorities, **76%** do not trust Parliament, and **64%** believe that the media is politically influenced. This lack of trust limits institutions' role as mediators between communities and weakens the perception of an inclusive society (European Commission, 2024b:8).

Informational polarization further deepens these tensions. The VIBE 2023 report describes North Macedonia as a society composed of “**segments living in parallel realities, where polarization makes communication between groups difficult and almost impossible**” (VIBE, 2023:3-4). In such a climate, interreligious perceptions are filtered through separate media ecosystems, encouraging stereotypes.

Structural problems highlighted by **ECRI (2023)** also play an important role, especially cases of hate speech and discrimination. The report notes the persistence of hostile public discourse toward ethnic and religious communities and the existence of forms of segregation in education, particularly in mixed-population localities. These realities increase the perceived social distance between Christians and Muslims (ECRI, 2023:15–18).

Regarding European aspirations, Muslims (especially Albanians) are significantly more pro-Western and more supportive of EU reforms compared to Macedonian Christians. KAS-IDSCS data show that **62% of Albanians** believe that North Macedonia belongs to the West, compared to **33% of Macedonians**; and **47% of Albanians** support constitutional changes required by the EU—more than the majority community (IDSCS & KAS, 2024:11, 17).

This difference in geopolitical orientation affects mutual perceptions, since European integration is understood differently by the two religious communities.

Therefore, public perceptions between Christians and Muslims are shaped by a combination of factors: spatial distribution, levels of social pessimism, geopolitical differences, informational polarization, and institutional discrimination. All these factors directly influence the dynamics of interreligious dialogue—both in terms of tension and in the identification of possible paths toward reconciliation in the context of European integration.

In his inauguration speech, **Prime Minister Mickoski** affirmed that the government would continue its foreign policy in harmony with European partners: “**together with our partners in the EU**” (foreign-policy harmonization) (Eunews). Thus, in principle, he reaffirmed the government’s commitment to maintaining the path toward European integration (Eunews¹)

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of Christian–Muslim relations in North Macedonia, conducted through the integration of sociological and geopolitical data, reveals a complex picture in which religious identity, ethnic belonging, and European orientation overlap and mutually influence one another. Religious and ethnic diversity is not a circumstantial element but a structural component of Macedonian society—an aspect that explains both the potential for cooperation and the vulnerabilities that may generate tensions.

First, the study demonstrates that religion remains an essential identity marker for both Macedonian Christians and Albanian Muslims. For Muslims, religion is directly linked to community identity, unifying ethnicity, language, and tradition. For Christians, religious identity largely coincides with national and cultural identity. This overlap between religion and ethnicity explains both the sensitivity of interreligious dialogue and its strategic potential in a plural society.

Second, the analysis of public perceptions reveals a clear geopolitical divergence between the two communities: Albanians (mostly Muslims) are consistently more pro-European, more supportive of reforms, and more optimistic about the future, whereas Macedonians (mostly Christians) tend to be more skeptical, more pessimistic, and more attached to a non-aligned identity position. This discrepancy directly influences how each community perceives interreligious dialogue and the process of European integration.

A third central element is the high level of distrust in public institutions, a phenomenon widespread across both communities. State institutions, the media, and civil society face a crisis of legitimacy, which limits their ability to mediate conflicts or facilitate intercommunity engagement. In this fragile context, religious institutions—both Christian and Muslim—remain among the few structures capable of inspiring trust at the local level. This grants them a strategic role in strengthening social cohesion.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that the polarization of the information sphere and the persistence of hate speech constitute major obstacles. In the absence of shared media spaces and a responsible public discourse, perceptions between communities are often shaped by stereotypes, parallel narratives, and conflicting interpretations of reality. These trends directly affect interreligious dialogue and mutual perceptions.

Despite the identified tensions, the study highlights the existence of significant resources for cooperation, especially within the dimension of dialogue between the two religions. Both Christianity and Islam share powerful symbolic themes—justice, peace, moral responsibility, reconciliation—which can form a common foundation for an interreligious discourse capable of transcending cultural and political barriers.

Ultimately, the general conclusion is that North Macedonia possesses real potential for interreligious cohesion, but this potential depends on several key factors: depoliticizing the public sphere, reducing media polarization, strengthening trust in state institutions, consolidating platforms for interreligious dialogue, utilizing shared theological themes as a cooperative language, and maintaining a clear European orientation perceived as an inclusive project for both communities.

By bringing together these directions, Christian–Muslim dialogue can become not merely a tool for managing tensions but a driving force of European integration, contributing to the consolidation of a Macedonian model of pluralism and coexistence.

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