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Address of the editorial office

University of Oradea, EuroINCLUS Research Center, Jean Monnet Center of Excellence
1 Universitatii Street, Oradea, Romania. Tel. 0040 259 408167.
E-mail: inclusivity@uoradea.ro.
<https://inclusivity.uoradea.ro/>

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Identity • Integration • Inclusion

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Inclusivity. Vision, Mission, Goals, and Perspectives

Mircea Brie¹

Abstract

This text is a discussion of the Inclusivity journal development project, a presentation of the institutional and academic frameworks in which it was created, and a concise justification of the main research directions that this editorial endeavor will address and promote. Inclusivity, which operates under the auspices of the EuroINCLUS Research Center, is dedicated to the advancement of knowledge in the field of EU studies and was established with the objective of disseminating information on EU-related topics to a broader audience. This initiative is poised to foster enhanced understanding and engagement between the EU and the general public, thereby strengthening the bond between the EU and its citizens. Concurrently, Inclusivity journal endeavors to adopt an analytical and synthetic approach in its pursuit to consider fundamental and specific concerns pertaining to the theorization, conceptualization, and operationalization of concepts related to identity management and minority issues, fundamental human rights, the promotion of integration processes, inclusion, intercultural education, societal security, and the societal resilience of minorities, immigrants, and refugees.

Keywords

Inclusivity, identity, minority, integration, culture, interculturalism

The establishment of the Inclusivity journal, as a new academic project carried out by the EuroINCLUS Research Center at the University of Oradea, is a tangible result of one of the main objectives of the Jean Monnet Center of Excellence project, entitled Identity, Security, and Inclusivity in border areas of South East Europe (EuroINCLUS, 2024). The Jean Monnet Center of Excellence project was conceived as a hub of excellence and expertise in research, documentation, teaching, and dissemination in the field of European studies, security, and cooperation at the EU's external borders. The necessity for the establishment of the center was justified by the imperative to strengthen cooperation and

¹ PhD Professor, Department of International Relations and European Studies, University of Oradea. Head of EuroINCLUS Research Center. PhD supervisor in the field of International Relations and European Studies, Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca. Romania. Email: mbrie@uoradea.ro

interaction between academia and society, local and regional decision-makers, civil society, and the media. The center brings together professionals from academia with specializations in alignment with EU trends. The main objective of the project was to promote the processes of integration, inclusion, intercultural education, societal security, and societal resilience of minorities, immigrants, and refugees.

This project was developed with the aim of creating a focal point of academic knowledge, serving as a center of know-how and excellence. The objective is to facilitate the dissemination of good practices from the EU to the border regions of neighboring states. The foundation for this initiative is rooted in the expertise acquired at the University of Oradea, which over the last few decades has emerged as a preeminent player in the field of research, education, and the management of identity, societal security, and inclusion in the cross-border area of Romania. The identification of proper responses and solutions to the predominant issues and challenges encountered in border regions can serve as a foundation for the development of an inclusive society within the European Union and in its neighboring regions.

The University of Oradea, as a promoter of European studies, aims through this Center of Excellence to capitalize on the experience gained by 6 professors, who coordinated Jean Monnet modules in the specific thematic areas of this project: PhD Professor Mircea Brie - project coordinator (ethno-confessional realities and societal security), PhD Professor Sorin Şipoş (historical and cultural heritage), PhD Professor Karla Barth (intercultural education and communication), PhD Associate Professor Luminița Şoproni (socio-economic inclusion), PhD Associate Professor Alina Stoica (cultural diplomacy) and PhD Associate Professor Polgár István (migration and integration).

The project builds on the EU's prior experience in promoting intercultural dialogue and education, both internally and externally. It underscores the necessity to establish thematic and policy-specific centers on integration, inclusion, and societal resilience. These centers could offer the EU novel perspectives and pragmatic solutions for formulating and implementing its policies in Southern and Eastern Europe.

It is imperative to facilitate the transfer of know-how, expertise, and excellence in accordance with European values and principles of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to ethno-religious minorities, immigrants, and refugees. The transfer of good practices from the European Union to the border regions of neighboring states is imperative.

Inclusivity is dedicated to disseminating knowledge regarding EU-related subjects to a broader audience bringing the EU closer to the public.

The *Inclusivity* journal employs a dual approach, integrating analytical and synthetic methods, to examine fundamental and specific issues pertaining to the theorization, conceptualization, and operationalization of concepts within its primary areas of focus. Consequently, *Inclusivity* will facilitate the convergence of teams of researchers, theorists, and practitioners, thereby amassing academic expertise and proffering models of good practices and know-how for the formulation of public policies congruent with the promotion of inclusion at the societal level. This approach is also intended to establish a framework for research design in the specific areas targeted and to engage young researchers, doctoral students, master's students, and undergraduates in the development of research teams that promote academic knowledge and facilitate the transfer of knowledge to interested specialists, decision-makers, and society at large.

The fundamental areas targeted by the *Inclusivity* journal are as follows:

- Identity management and issues related to ethno-national, linguistic, and religious minorities
- Cultural and educational integration
- Socio-economic inclusion at the community and society levels
- Interculturality, integration, resilience, and societal security
- Cultural-historical heritage and cultural diplomacy
- Migration management and refugee issues
- Human rights and vulnerable groups
- Fundamentalism, divisions, borders, and identity conflicts

The conceptualization of these fundamental directions gives rise to specific concepts, such as identity, integration, inclusion, security, and societal resilience, all of which fall under the umbrella of interculturalism. At the community level, considerations are given to minorities, migrant groups, and refugee groups.

Beyond the models of multiculturalism, the theoretical and applied framework of *interculturalism* promotes an integrative approach, which serves as the foundation for the thinking and structural-methodological philosophy of the project we are building around the *Inclusivity* journal. It is imperative to recognize that human beings, groups, and human communities must *live together, not side by side*. This reality leads to the development of a common frame of reference, shared values, and public policy models that promote equality and coexistence.

From a general perspective, the concept of "inclusivity" refers to "the fact of including all types of people, things, or ideas and treating them all

fairly and equally" (*Cambridge Dictionary*, 2025). Of course, a thorough examination of the concept yields meanings that extend far beyond those assumed by the editorial team of this journal, which appears under the auspices of the *EuroINCLUS Research Center*. The meanings and directions of conceptual expression towards which the research published in this journal will be directed are aligned with the eight fundamental directions previously outlined. The entire operationalization of the concept of "inclusivity" is therefore built in accordance with these principles, developing the entire theoretical, methodological, and applied frameworks in which the authors and academic works selected for publication in the journal will express themselves.

The main area of research is Europe, although the investigation is not limited to this region. To comprehensively understand the integrative and global perspectives on the phenomenon and facets of inclusion, comparative and contextual references, as well as models found in other geographical areas, are essential.

In the context of analytical inquiry, reference is made to the various levels of expression that identity may assume. Given the specificity we attribute to it, *Inclusivity* focuses on the *national level*, as well as the *subnational*, regional/local level (including internal regions, administrative units, and the community level). It also encompasses the *supranational* level, European or global, and that of international organizations (which may also have a regional associative dimension at the national level). The conceptual debate also extends to the reality of cleavages and identity boundaries. In addition to the articulation of identities associated with the national and ethnic characteristics during the identity revolution of the 19th and early 20th centuries, this process continues to evolve, resulting in the emergence of new levels of identity in the contemporary era. 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 (Brie and Blaga, 2015: 255-273).

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 (Poenu 2012). 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).

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).

In Central and Eastern Europe and in the Balkan countries, from the conceptual point of view, we can identify different kinds of identity characteristics. There are a lot of cleavages or borders associated with the identity: ethnic identity, religion identity, linguistic identity, alphabet identity, citizen identity / civic identity, cultural identity, geopolitical identity. A fundamental feature of state-type nation-state constructions in Western

Balkans is their permanent lack of legitimacy or, rather, their incomplete legitimacy. By identifying the state with a single national identity, the other national communities inevitably found themselves outside this process of legitimation, which constituted a fundamental source of inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions (Brie, 2024: 73-74).

Conceptual analysis is never enough without the application of appropriate public policies and the implementation of models for managing relations between the majority and the minority. The aim should be, beyond ensuring multiculturalism, to reach interculturality, by ensuring effective inclusion and integration through dialogue. Interculturality goes beyond dialogue carried out at the level of partnerships that ensure coexistence, such as *consociationalism* (McCrudden, 2006: 2). This concept designates a model for managing diversity and supposes arrangements that involve the division of power in multi-identity states and societies in ethno-national, community linguistic or religious terms. The common interest in maintaining the state and citizenship are elements that support the community "contract" (Kymlicka, 2000: 203-204). This is one of the general principles underlying the protection of ethno-national minorities, namely the principle of partnership between identity communities. The specialty literature and models resulting from international practice identify several general principles underlying the protection of ethno-national minorities: a) *the principle of respect for diversity* - by promoting coexistence in the same habitat and equality, this principle is "largely different from the principle of tolerance which presupposed the arrogance of the hierarchical relationship between tolerant and tolerated" and ensures the mechanism for protecting the rights of all communities ethno-national and linguistic; b) *the principle of partnership coexistence* (of the partnership between the cultural-identity communities) - based on this principle the ethno-national minorities are associated in the process of local, regional and national governance (general leadership); c) *the principle of positive discrimination* - the ethno-national and cultural minorities obtain rights of a privileged nature in relation to the majority. These benefits are granted in order to compensate for inequalities, differences in socio-economic and cultural status and to stimulate integration; d) *the principle of preserving the cultural identity* - considers the creation of an institutional and legislative regulatory framework that would contribute to the preservation of the specific elements of the ethno-national and cultural-identity communities; e) *the principle of multicultural integration* (multiculturalism) - which "goes beyond mere coexistence and, refusing, equally, both the assimilation of minorities and their isolation (insularization, ghettoization), aims for the members of each entity, be it majority or minority, to and to acquire, understand, respect and express

themselves according to the values specific to the culture of the other coexisting cultural communities” (see Brie; Islam and Polgar, 2021: 68).

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Eqrem bej Vlora: Building Albanian International Relations Identity

Islam Jusufi¹

Abstract

One argument asserts that international relations (IR) were constructed to serve the identity of a particular state and remain so today. In Albania, IR was initially considered an "alien species," but later became an important instrument for shaping national identity on the eve of and in the aftermath of the formation of an independent Albanian state in 1912. This paper aims to answer the question of what the initial Albanian conception of IR was in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. To this end, the paper relies on the views of Eqrem bej Vlora (1885–1964), a prominent historical figure in Albania, to examine how he framed the initial Albanian understanding of IR by emphasizing the identities assigned to Albania. Albania's identity is composed of three layers, as described in Eqrem bej Vlora's writings. The first layer comprises a firmly embedded identity based on Albanian national historical references. The second layer includes the conceptualization of Albania's role as a European country. The third layer relates to the relevance of Ottomanism to Albanian identity. Together, these layers attempt to show how Eqrem bej Vlora viewed Albania's identities and place in the world.

Keywords

International Relations, Albania, Eqrem bej Vlora, identity

1. Introduction

The social and political setting in which the discipline of international relations (IR) took root in Albania is older than the Albanian state, which came into existence in 1912. Prior to 1912, a process occurred that established the beliefs and foundations that would provide an identity for the new state and shape its foreign policy and involvement in world politics as an independent European country emerging in the early 20th century.

Albania's encounter with IR occurred within the anarchic system of the 19th century (Kissinger 1995), preceding the quest for Albanian national independence. Starting from the late 19th century, IR arrived in the country

¹ Independent Scholar, Skopje, North Macedonia. E-mail: islam.jusufi@gmail.com. ORCID: 0000-0003-0437-3819

as a means of mitigating the implications of anarchy and followed a trajectory from world metropolises to Albanian lands. The first attempt to establish this trajectory occurred with the *Rilindja* (renaissance) thinkers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This period corresponds with the nation- and state-building processes in Albania (Brisku 2019; Ypi 2007). The renaissance is the most fitting period to define the initial phase of Albanian intellectual IR history, spanning from the late 19th century to the 1912 Declaration of Independence. The *Rilindja* is the term used to describe the spiritual renaissance of the Albanian nation between 1836 and 1912. This period marks the first attempt to define the Albanian national identity and the fundamentals of Albanian IR thinking. Unsurprisingly, then, the earliest renaissance thinkers had a particular understanding of world politics. This thinking revolved around the idea of describing the international system and how it could facilitate the emergence of Albania as a new member of the international system. Initially, this pedigree limited the intellectual scope of IR understanding to the production of Albania within the rapidly developing Ottoman imperial context. However, the gradual decline and withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire from its Balkan territories during the 19th and early 20th centuries provided an array of alternative perspectives through which to view the concept of the "international" in initial Albanian thought.

Where does Albania belong? Does it aspire to be part of the West, the Orient, or itself? How did Albania's founding elite define its IR identity? During Albania's struggle to be recognized as separate from the other Balkan states and the Ottoman Empire, Albanian renaissance authors embraced a national identity that contrasted sharply with those of the surrounding states. They emphasized the national, ethnic roots and European vocation of the nation. While they emphasized the differences, they did not completely deny the similarities and the Ottoman legacy in Albanian identity.

This paper describes how initial Albanian scholarship in IR emerged. By examining the early Albanian school of IR, this paper aims to explore the historical Albanian discourse on IR and how these discourses influenced early Albanian thinking on the subject. To this end, the paper examines the life and work of Eqrem bej Vlora (1885–1964), who was first an imperial Ottoman bureaucrat, diplomat, large landowner, and warrior; then a national Albanian politician, minister, and author.

This article reconstructs discourses concerning Albanian IR identity in 19th- and early 20th-century Albanian history, as reflected in the thoughts of Eqrem bej Vlora. Vlora was a prominent thinker, activist, and statesman who belonged to the late period of the Albanian renaissance movement. By focusing on his thoughts, the article offers a new perspective on him and, more importantly, on the meaning of IR for the people who guided Albania's

historical development. Certainly, no other historical Albanian thinker was as systematic an IR thinker as Eqrem bej Vlora, nor did any other leave behind an IR treatise on Albanian foreign policy issues. Renaissance thinkers' intellectual activities generally focused on the humanities, such as poetry, literature, and history. Their work was imbued with a growing ethos of Albanian romantic and cultural nationalism (Elsie 2005). Later, they increasingly became involved in political activism and national politics, generating a trail of reflections, positions, ideas, and political deeds (Brisku 2019; Ypi 2007). This article addresses the question of what meaning the national intellectual elite gave to foreign policy and how they envisioned an IR vision for Albania. One topic of debate in this paper is whether an Albanian IR school emerged from the efforts of the Albanian romanticists.

To explain Albania's sense of identity, this paper relies on the writings of Eqrem bej Vlora. It attempts to establish a model for the formation of Albanian identities composed of three overlapping layers. This framework for studying state identities is based on the work of Guimarães (2020). The first layer comprises a profound and firmly embedded identity referring to Albanian national, ethnic, and historical references. The second layer includes the conceptualization of Albania as a European country. The third layer relates to the relevance of Ottomanism to Albanian identity. This complex identity set illustrates Eqrem bej Vlora's perspective on Albania's place in the world.

This paper is structured in three parts. First, to characterize Albania's search for identity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the paper explores the life and works of Eqrem bej Vlora. Second, it develops the formation of Albania's identity in three sub-sections: Albanian, European, and Ottoman. Finally, the paper concludes.

2. On Eqrem bej Vlora

Eqrem bej Vlora (1885-1964) was an accomplished Albanian aristocrat, politician, diplomat, scholar, and writer. Often referred to as "the Last of the Beys," he embodied the final era of Ottoman-influenced Albanian nobility. Born into the powerful Vlora and Toptani families on his father's and mother's side, respectively, his father, Syrja Bey Vlora, and his mother, Mihri Toptani, belonged to the elite landowning class in southwestern and central Albania. They were also members of the Ottoman ruling elite. He was first educated by private tutors in Vlora, then attended the prestigious Theresianum in Vienna from 1899 to 1903. He then studied law and religious studies in Istanbul from 1904. He worked in the Ottoman Foreign Ministry and at the Ottoman embassy in St. Petersburg in 1907. He later joined his cousin Ismail Qemali Bey Vlora's independence movement. During the Balkan Wars (1912), he was appointed reserve major and

commanded a volunteer Albanian battalion that defended Vlorë under Ottoman auspices. During the independence movement, he served as a delegate and deputy president of the Senate at the Assembly in Vlorë, which proclaimed the independence of Albania on November 28, 1912. He was one of the signatories of the Albanian Declaration of Independence in 1912 and served as Albania's first Minister of Foreign Affairs. He also held various other positions in the Albanian government and parliament. He held early government roles as a diplomat and deputy secretary of foreign affairs. He also served as Albania's ambassador to Europe. He was later elected to the Albanian parliament in 1924 and became a senator in 1925. Eqrem bej Vlorë was an Ottoman-Albanian bureaucrat and Albanian statesman (Jusufi 2024).

Eqrem bej Vlorë's love of languages, literature, and learning was fostered during his wealthy and cosmopolitan childhood, which was curious given the national politics of his lifetime. His father, Syrja Bekteshi, was also prolific, though not quite to the same extent. Like Ismail Qemali bej Vlorë, the leading figure of Albanian statehood and the first president of the republic who also belonged to the same Vlorë family, Eqrem bej Vlorë shared a desire to reinforce the links between Albania and the European center. In pursuing this objective, Eqrem bej Vlorë and other members of the Vlorë family were drawn to the quest for Albanian statehood and internationalization.

Recognizing the challenges the country was facing and the necessity of compromising with the European powers, Eqrem bej Vlorë played a pivotal role in offering the crown to Prince Wilhelm of Wied in 1914. When World War II began, he welcomed the Italian invasion in 1939 and held government offices under Italian occupation, including Minister of Kosovo in 1942 and Foreign and Justice Minister briefly in 1944. Following the communist takeover, he fled to Italy and later lived in Austria, where he died in Vienna. In 2014, his remains were reburied in Vlorë.

He has been viewed as a patriot, an aristocrat, and a collaborator with the Italian occupiers. During the Communist era, he was labeled a "war criminal." His family endured hardships under the communist regime, yet his cultural contributions persisted despite exile and political shifts (Baze 2024).

While in exile from Albania's dictatorial communist regime after World War II, Eqrem bej Vlorë set out to write a groundbreaking book on Albanian international relations scholarship, titled "Lebenserinnerungen" (Memories) or *Kujtime* (2010; 1973; 1968). A prolific intellectual, he also wrote several other books, including *Aus Berat und vom Tomor: Tagebuchblätter* (From Berat and Mount Tomorr: Diary Notes) (bej Vlorë 1911), as well as an

unpublished manuscript on Ottoman rule in Albania. He also published various articles in Albanian, German, and Turkish periodicals and newspapers addressing Albanian independence, nation-building, regional autonomy movements in the Balkans, religious and intercommunal relations, and foreign perceptions of Albania. Nevertheless, his memoirs, *Lebenserinnerungen*, are his leading legacy. Originally written in German and later translated into several languages, including Albanian, it offers a nobleman's unique view of early 20th-century Albanian life, politics, and international relations (Jaupaj 2018). Vlora wrote his memoirs in two volumes, covering the period from 1885 to 1925. The first volume (1885–1912) was published in German in 1968 by the Südost-Institut in Munich and edited by Dr. Bernath. The second volume (1912–1925) was published posthumously in German in 1973 by the same institute and edited by Dr. Schwanke. The memoirs are a valuable source of information about the history and culture of Albania and the Balkans, as well as Eqrem bej Vlora's personal life and experiences. His German writings reflect the influence of Austrian historiography and literary style. Historians use his works as essential primary sources on the Albanian independence period (1912–1920s) and the worldview, cultural, and social structures of the Ottoman provincial aristocracy in early modern Albania.

In summary, Eqrem bej Vlora was one of the most prominent Albanian intellectuals of early 20th-century Albania. He was both a supporter of and a critic of Albanian national romanticism. A multifaceted figure, he was an aristocrat who bridged Ottoman and Albanian identities; a statesman who was crucial to Albania's early independence; and a reflective scholar whose writings enrich our understanding of his era. Most importantly, he laid the foundation for Albania's understanding of foreign policy and IR at the time. His writings are particularly valued for their vivid, personal, and often ironic portrayal of Albanian society, politics, and culture during the final decades of Ottoman rule and the early years of Albanian independence. More than any other Albanian renaissance thinker, Eqrem bej Vlora is considered the most significant by Albanian IR scholars due to his critique of post-independence politics.

3. While awaiting new roles, search for new identities

As Albania struggled to have its statehood recognized by the European powers of the early 20th century, its founding fathers and elite, also known as *Rilindasit* (Renaissance intellectuals), engaged in an intensive effort to promulgate an Albanian identity that would distinguish it from others and gain recognition from the world powers of the time. Both Europeans and Ottomans fiercely contested Albania's credentials as a viable new European independent state. Initially, Albania was not fully accepted as a separate

entity from other Ottoman enclaves in the region, and rivalries took on cultural or identity-related meanings. This was certainly the case in the early 20th century when many considered historical rivalries to be the origin of mistrust toward Albania's emerging identity as the Ottoman Empire broke up and withdrew from the Balkan region. The search for a Western or European identity resonated among Albanian intellectuals of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. There was also no disjunction among the elite concerning the new role of Albania in relation to its Albanian, European, and Ottoman legacies. In fact, the elites demonstrated similar levels of support for Albania's national identity narratives, showing a consistent pattern of views. More importantly, as will be shown in the next section, this Albanian intellectual elite managed to establish an identity repertoire in which multiple identities coexisted, particularly with regard to Albania's role with respect to the Albanians, the West, and the Orient. Thus, Albania produced a mosaic of identities.

In this section, the paper presents a three-layer model to characterize the formation of Albanian identities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This model relies on the writings of Eqrem bej Vlora. The model begins with the most deeply rooted identity conceptualizations. The first layer comprises a profound and firmly established identity based on Albanian national, ethnic, and historical references. The second layer includes the role of Albania as a European country. The third layer relates to the relevance of Ottomanism to Albanian identity. Together, these identities reveal Eqrem bej Vlora's perception of Albania's place in the world.

3.1. The first layer – Albanian historical national identity

As noted elsewhere (Brisku 2019; Ypi 2007), elements of the Enlightenment and Reformation were initially brought to Albania in the spirit of 19th-century romanticism. In fact, the first elements of the Albanian IR school can be found in the works of renaissance intellectuals. Albanian literature emerged during the renaissance period, and the most notable intellectuals of this time were Naim Frashëri, Sami Frashëri, Pashko Vasa, Jeronim de Rada, Faik Konica, Ismail Qemali, Luigj Gurakuqi, and Fan Noli. These intellectuals were central figures in the 19th- and early 20th-century Albanian political, cultural, and literary movements that aimed to foster a unified Albanian identity and advocate for autonomy or independence from the Ottoman Empire. Using literature, education, and political advocacy, they promoted the Albanian language, preserved and celebrated Albanian cultural identity, and advocated for national unification and independence. The Congress of Manastir (1908) marked a key victory for the renaissance movement by unifying the Albanian alphabet. These intellectuals helped forge a secular, civic form of nationalism that included Albanians of different religions, including Muslims, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians. Their

poems, essays, newspapers, and political tracts became foundational texts of Albanian literature and nationalism. The renaissance movement was part of a broader 19th-century European trend in which emerging nations used culture to promote political emancipation (Elsie 2005; Austin 2002; Vickers 1999; Skendi 1967).

The main characteristics of this initial Albanian thinking focused on the Albanian understanding of the world order and the perception of Albania's position in the global community. Debated concepts included "self-determination," "sovereignty," "independence," and "Europe," among others. These and similar ideas bear a strong resemblance to realist and idealist thoughts on IR. The Albanians did not simply understand these concepts as the endpoint of historical national development; rather, they understood them as a set of interrelated international processes that encompassed social, economic, political, and cultural developments in order to secure the renaissance or revival of the Albanian nation. Albanian romanticists provided idealistic and historically grounded realist accounts of 19th- and early 20th-century IR dynamics. They attempted to offer historical narratives, labeling them as "Enlightened Albania," which placed the emergence of an independent Albania at the center. Independence was not just about freedom; it was also about completely restructuring the interstate order in Southeastern Europe. These Albanian thinkers developed an approach to "independence" in which state formation and an enhanced capacity of the Albanian state to represent Albanians internationally were central features.

From an active political perspective, the representatives of the renaissance movement took the first important step toward establishing an organized framework for an independent Albania. They recognized that a state is necessary for a nation, rather than the other way around. This version of Albanian nationalism initially appeared to result from the French and American Revolutions, which emphasized territorial integrity as a principle for exercising collective sovereignty. Thus, supporting active resistance through an intellectual and literary movement that argued for national sovereignty, freedom, and self-determination became extremely important (Ypi 2007).

Thus, the first layer of Albanian identity comprised long-standing and deeply rooted national identity formation related to significant historical events in Albanian history from the 15th to the early 20th century. One of the most important founding myths of Albanian identity on the eve of independence in 1912 and in the aftermath was the discourse of a pre-existing "Albanian" territory dominated and expanded by Skanderbeg and the Albanian Arbereshe community that had fled to Italy and Greece. The Albanian elite characterized Albania's national identity as an extension of

Skanderbeg's legacy. In his analysis of Albania's national reformation, Eqrem bej Vlora reinforces this view, arguing that despite foreign incursions and internal and external disputes, the Albanians managed to keep themselves united within a vast territory.

According to Eqrem bej Vlora, Albania's national identity begins and is symbolized by Skanderbeg, a 15th-century nobleman who led the resistance against the Ottoman Empire. Bej Vlora states, "For the Albanians, true history begins with Skanderbeg. He was the first to unite our principalities and give us the idea that we were our own people who could govern ourselves" (bej Vlora 2010, 1973, 1968). He saw Skanderbeg not merely as a historical figure but also as the foundational symbol of Albanian unity, resistance, and identity in the face of foreign domination. In his writings, Vlora emphasizes Skanderbeg's ability to unify the Albanian principalities under a common cause, which he considered a precursor to national unity. For Eqrem bej Vlora and many of his contemporaries, Skanderbeg's legacy was revived and repurposed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a unifying national myth to justify independence from the Ottoman Empire and promote national cohesion. This myth emphasized the pre-existence of a common origin based on the notion of a single historical territory continuously inhabited by Albanians, as well as natural and anthropological characteristics prior to Ottomanization itself.

The social and political upheavals of the 19th century that took place in Europe revealed a quasi-medieval Albanian society characterized by clan divisions and weak administrative structures (Ypi 2007). Until then, Albanians were fragmented among different Ottoman vilayets and regions. Throughout most of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, renaissance authors emphasized the ethnic, sociological, and linguistic uniqueness that has historically characterized Albania in the Balkan Peninsula and Europe on a national scale. Eqrem bej Vlora supported the idea, first proposed by Albanian renaissance leaders, of a shared Albanian consciousness and identity stronger than local and regional differences. They believed that independence would be sufficient to hold together a divergent population, despite their myriad loyalties. Albanian feudal barons recognized the need for one "sovereign" lord. In practice, however, the feudal lords, including Eqrem bej Vlora himself, retained too much economic, political, and military power by maintaining armed followers. This resulted in continually contested sovereignty and endemic conflict.

3.2. The second layer - conceptualization of Albania as a European country and embrace of European rule over Albania

Many Albanian intellectuals celebrated ethnic nationalism when they intervened to defend the national cause of "recognition" for independence or post-independence. However, matters looked different when their initiatives

were directed towards Albania's relations with the world. The ethnic and cultural features of "Albanianism" that renaissance intellectual celebrated proved the existence of a distinct and unique entity worthy of international "recognition." However, supporting Albania's place in the international community required emphasizing identification with more abstract notions of IR, which could motivate Albania to contribute to regional and global politics. This would entail overcoming nation-based divisions in favor of a broader, inherently political form of attachment at the continental level (Ypi 2012).

The struggle for independence brought together a generation of intellectuals who aimed to reimagine Albania's position in Europe and the world, providing the intellectual basis for their vision. They designed a new, groundbreaking foreign policy to reposition Albania in Europe. For Eqrem bej Vlora, this required the adoption of new political and economic ideas and the full inclusion of Albania in Europe. Specifically, he identified Albania with European powers, especially Italy and Austria-Hungary. Albanian intellectuals developed a Europeanist doctrine for foreign policy, aiming to expand Albania's capacity to project unity internally. Thus, embracing the country's European identity became imperative for survival and political stability. In this way, Albanian intellectuals incorporated European discourse into their rhetoric.

For Eqrem bej Vlora, Europe and the West provided Albania with a renewed international identity. Like other renaissance intellectuals, Eqrem bej Vlora believed that the Albanian national identity project of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was based on the idea that Albania was closely related to Europe. This new narrative aimed to demonstrate that Albania was a "normal" country on the European continent. Vlora's writings express a sense of belonging to Europe: "Albania's destiny is intertwined with Europe's. Our national awakening and fight for independence were inspired by and supported through European ideals of nationhood, sovereignty, and self-determination. The recognition of Albania among European states was both a diplomatic struggle and a cultural affirmation of our European identity." While some deep-rooted stereotypes about Ottoman Albania persisted, important aspects of political life in Albania came to be considered European. Albania emphasized its close relations with Europe, particularly with Italy and Austria-Hungary, as well as with France, Great Britain, and the United States.

Eqrem bej Vlora sought to transform Albania into a European country by partially adopting the monarchical traditions of Europe. The transition from a national ruler to Prince Wied, who led the country starting in 1914, was related to the idea of establishing a European state, considering the internal strife and divisions within the country. For Eqrem bej Vlora, the

logic behind installing Prince Wied as ruler of the newly independent Albania contributed significantly to preserving the country's territorial unity. The Prince of Wied was linked to European monarchies and royal families. Vlora was aware of the fragility of the law in the newly independent Albania, as well as the fact that transplanting European political institutions would be inadequate for the local Albanian reality. His goal was to improve Albania's relationship with European powers and gain their recognition and acceptance, as well as embrace the virtues of European and Western civilization. Like other figures, such as Ismail Qemali, Fan Noli, and Luigj Gurakuqi, Eqrem bej Vlora maintained that Albania could survive and perhaps even thrive as an independent, small nation-state if its wealth and national economic development remained anchored within a larger political and economic space (Brisku 2019). Thus, Eqrem bej Vlora and others welcomed Wied's arrival in 1914 as Europe's confirmation of Albania's existence. According to Vlora, the answer to the difficult challenge of building a politically operational identity that united disparate regional Albanian realities while preserving the main features of a conservative, patriarchal society was the European monarch as a symbol of belonging to a specific civilization project.

In his famous book, Eqrem bej Vlora argues that the main goal of the newly independent nation was to secure recognition from the European powers regarding the maintenance of Albania's territorial integrity amid the expansion occurring in the Balkans on the eve of World War I, thus embracing a "realistic" approach. He advocated for European-inspired internal reforms and acknowledged the continent's balance-of-power dynamics. He advocated for an active rather than isolationist role with the European powers, militarily and economically. Thus, conceptualizing Albania's interests as active engagement and cooperation in Europe, Eqrem bej Vlora's IR view meant that Albania should recognize Italy's and Austria's interests in Albania.

However, he was not without criticism of this approach. He stated that "Albania's foreign policy was never the result of well-conceived state reasoning, but rather a plaything of shifting personalities, whims, and foreign powers" (bej Vlora 2010; 1973; 1968). One day, one kissed the hand of Vienna; the next day, one sent telegrams to Rome; and the day after that, one offered oneself to Athens. In the end, none of them wanted us" (bej Vlora 2010; 1973; 1968). He criticized Albanian leaders for lacking a long-term vision and for making foreign alliances based on short-term survival rather than national interest. In his view, Albania did not yet have a class of professional diplomats or statesmen capable of designing a coherent strategy. Bej Vlora argues that Albania was overly dependent on the goodwill of the Great Powers, especially Austria-Hungary, Italy, and, at times, Greece

and the remnants of the Ottoman Empire. This led to an unstable and reactive foreign policy. He describes how personal rivalries among Albanian leaders (e.g., Ismail Qemali, Esat Pasha Toptani, and Ahmet Zogu) shaped foreign alignments more than national interests: "Each leader sought support not for Albania, but against his rivals" (bej Vlora 2010, 1973, 1968). Bej Vlora often reflects regretfully that Albania's isolation was partly self-inflicted: "The world knew little about us, and what it knew, it feared or despised" (bej Vlora 2010, 1973, 1968). As a diplomat, Eqrem bej Vlora worked to strengthen ties with Austria-Hungary and Italy, believing that Albania's survival depended on balancing between the two powers. In his writings, he acknowledges that some foreign alliances, particularly during World War II, were missteps, yet he maintains that Albania had limited maneuvering room, caught between larger powers.

A sense of backwardness was also prevalent among the Albanian renaissance intellectuals and the elite. Their perception of a superior Europe led to uneasiness about backwardness. This inferiority complex led to the adoption of various political and social models originating in Europe in an attempt to correct Albania's underdevelopment. In order to become a true Western country, they believed that Albania had to accept its historical inferiority. Thus, they saw an opportunity to join the European world as a reckoning with the past and a way of overcoming Albania's backwardness.

Given Albania's close geographic proximity to Europe, it's no surprise that Eqrem bej Vlora and his contemporaries sought to align closely with Europe. The adoption of "Europeanism" was nearly unanimous among the Albanian renaissance elite. They all agreed on the idea of establishing a national identity based on Europe. There was a consensus on Albania's European identity on the eve of and in the wake of the new republic. Thus, from the late 19th to early 20th century, Albanian intellectuals and the elite displayed unmitigated reverence for Europe. This consensus concerning Albania's role in Europe and the West led to a sense of belonging. It shows that the Albanians willingly embraced their Western and European credentials.

As the years passed since Albania's independence, it became evident that the Albanian elite and public had fully embraced their European identity as an integral part of their national identity. Albania sought political and economic revival through active participation in European international institutions. The Albanian discourse fully and uncritically accepted the perception that Albania is a Western, European country. Eqrem bej Vlora's discourse repositioned Albania as a Western and European country. Initially, Eqrem bej Vlora and other Albanian intellectuals viewed Albania as a "bridge" between Europe and Asia. However, given the emerging anarchy, they committed themselves to Europe as the only option.

This new approach had an adamant defender and leading curator in Eqrem bej Vlora, a former Ottoman technocrat, new Albanian politician, and diplomat. Vlora was an emphatic Europeanist. He reinforced the narrative that Albania's destiny was to embrace Europe and negotiate recognition with European powers. Despite emerging regional rivalries, Albania's success in achieving recognition from European powers became a landmark in its foreign policy. For Eqrem bej Vlora, the idea of Albania as a pacifist country that preferred to solve its internal and regional issues through diplomacy rather than war was essential to the country's identity.

Eqrem bej Vlora's background includes an extensive European education and diplomatic experience in Vienna, Graz, Paris, and beyond. His memoirs reflect a European worldview (Ivezaj 2025). He lobbied major European capitals, including Rome, Paris, and Vienna, to defend Albania's borders at the 1920 London Conference, demonstrating his involvement in European political circles. European thought also influenced his literary style. His memoirs emphasize his cultured, multilingual, Europe-educated nature and his historiographical contributions (Shehu 2017).

3.3. The third layer - imperial continuity and Ottoman legacy

Renaissance intellectuals were generally inspired by the 19th-century Ottoman reforms known as the Tanzimat. These reforms established new, centralized institutions and introduced legal norms based on equality before the law. They also liberalized the economy and, consequently, placed the imperial order within a constitutional framework (Brisku, 2019). Initially, this did not necessarily mean seeking a separate Albanian state or independence from the empire.

As Albanian-speaking leaders formed a dominant group within the Ottoman bureaucracy, the initial understanding of IR among the Albanian Ottoman elite was designed to perpetuate their own and Ottoman supremacy. The Albanian aristocracy and bourgeoisie representatives often mediated between the Albanian population and imperial functionaries, obtaining administrative posts in other countries. Their descendants, who studied in Ottoman faculties, were among the initiators of the Albanian renaissance movement (Ypi 2007). The Ottoman army and administration offered opportunities for social and professional advancement, and Albanians gained high feudal and military positions under the sultans.

While Albanian revival thinkers were hardly unanimous in their support of the Ottoman Empire, they offered historically informed reasons for why the Ottoman Empire was helpful in Albania's transition. Eqrem bej Vlora stated, "Now, that time of the Turks has shaped — for better or worse — the Albania that is proud today..." (bej Vlora 2010; 1973; 1968). Eqrem bej Vlora was clearly making an important point: Albania initially had to

align its interests with the existing imperial morality. Early Albanian IR thinking positioned the country within the Ottoman Empire's continuity. For renaissance intellectuals, including Eqrem bej Vlora, these national rights were to be renegotiated within some federal or intergovernmental order.

Initially, this view subscribed to the national cause of self-rule and language rights for Albanians within a constitutional Ottoman Empire. Uprisings occurred in Albanian lands in response to the Ottoman administration's failure to fulfill expectations for self-rule and language rights. They demanded a political nation under the supervision of a general inspector representing the Sultan. Despite existential geopolitical pressures from the Great Powers—Italy attacked in 1911—and the Balkan states in late 1912, these figures were realistic in believing that the empire still exerted power over Ottoman-Albanian provinces. Thus, they were invested in a continued imperial future for the nation provided that the empire reformed along federal and national lines. These figures doubted the political and economic viability and independence of small nation-states within the late 19th- and early 20th-century European interstate order (Brisku 2019). As with other romanticists, Eqrem bej Vlora first conceived of the Albanian national interest as a necessity to defend a fragmented national territorial space threatened by the nationalist projects of surrounding Balkan states. Additionally, a significant portion of the Albanian local elite — specifically, politically conservative factions from northern Albania and Kosovo — maintained enthusiasm for cooperating with the Ottomans. They distrusted the Great Powers and opposed independence, instead calling for more autonomy within the empire (Brisku 2009).

But facing no response from Sublime Porte for more rights for Albanians and considering threats of Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro, and Serbia to Albanian territories, with limited help coming from Ottoman Empire, led the renaissance intellectuals to logically move from cultural to political nationalism. Thus, these romanticists, shifted from cultural and romantic to political nationalism (Schwandner-Sievers and Fischer 2002; Brisku 2019; 2013). While seeking a national common past and unified political and economic space would become a rather “universal” political demand by the early 1910s, the path to leaving the empire only became available when a transformed imperial centre not only dismissed such demands (Logoreci 1978) but, crucially, no longer provided protection to the Albanian-inhabited lands, especially after the first Balkan League (Greece, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bulgaria) in late 1912, from these states. Hence, Albania's independence, on 28 November 1912, which renaissance intellectuals saw as a reaction to the existential threat to the nation and hence a call to action, came about also because of political and diplomatic mobilization of Albanians within and without the empire and the backing of

larger states of Italy and Austro-Hungary (Brisku 2019). In this line, as the Ottoman Empire was collapsing, Eqrem bej Vlora and his peers would call for a separate statehood for Albania.

The immediate political backdrop of the quest for independence was the emerging Albanian belief that the Ottomans had failed to establish a new form of governance in Albania as the empire was coming to an end. These discussions and events brought together a series of overlapping views — indigenous, religious, republican, and imperial — under the impact of rapidly changing contexts and circumstances. The dilemma was how to break free from the Ottoman Empire's dependence mentality and reposition Albania in relation to the Ottoman Empire and its withdrawal from Balkan territories. In this realm, Albanian intellectuals developed a self-awareness that enabled them to sever their intellectual ties to the Ottoman intellectual infrastructure and connections. The result was Albania's birth as a sovereign and independent state. According to Eqrem bej Vlora, this was the most significant outcome of the struggle. This was only possible because a territorial space had emerged that would be called "Albania." Thus, the assembly in Vlora's declaration of independence in 1912 confirmed Albania's resolve. For Eqrem bej Vlora and other members of the Albanian elite, sovereignty became the most important organizing principle for all forms of Albanian social life.

In his analysis of the achievement of domestic revival, Eqrem bej Vlora interwove an account of how the restructuring of empires fueled the emergence of Albanian state sovereignty. According to Eqrem bej Vlora, these developments were closely linked to the formation of a new international order of sovereign states in Europe. Thus, the history of Albanian revival thinkers culminated in the establishment of an independent, sovereign Albania. Regarding the proclamation of Albanian independence in 1912, he stated: "The moment was great, but the country was small, and our experience was even smaller. In Vlorë, we were a handful of idealists and notables who believed we were making history" (bej Vlora 2010, 1973, 1968).

However, like some other renaissance thinkers, Eqrem bej Vlora recognized that self-determination had its perils. He was concerned that an inevitable consequence of self-governance would be the loss of traditional friendships with other nations of the Ottoman Empire. Thus, an ambiguous position toward the Ottoman Empire and the wider Balkans region emerged, and Albania's belonging to the Balkans was neglected in the narrative. Being a Balkan country was no longer pivotal to the new narrative. The renaissance movement automatically repositioned Albania in the West. The desire to affiliate with the West resulted in a sense of inferiority, and now, being a post-Ottoman country had become a liability. In other words,

Albanian intellectuals were reluctant to express support for Albania's position on the new Balkan map. Intellectuals and rulers alike showed little interest in the Ottomans or the Ottoman Balkans. A role in the Balkans was denied both by the Albanians themselves and by the other Balkan states. The most important Albanian political, cultural, and economic centers were on the Adriatic and Ionian coasts, facing Europe and separated from their Balkan and Ottoman neighbors. This allowed for the construction of an identity in which former Ottoman territories were the "other." Although he was not in favor of isolationism, Eqrem bej Vlora believed that Albania had to build its internal and international credentials through coherence between its domestic limitations and international aspirations. According to Eqrem bej Vlora, the small nation-states of the Balkans, including Albania, were militarily and economically nonviable because they depended on military and economic backing from European powers, even though they were independent.

Nevertheless, Eqrem bej Vlora acknowledges the long period of Ottoman domination over Albanian lands. While he acknowledges the Ottoman Empire's role in shaping the social and political realities of Albanians, he also views this period as one of foreign control and national subjugation. He suggests that the Ottoman era was formative for Albanian identity and governance structures, leaving Albanians with both burdens and opportunities. Bej Vlora highlights how Albanian leaders and communities sought to maintain local autonomy during the Ottoman Empire's decline. They took advantage of the weakening imperial control to foster Albanian national consciousness and eventual independence. He situates the Albanian national awakening within the context of the Ottoman Empire's decline, emphasizing that during this period, Albanians began to perceive themselves as a distinct people with the capacity for self-rule (bej Vlora 2010; 1973; 1968). Thus, Eqrem bej Vlora reflects on the Ottoman period as a crucial yet ambivalent chapter in Albanian history. He acknowledges the constraints imposed by Ottoman rule as well as the formative influences that shaped Albanian identity and political aspirations toward self-governance.

Conclusions

A few systematic studies have focused on how early Albanian thought influenced the development of national Albanian IR theory. This paper addresses this gap. With his experience in the Ottoman Empire and Albanian institutions, Eqrem bej Vlora became a prominent intellectual and a critical voice in Albania. Given the questions he raised in his actions and writings, it is not surprising that he established the foundation of the Albanian school of IR. He was a leading figure in the independence

movement that sought to intensely internationalize Albania. His life was an early example of a romantic Albanian trying to influence the cause and course of national transformation in the context of a new and emerging Europe. His memoirs offer a candid and critical portrayal of Albania's foreign policy in the early 20th century.

The paper argued that Eqrem bej Vlora's discourse portrays Albania's placement within national, Western, and Ottoman orientations. His narrative reveals an aspiration to belong to the West without denying Albania's Ottoman heritage. Eqrem bej Vlora perceives Albania as a European country of Albanians, acknowledging its unique legacy of Ottoman rule. The three-layered model of identities expressed in Eqrem bej Vlora's writings shows that Albania exhibited concern for its IR identity. First, he emphasized the unification of the Albanian language and population. Second, the Albanian elite recognized Albania as a Western and European country. An unambiguous attachment and aspiration to the West emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, eventually being fully embraced in the early years of independence. Third, the model emphasized Albania's uniqueness in relation to its former ruler, the Ottoman Empire. Despite the strong desire to be part of the West, Albania never rejected this category altogether. Thus, the three-layered model shows that Albania produced a mosaic of IR identities.

As IR began to emerge in Albanian thought in the late 19th century, it was initially framed within a national context. Later, the discipline was relied on to help establish Albania as a state with a European vocation and friendly relations with the Ottoman Empire and its legacy. This paper argues that Albania's initial discourse took a middle ground in locating the country between the West and the Orient. In other words, rather than a hard separation between the three, Albania's founders showed the aspiration and struggle to place Albania within itself, the West, and the Orient. They recognized Albania as an Albanian, Western, and Ottoman country and did not espouse a narrative that completely differentiated Albania from its various identity nuances. They were also not entirely comfortable with clear-cut definitions of Albania's national identities. This ambivalence toward Albania's emerging identity is represented by a permanent identification with the dynamics occurring in Albania, the West, and the Ottoman Empire. Their ease with both Europeans and Ottomans is demonstrated by their embrace of Albania's dual historical roots in European history and its cohabitation with Ottoman administration.

Thus, examining the country's pursuit of external recognition sheds light on the emergence of the concepts of IR in late 19th- and early 20th-century Albanian political thought. In short, these Albanian ideas were similar to the perspectives of Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Kant on

the world and human society. The renaissance and romantic paradigms of this period laid the foundation for the initial Albanian IR scholarship. Thus, the initial construction of Albania's core foreign policy values started in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the writings of Renaissance intellectuals. In less than half a century, the Albanian Renaissance elite established many new IR identities for Albania. These new concepts were incorporated into the discourse of Albanian intellectuals, which had major implications for Albania's statehood.

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Strengthening Social Resilience Through Cultural Diplomacy at the Eastern European Union Border

Alina Stoica¹

Abstract

This text is a discussion of the Inclusivity journal development project, a presentation of the institutional and academic frameworks in which it was created, and a concise justification of the main research directions that this editorial endeavor will address and promote. Inclusivity, which operates under the auspices of the EuroINCLUS Research Center, is dedicated to the advancement of knowledge in the field of EU studies and was established with the objective of disseminating information on EU-related topics to a broader audience. This initiative is poised to foster enhanced understanding and engagement between the EU and the general public, thereby strengthening the bond between the EU and its citizens. Concurrently, Inclusivity journal endeavors to adopt an analytical and synthetic approach in its pursuit to consider fundamental and specific concerns pertaining to the theorization, conceptualization, and operationalization of concepts related to identity management and minority issues, fundamental human rights, the promotion of integration processes, inclusion, intercultural education, societal security, and the societal resilience of minorities, immigrants, and refugees.

Keywords

Inclusivity, identity, minority, integration, culture, interculturalism

1. Introduction

The Romanian–Hungarian cross-border area is one of the most dynamic laboratories of intercultural cooperation in Central Europe, characterized by a shared history, mixed cultural influences, and diverse ethnic composition, particularly in Bihor County (Romania) and Hajdú-Bihar County (Hungary). This region is recognized for its model of intercultural coexistence and interethnic dialogue, shaped by centuries of cohabitation among Romanians, Hungarians, Slovaks, Jews, Germans, and Roma (Țoca, 2013). At the same time, this border space provides a concrete context for analysing how European identity is manifested in practice,

¹ Assoc.Prof.PhD., Department of International Relations and European Studies, Faculty of History, International Relations, Political and Communication Sciences, University of Oradea, Romania, E-mail: stoicaalina79@yahoo.com

beyond institutional frameworks. The border is not merely a geographical line but a meeting space between multiple identities, where national, cultural, and increasingly European belonging overlap.

Following Romania's accession to the European Union, cross-border cooperation between the two states has gained institutional consolidation through joint programs such as Interreg Romania–Hungary, the Bihor–Hajdú-Bihar Euroregion, and the Carpathian Euroregion, which have stimulated economic, educational, and cultural exchanges (Polgár & Brie, 2025). This collaboration has been supported by local authorities and university institutions, which have become active actors in the development of regional public diplomacy. In this context, the distinction between physical and symbolic borders becomes relevant. Beyond the political and territorial Romanian–Hungarian border, the specialized literature draws attention to the existence of “invisible borders,” such as linguistic, cultural, religious, or ideological ones, which can either facilitate or hinder cooperation processes (Brie & Horga, 2014).

The Oradea–Debrecen border region represents a clear example of cultural and functional interdependence, where cooperation policies have gone beyond the formal level of partnerships and materialized in joint educational programs, cross-border infrastructure, social integration projects, and long-term cultural initiatives. In this context, cultural diplomacy does not manifest itself only through symbolic exchanges but through concrete initiatives that connect communities on both sides of the border, contributing to social cohesion and reducing local identity tensions (Stoica, 2010). Such forms of cooperation help articulate a “border European identity,” which does not exclude local identities but brings them into dialogue.

The University of Oradea, through its Jean Monnet Centres of Excellence and other academic structures, has established itself as a regional mediator and facilitator of cross-border academic cooperation, promoting educational and scientific projects focused on European identity, inclusion, and intercultural dialogue. At the same time, partnerships with institutions from Debrecen, Gyula, and Nyíregyháza demonstrate that academic diplomacy has become a central component of regional cultural diplomacy. Through these projects, universities contribute to overcoming mental and cultural borders, helping transform borders from areas of separation into areas of cooperation (Stoica & Chirodea, 2015).

This practical reality justifies the present study, in which cultural diplomacy is analyzed in action as an applied instrument in building social resilience based on proximity cooperation, cultural interdependence, and joint community projects. Ultimately, cultural diplomacy becomes a

mechanism for shaping European identity in border spaces, contributing to the reduction of tensions and the strengthening of regional cohesion.

2. Cultural diplomacy – A functional instrument in the field

Cultural diplomacy manifests itself in the Romanian–Hungarian cross-border space not merely as a theoretical concept, but as an active instrument of cohesion and collaboration between communities. It functions as a form of living dialogue, in which cultural events, educational exchanges, and institutional cooperation become channels through which European values are translated into concrete experiences. In border localities such as Oradea, Debrecen, or Gyula, cultural diplomacy represents a form of regional soft power, where culture, education, and shared traditions become bridges between groups with different identities.

A relevant example is the organization of intercultural events which, over the last decade, have moved beyond their festive dimension and gained a strategic role in strengthening mutual trust. Festivals such as the *Oradea Cultural Autumn* or the *Debrecen Flower Carnival* bring together artists, cultural organizations, and institutions from both countries every year, creating spaces for dialogue and cooperation (Stoica & Țoca, 2010). In these contexts, cultural diplomacy becomes a dual process: on the one hand, it affirms local identity, and on the other, it anchors it within a shared European framework, illustrating the concept of “identity through interaction” (Blumer, 1986).

Educational joint programs also play a significant role, developed through initiatives such as Erasmus+ or Interreg Romania–Hungary, which provide students, teachers, and young professionals with opportunities to collaborate on interdisciplinary projects. These programs not only facilitate academic mobility but also contribute to forming a generation capable of thinking and acting across borders. Thus, the University of Oradea and the University of Debrecen have become essential actors of cultural diplomacy, putting into practice a model of university cooperation based on knowledge and mutual respect (Stoica & Chirodea, 2015).

Traditional local festivals also function as spaces for intercultural encounters. Slovak communities in Șinteu, Hungarian communities in Tărian, or Romanian communities in Körösszegapáti transform these events into true laboratories of coexistence and mutual recognition, where cultural heritage becomes a vector of community diplomacy (Polgár & Brie, 2025). They illustrate how proximity-based cultural diplomacy relies on exchanging experiences and valuing diversity rather than uniformity.

Moreover, cross-border projects funded through European programs (RO-HU, Interreg) act as structural instruments for applying cultural

diplomacy. They support cultural, educational, and social activities that contribute to the sustainable development of border areas and the strengthening of community resilience. Recent examples include projects dedicated to shared heritage and social inclusion, in which local authorities, universities, and NGOs act as equal partners in building a shared European identity (European Commission, 2023). Such initiatives demonstrate that cultural diplomacy is not limited to classical diplomatic levels but is carried out "in the field," through daily cooperation and direct community involvement.

Therefore, cultural diplomacy in the Romanian–Hungarian space is shaped as a practical form of intercultural governance, capable of reducing symbolic distances and generating cross-border social capital. It transforms borders from barriers into resources and from lines of separation into axes of interaction. In a geopolitical context where identity fragmentation threatens European cohesion, these practices offer a sustainable model of social resilience through culture, in which dialogue, partnership, and trust become pillars of sustainable regional development (Tuşie, 2022).

3. The connection with social resilience

In border regions, cultural diplomacy is not limited to symbolic exchanges or the promotion of local identities in a European context; it plays an active role in strengthening the social resilience of communities. Social resilience can be understood as the capacity of a community to manage tensions, cooperate, and adapt to change while maintaining cohesion and the functioning of essential social systems (Adger, 2000). In the Romanian–Hungarian cross-border areas, where ethnic diversity and shared history can generate both opportunities for collaboration and identity-based tensions, cultural diplomacy serves as a concrete instrument for building trust and solidarity.

One of the main effects of cultural diplomacy is the reduction of stereotypes and prejudices between ethnic groups. Intercultural festivals and joint educational projects offer communities the opportunity to interact directly in a setting that values diversity and dialogue, uniting rather than dividing communities. For example, traditional events in Şinteu (the "Potato Festival"), Bihor County, allow Romanian, Hungarian, and Slovak participants to observe and appreciate each other's cultural heritage, leading to reduced negative perceptions and improved mutual understanding. Thus, culture becomes a vehicle of communication and a tool of informal education, where stereotypes are addressed through direct experience and social interaction. The active involvement of Slovak diplomacy in Şinteu for more than a decade, through the Honorary Consulate in Oradea and the Slovak ambassador in Bucharest, has led to the revival of Slovak culture by

rehabilitating an entirely Slovak village, supporting traditional Slovak activities, culinary arts, and customs in Bihor (Digi24, 2017).

A second mechanism through which cultural diplomacy contributes to social resilience is the strengthening of trust between groups. Joint activities such as Erasmus+ youth projects or university exchanges between Oradea and Debrecen create stable cross-border networks based on collaboration and reciprocity. In these contexts, participants learn to manage cultural and linguistic differences, communicate effectively, and make collective decisions, developing skills that extend to the local community level. The trust thus built between individuals and institutions becomes the foundation of social resilience, enabling communities to better face emerging crises or conflicts (Stoica & Chirodea, 2015).

Another important aspect is cross-border civic engagement. Local projects and community initiatives supported through European funding (RO-HU, Interreg) allow citizens to actively participate in community life and influence decisions related to heritage, education, or urban development (European Commission, 2023; Interreg Romania-Hungary Programme, 2023). In this way, cultural diplomacy is no longer merely a policy of symbolic exchanges but becomes a framework for social involvement, accountability, and civic participation. Communities thus gain the ability to self-govern flexibly, anticipate and manage social tensions, and build networks of mutual support.

At the same time, cultural diplomacy facilitates the preservation of identity without generating identity conflicts. Projects that promote traditional values and cultural heritage allow minorities to maintain their ethnic and linguistic identity while integrating into a wider European framework. In Oradea and Debrecen, multilingual educational programs and intercultural workshops provide clear examples of how local identity can coexist with European identity, without cultural differences becoming sources of tension. An illustrative example is the longstanding cooperation between the University of Oradea, specifically the Department of International Relations and European Studies, and the Consulate General of Romania in Gyula. These collaborations involved practical study visits for students taking courses in Foreign Policy and Diplomacy. In addition to activities at the Consulate, which took place every December before Christmas, students also joined the local Romanian community in Gyula for traditional Christmas carols, sharing Romanian culinary traditions brought from Romania.

Furthermore, the cumulative effects of these mechanisms create what the literature refers to as “social resilience through culture” (Adger, 2000; Turšić, 2022). Culture, education, and institutional cooperation form an

ecosystem that allows communities to respond quickly and effectively to socio-political and economic challenges, transform tensions into opportunities for dialogue, and build lasting bridges between ethnic groups. In this sense, cultural diplomacy is not merely a tool of symbolic representation but a real vector of development and social adaptation, capable of addressing the complexity of multiple borders—physical, symbolic, and ideological—present in the Romanian–Hungarian space.

4. Applied study: cultural diplomacy experiences observed in the EUROINCLUS project

The EUROINCLUS project offered a unique perspective on how culture, education, and the economy intersect to build bridges between communities and promote social inclusion. Through the visits and activities carried out, concrete forms of micro-cultural diplomacy were observed, where local interactions become instruments for strengthening social cohesion and intercultural dialogue. This chapter analyzes four distinct yet interconnected contexts: the Slovak community in Șinteu, the Criș Country Museum, Euro Business Park, and multilingual denominational schools.

4.1. Șinteu – Community-based cultural diplomacy

In the village of Șinteu, the event dedicated to the potato demonstrated how local traditions can function as a vehicle of cultural diplomacy. The festival was not only a culinary celebration but also a setting in which members of the community meet, share experiences, and value their cultural heritage. Participants had the opportunity to interact with visitors from other communities, building connections based on mutual respect and appreciation of cultural differences. Thus, the festival became an example of community micro-diplomacy, where local cultural identity serves as a bridge for communication and intercultural understanding (Digi24, 2017).

Șinteu village, located in Bihor County, is a remarkable example of cultural rehabilitation and preservation carried out by the Slovak community. Over the decades, Slovak inhabitants have preserved not only the traditional architecture of houses and churches but also their customs, cuisine, and language. This strong commitment to heritage has transformed the village into a living space of history and culture, where traditions are not only displayed but also practiced and passed on. The Potato Festival takes place in this context, and its organization highlights the importance of maintaining community cohesion and promoting Slovak identity within a multicultural territory (Radio România Cluj, 2024).

Events of this kind, held in a culturally active and rehabilitated village, show how both tangible and intangible heritage can become instruments of cultural diplomacy. Through active participation in the festival, visitors learn

to appreciate the community's efforts to preserve its identity, while local members reaffirm their traditions and values. Thus, Şinteu becomes not only a place of celebration but also a model of community micro-diplomacy, where local culture generates dialogue, cooperation, and intercultural respect.

4.2. The Criş Country Museum – Heritage as a space for dialogue

The next stage of the visits was the Criş Country Museum, where cultural heritage was perceived not only as historical legacy but also as a tool for education and social dialogue. The museum's exhibitions and interactive workshops offered participants the chance to experience the historical and cultural diversity of the region. In this context, heritage became a space of micro-cultural diplomacy: visitors had the opportunity to engage in dialogue about identity, values, and traditions, thus strengthening collective awareness and respect for diversity.

The Criş Country Museum in Oradea is a representative example of a cultural institution that promotes museum education and intercultural dialogue. Through the organization of permanent and temporary exhibitions, as well as educational workshops, the museum facilitates public access to the history and culture of the Crişana region. These activities contribute to developing collective awareness and understanding of cultural diversity.

The museum also collaborates with educational institutions such as the University of Oradea and the Oradea School of Arts to organize events such as the "Images in Dialogue" exhibition, which promotes visual arts and dialogue between generations. In this way, the museum becomes an active space for cultural learning and exchange.

4.3. Euro Business Park – Economic cooperation supported by cultural trust

The experience at Euro Business Park highlighted how cultural relations can influence and strengthen cross-border economic cooperation. During the visits and discussions with representatives of local companies, it became clear that cultural trust is not just an abstract concept but a tangible factor that determines the success of negotiations and joint projects. Shared values, mutual respect, and an understanding of the cultural context are essential elements in building durable partnerships and reducing the risk of misunderstandings in business environments.

An important aspect of this experience was observing how economic micro-diplomacy manifests in practice. Personal relationships between entrepreneurs, park managers, and local authorities are often based on shared experiences and a high level of familiarity with the traditions, norms, and cultural customs of the partners. This intercultural awareness facilitates effective communication, increases decision-making

transparency, and generates a cooperative atmosphere in which conflicts can be prevented or resolved more easily.

Additionally, Euro Business Park serves as an example of integrating the cultural and economic dimensions of diplomacy. Joint projects are not limited to commercial exchanges but also include collaborations in vocational training, exchanges of good practices, and corporate social responsibility activities that involve the local community. Thus, culture and cultural trust become strategic resources that support sustainable development, enhance competitiveness, and consolidate social relations in the border region.

This intersection between economy and culture shows that micro-diplomacy is not limited to the symbolic or educational sphere but has concrete applications in business management and in promoting balanced regional development. Relationships based on an understanding of cultural values and practices strengthen cross-border economic networks and transform business parks into spaces of intercultural cooperation, demonstrating that economic success is closely linked to the social and cultural capital of the communities involved.

4.4. Multilingual denominational schools – Education and identity

Finally, the multilingual denominational schools visited as part of the EUROINCLUS project demonstrated how education can become a powerful tool for inclusion and educational micro-diplomacy. These institutions, present in ethnically diverse communities in Bihor and Crișana, combine the national curriculum with instruction in multiple languages—Romanian, Hungarian, Slovak, or German—while being rooted in religious values. Through this approach, the schools do not only transmit academic knowledge but also form intercultural competencies, promoting empathy, respect, and cooperation among students of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

The activities observed in these schools include local language and culture classes, group projects involving students of various denominations and native languages, as well as traditional celebrations adapted to community diversity. For example, students participate in culinary workshops, art exhibitions, and themed competitions that highlight the cultural heritage specific to each community. These practical experiences enable children to understand and appreciate cultural differences, develop intercultural communication skills, and learn to collaborate in a harmonious environment.

Multilingual education in these schools also has a significant impact on strengthening individual and community identity. Students learn to recognize and value their cultural roots, while daily interactions with classmates from

other communities cultivate tolerance and openness toward diversity. In this way, multilingual denominational schools become true spaces of educational micro-diplomacy, where education serves not only academic instruction but also the creation of lasting bridges of intercultural dialogue.

Therefore, these institutions demonstrate that education can function simultaneously as a tool for social inclusion, preservation of cultural identity, and promotion of community cohesion. Through programs adapted to linguistic and cultural diversity, multilingual denominational schools prepare students to live and contribute in a multicultural society, offering them essential skills for intercultural understanding and cooperation.

Conclusions

The analysis of cultural diplomacy in the Romanian–Hungarian cross-border space shows that it is not merely a symbolic practice but a concrete instrument for strengthening social resilience. Through joint educational projects, traditional festivals, economic cooperation, and cross-border civic initiatives, local communities develop the capacity to manage tensions, reduce stereotypes, and build mutual trust between ethnic groups.

Community events such as the “Potato Festival” in Șinteu demonstrate that local traditions are not only cultural expressions but also effective tools of micro-diplomacy. The festival enables community members to interact with visitors from other regions, strengthening community identity, transmitting local values and customs, and building relationships based on mutual respect. The involvement of Slovak authorities and the local community has led to the revitalization of the village and the promotion of cultural heritage as a resource for social cohesion, highlighting the role of traditions as a vehicle for intercultural dialogue.

The experiences from visits to the Criș Country Museum and Euro Business Park illustrate the complementarity between cultural heritage and economic cooperation. The museum serves as an active space for education and dialogue, contributing to the development of collective awareness and respect for diversity. In the economic environment, the success of cross-border projects depends not only on professional skills but also on cultural trust and shared values, demonstrating how economic micro-diplomacy supports sustainable relationships and intercultural cooperation.

At the same time, the multilingual denominational schools in Oradea show that education can function as a tool for social inclusion and educational micro-diplomacy. Programs tailored to linguistic and cultural diversity, combined with participation in European projects, enable students to strengthen their personal and community identity, develop intercultural skills, and build harmonious relationships between different cultures.

The experiences within the EUROINCLUS project confirm that integrating cultural, educational, and economic activities can stimulate intercultural dialogue at the local level and strengthen social cohesion. Micro-diplomacy expressed through local traditions, cultural heritage, economic cooperation, and multilingual education represents an effective tool for promoting inclusion, mutual respect, and understanding among diverse communities. In this way, communities become capable of managing tensions, valuing cultural diversity, and building a cohesive, open, and sustainable society.

Therefore, cultural diplomacy and community micro-diplomacy contribute to the creation of a replicable model of social resilience in border regions. These practices transform borders from barriers into spaces of cooperation, dialogue, and sustainable development, offering valuable lessons for other European regions characterized by ethnic diversity and cultural complexity.

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State of Israel's Internal and External Policy with Regard to Work Immigrants

Michelle Abergel¹

Abstract

Borders between countries which have once been closed, are being opened and people can now relocate, hoping for a better life. However, these waves of immigration have led countries to set immigration policies, based on their wish and ability to allow immigrants entry. Israel is not different, and it too has an immigration policy, designed to let those who are allowed in, keeping out those who are not allowed. The current research explores the current immigration policy and suggests a new framework, considering the problems it encompasses. A research model with several stages has been formulated: content analysis of documentation, interviews with work immigrants, questionnaires filled out by people working for the Israeli immigration control system, and a focus group with senior members of the different governmental branches. The new model focuses on tight supervision for the human resource contractors who bring work immigrants to Israel. This compels them to protect their rights. It also suggests that the policy must focus mainly on integration and acculturation of the immigrants in their surroundings, aiming to reduce discrimination and feelings of fear and hate towards them, and to make them feel protected in their new community. This integration has to be implemented by educating the local population and by integrating leaders of the immigration community into local authorities.

Keywords

Immigration, policy, work immigrants, Israel, culture

1. Introduction

Immigration is primarily driven by the lack of job opportunities in developing countries, along with other factors such as resource shortages, armed conflicts, authoritarian regimes, and genocide. Consequently, many individuals seeking better living conditions for themselves and their families choose to leave their homes and migrate to other countries in pursuit of a fresh start and improved opportunities. Over the past decades, significant global changes have contributed to a substantial rise in immigration,

¹ Operational Control Officer, The central district of Israel, Tel Aviv, Israel. PhD in the field of International Relations and European Studies, Babes-Bolyai University from Cluj-Napoca (2025). E-mail: michelleabergel29@gmail.com

particularly from developing nations to more established, developed ones. This large-scale migration has fostered multicultural and multilingual societies in developed countries, where people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds come together to form new communities. These changes can lead to positive outcomes, to the embracement of new and different cultures, languages, and customs. Yes, it can also lead to negative results, frictions between the different cultures and resentment of the local population towards the immigrants, since the latter are taking jobs which can be held by locals.

In Israel, immigration is a complex and multifaceted issue. Historically, the Jewish population has faced widespread discrimination, hatred, fear, and resentment, spanning centuries and even millennia. In the aftermath of the Second World War, it became evident that the Jewish people required a secure homeland—a place where they could live safely and without persecution. This recognition ultimately led to the establishment of the State of Israel. Since these were the main reasons for its foundation, it stands to reason that the main immigrant population which the country seeks, are Jews from the diaspora. These immigrants will expand the Jewish demographics and actualize the Zionist dream and ideal, of Jewish people living together, safe in their own country.

Over the years, Israel has welcomed many Jews from around the world, granting them rights, citizenship, and privileges to which they are entitled just by being Jewish. However, Jewish people are not the only people who come to live in Israel. People from different ethnicities, origins, races, and religions immigrate to the country, hoping to find a safe place for themselves and their families. In many cases, these people come from war zones, e.g., Sudan, looking to start over in a new location.

When talking about immigration and immigration policy, it is important to consider the fact that immigration does not happen in a vacuum. That is, many parties are involved in the process of immigration, among them: the countries of origin, the hosting countries, and countries which maintain political, social, and economic ties with all the other parties. As a result of all these connections, the immigration policy of each country is highly affected by its ties to other international players (Natter, 2018). Another factor which affects to certain extent the formulation of immigration policies, is the "quality" of the immigrants. When a country absorbs immigrants, it classifies them, knowingly or not, into categories based on their ethnicity, race, religion, and profession. Some immigrants are considered favorable, and some are not. This classification could impact the immigration, when favorable immigrants receive preferential treatment over others, based on their education or desirability to the hosting country (FitzGerald, 2022). All these factors play a role in the immigration process,

and especially in the formulation of immigration policy in different countries, when these policies can be opposed to one another, even inside a union such as the EU. This can cause problems in cohesion, leaving the local population and the immigrants confused and unsure as to their next move.

As to the Israeli context of immigration, promotion of the Jewish immigration is the main objective of this type of immigration, both for the State of Israel and for many immigrants. Already before its official foundation, Israel has always been known as a Jewish home, the promised land. Consequently, even as early as 1880, there were large waves of Jewish immigration to the land, and later the State of Israel. The statistical figures show that between 1880-1918, 2.4 million Jews immigrated to Israel; between 1919-1948 (the foundation of the State of Israel), 1.6 million Jews immigrated; between 1948-1960, over 1.3 million Jews immigrated; between 1961-1988, about 1.6 million Jews immigrated; and between 1989-1995, about 1.1 million Jews immigrated to Israel (DellaPergola, 1998: 51-92). The fact that Israel has welcomed mainly Jewish immigration, has implication not only for the number and origin of immigrants, but for the integration process and the sense of belonging experienced by immigrants coming to Israel. When dealing with Jewish immigrants, rights are granted to them rather quickly and easily due to the Law of Return. Furthermore, the local population tends to look at Jewish immigrants more favorably, integrating them in society in terms of work, social connections, and social services. On the other hand, when it comes to non-Jewish immigrants, the local population does not always embrace them quite easily. The attitudes towards them are those of fear and resentment. They often struggle to get permits and get jobs, and their social connections, namely making friends and finding a support system, are less easily obtained (Rajiman & Geffen, 2018: 142-157).

Taking all this into consideration, the current research aimed to explore the issue of foreign workers, immigrants, and refugees in Israel. As stated, the main theories today regarding immigration, especially immigration in Israel for non-Jewish immigrants, focus on their religion and ethnicity as a point of view for looking at the immigrants. These examinations showed that it was necessary to take this matter further. That is, if foreign immigrants coming to Israel are considered as second-class immigrants, what does this mean in terms of legislation, the way that the government treats the immigrant, their rights and obligations, their general acceptance by the local population, the public opinion about them, as well as their general rights, such as employment, education, and healthcare. Additionally, data were gathered for this research during the years 2022-2023.

Each part of the research is limited to a different group of immigrants, e.g., work immigrants, illegal immigrants, and non-Jewish immigrants. This was done in order to examine the overall policy regarding non-Jewish immigrants living in Israel and the way the public and the decision makers perceived them. We believe that focusing each section on a specific group yields a complete and thorough understanding of the experience of non-Jewish immigrants in Israel.

The current research focuses on a population that, most of the time, prefers remaining under the radar. Hence, it is important to indicate some difficulties in recruiting interviewees. Despite their legality in Israel, work immigrants tend to keep a low key and avoid opening up about their experience, especially not to people they do not know or trust. This is due to the fact that they are working under contractors, and they are somewhat afraid to expose their real feelings and experiences, in fear of retribution. Therefore, it was somewhat difficult to locate work immigrants who were willing to participate in this study. Hence, social organizations that work with them were approached, who set up the first connection. With this help, we managed to locate our interviewees.

When looking at the overall current research and its importance in the field of international relations and in the field of immigration in Israel, first, no system is perfect and every such system, especially one that has existed for many years, e.g., the immigration policy in Israel, and any public policy for that matter, deserves review and revision every few years. This is particularly important when taking into consideration issues such as global changes, immigration trends, demographic shifts, and the growing popularity of Israel as an immigration country, especially for work immigrants from third world countries. Thus, examination of the existing situation, analyzing it, and trying to solve the prominent problems and difficulties, are important actions, with relevant and actionable repercussions, which may be useful in the actual field of internal affairs in Israel. Moreover, the topic of policy and legislation in Israel is very controversial, with many political forces sometimes working against each other, to promote their own political and personal agenda. In that regard, the current research exerted all efforts for the purpose of keeping all political opinions and agenda out of the picture and maintaining utmost objectivity. It relied solely on the existing situation and the point of view of the different participants, whether work immigrants or decision-makers.

1.1. Research aims and research questions

Main research aim:

To develop a new framework for thought regarding the foreign and domestic policy about work immigrant/asylum-seekers.

Subsidiary research aims:

To explore the constitutional aspects of the way work immigrants in Israel are being treated.

To explore the human rights related to the work immigrant in Israel.

To explore the cultural aspects involved in this issue in Israel.

This prompted the aim to explore issues such as human rights, culture, and legal aspects as they came into play in the work immigrants' daily lives.

Main research question:

Which factors could constitute the framework for thought about Israel's policy regarding work immigrants?

Subsidiary research questions:

What are the legal aspects regarding the attitude towards work immigrants and refugees in Israel?

What are the human rights of work immigrants and refugees in Israel?

What cultural issues are involved in the matter of work immigrants and refugees in Israel?

Research hypothesis:

Israel's current immigration policy will prove to be harmful to the country's economy. Moreover, the current immigration policy will prove to be harmful to the work immigrants' living conditions.

The legal aspects regarding the attitudes towards work immigrants and refugees in Israel will focus on their possible threat to the Jewish identity and the wide public's safety.

Human right issues will be prominent in the experience of work immigrants in Israel, and they will be mistreated in this regard.

The cultural issues which will be involved in the topic of work immigrants and refugees in Israel will focus on cultural separation, not integration.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Conceptual analysis and literature review

2.1.1. Globalization

The modern world is evolving rapidly, with these changes notably reflected in the social and cultural landscapes of various countries—particularly developed nations that are becoming increasingly globalized. This shift means that people today, especially in developed regions, share their environments with individuals from diverse countries, cultures, and historical backgrounds. The new globalized world is creating an integrated new environment for people in which they live and grow (Abergel, 2020: 75-78). However, globalization does not necessarily mean that people need to live in the same country in order to integrate their cultures together, or to

share their history with one another. The most fascinating thing about globalization is the fact that people from around the world can interact with one another via the Internet and share elements from their life with people from the other side of the world (Acheson, 2010).

2.1.2. Third world countries

When discussing the concept of third world countries, or developing countries, as they are known in today's world, it is first necessary to define the term. What does, "developing countries" mean? In 2010, the World Bank defined developing countries as countries with gross national income of US\$ 12,195, or less, per capita. Other factors include quality of life, such as life expectancy and literacy rates, as well as economic diversification, which encompasses labor force participation and personal consumption. Currently, over 80% of the global population resides in developing countries (Ibrahim & Damasceno, 2012: 611-619).

2.1.3. Immigration from third world countries

In recent decades, numerous international changes and upheavals have occurred. These events have contributed to the process of globalization, which has allowed individuals to leave their home countries and relocate to different nations-sometimes even across continents-in search of better opportunities for themselves and their families (Abergel, 2020: 75-78). On the other hand, these changes have divided the world into two separate and distinct parts: rich, advanced countries which are mostly part of the western, modern world, and are referred to as "developed countries", and poor, war-filled countries, which most of the time are at a disadvantage in terms of resources and living conditions. These countries are known as "third world countries", or "developing countries".

2.1.4. Issues related to human rights of work immigrants and refugees

Before addressing the issue of human rights for immigrants and refugees, it is important to distinguish between the two groups, as they often receive different treatment in host countries. Following the mass refugee crisis of 2015, both media and politicians in the European Union and its member states found it necessary to clarify these differences. According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is defined as someone who has been forced to flee their country due to persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group (United Nations, 1951). Conversely, migrants are considered people that have decided of their own free will, out of personal reasons, to leave their original country. Moreover, they made this decision on the basis of internal factors, without external interference of influence, such as war or persecution (De Coninck, 2020: 1667-1686).

2.1.5. Human rights of immigrants and refugees in Israel

One of the countries which has been at the focus of many immigrants and refugees, mainly from Africa and sub-Saharan countries over the past few years is Israel. Since 2007, Israel has absorbed more than 50,000 immigrants, and an estimated number of about 15,000 undocumented more have entered the country illegally. Most of these undocumented immigrants have been staying illegally and do not have work permits, namely they must find employment in unconventional and illegal ways. Thus, most of the work that these immigrants can find is dangerous, physically challenging, and often puts them in hazardous situations. They have to get access to healthcare, but without being a legal part of the society, they need to find alternative medical solutions, which can put them in danger (Mor et al, 2017: 484-491).

2.2. Public policy regarding immigration - Theoretical framework

2.2.1. Social constructivism theory

According to the theory at hand, the thesis is underpinned by three elements: (1) Reality which encompasses human activity, merging different members of the same society. Reality is viewed as a social construct; (2) Knowledge – according to social constructivists, knowledge arises from human interaction within a shared social environment; and (3) Learning – is a social process. It is not passive, nor can it occur in isolation, but rather through the active interaction of individuals, ideally through social activities (Kim, 2001). Social Constructivism is somewhat hereditary; it passes from instructors to learners in the constructivism paradigm. Instructors are initializers of learning, they provide the basis and support for the learners, who gradually develop skills for learning by themselves. It is assumed that the heavier the weight attributed to knowledge, creativity, and collaboration, the more learners are likely to learn by pair work, group work, and teamwork. Thus, they are offered the opportunity to manifest and implicate the world of knowledge (Amineh & Asl, 2015: 9-16).

2.2.2. Theories of culture

Before addressing culture in today's modern world, we first need to define culture or discuss the main theories of culture in recent research. One of the most prominent researchers in this field is Eisenstadt, who conceived a definition of culture. A review of his work illustrates that he defined culture as "an autonomous, plural, multi-level, and dynamic structure, with its own internal patterns, processes, and generative potential for critique, reinterpretation and transformation. As such, culture also operates as a pool or repertoire of symbolic orientations of various sorts and kinds, potentially capable of deeply 'interweaving' with other aspects of social life and even evolving into an influential, defining feature of

institutional formations, societal configurations, and civilization" (Silber, 2020: 134).

2.3. Israel's immigration management system and the refugees' status

2.3.1. Immigration to Israel

The State of Israel was founded and declared as an independent country in 1948, freeing the land from the British mandate. Following the decision to turn Israel into a state, a new government was elected, headed by David Ben Gurion, one of the founding fathers of the country and a long-time fighter for the liberation of Israel from British administration. The new government of the new country understood that one of the first and most important agendas should be filling the land with Jews. Thus, it would attain a demographic majority and keep the country safe from occupation and any foreign interference. In order to accomplish this goal, one of the first decision made by the government was to open the country's borders to any Jew who was willing to come. This decision was validated by the Declaration of Independence (Picard, 2018: 382-399).

2.3.2. Legislation and policy regarding immigrants and refugees in Israel

In Israel, the main immigration policy is oriented at Jewish people living in other countries, which are referred to as "the Jewish diaspora". Despite this, and even though the State of Israel strongly and positively encourages Jews to immigrate to its territory, the general immigration policy in the Israel is quite strict with respect of non-Jewish populations. As far as work immigrants are concerned, Israel allows a few authorized entries each year, under some restrictions, with an increase in the number of authorizations granted each year. Most of the work immigrants allowed in the country are mainly unskilled workers, who arrive to work in nursing, agriculture, and construction. However, over the past several years, Israel has started targeting skilled workers to immigrate into its territory, offering them benefits which unskilled workers usually do not get (Sigad et al, 2018: 197-206).

Until 2009, the body which was responsible for handling refugees and asylum seekers in Israel was the UNHCR, which operated as a representative of the UN. Since 2009, the State of Israel took has undertaken to function as the main body responsible for these populations, and the main office which is responsible for the processing of applications and requests submitted by refugees and asylum seekers, is the office of population and immigration (UNHRC – Israel, 2023). The operation of this office has been quite extensively criticized, as was described above in great detail. On the other hand, this section aims to examine their protocol for dealing with refugees and asylum seekers.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research approach: Mixed methods paradigm

The work premise behind the concept of mixed method research is the idea that a combination of quantitative and qualitative research leads to a more comprehensive research method, integrating two complementary research methods. Research findings indicate that using mixed method research leads to a deeper understanding of the studied topic. Quantitative research facilitates generalization of the research findings to the general population, or to several different populations. On the other hand, the qualitative approach enables researchers to focus on one specific case. Thus, by using the answers obtained from that study, the quantitative research findings can be highlighted (Fessinger & Morrow, 2013: 69-83).

3.2. Ethical considerations

To protect the interviewees' anonymity and keep their privacy, none of their identifying information was used for the current research and all of it was kept private, in order not to allow for any identification. Furthermore, the questionnaires were filled out anonymously, to protect the respondents' privacy and prevent their identification.

Since all the people who participated in the current research were legally adults, there were no ethical considerations regarding parental consent. All the participants gave their informed consent to participate in this study.

4. Results

The results are divided into 3 sections: one for each research question, as to better understand them and the way they provide information, as a basis for constructing the new model.

4.1. Results emerging from research question 1: What are the legal aspects regarding the attitude towards work immigrants and refugees in Israel?

- Employers should provide several social conditions to the workers: social security, early notice in case of termination, severance pay, minimum wage at the very least, housing, medical insurance, and an employment contract written in a language the worker understands.
- The workers are entitled to a weekly resting day and an annual vacation, whether they actually take or whether they get money instead.
- The workers are entitled to days off during holidays and paid vacation days for holidays if the holiday does not fall on a worker's day off.
- Foreign workers should be hired under the supervision of the International Immigration Organization (IOM), or any other arrangement.

4.2. Results emerging from research question 2: What are the human rights of work immigrants and refugees in Israel?

- The human rights of work immigrants in Israel, are mainly the most basic human rights.
- Work immigrants in Israel are not physically harmed and they receive basic treatment, but the country does not encourage their stay in its territory.
- Moreover, through its current immigration policy and the general attitudes manifested by government members, the current immigration policy is designed to limit as much as possible the human rights of work immigrants in Israel.

4.3. Results emerging from research question 3: What cultural issues are involved in the matter of work immigrants and refugees in Israel?

- The cultural issues involved in the integration of work immigrants into the Israeli society in terms of culture, language, religious customs, and solidarity, were quite scarce.
- The government and the Israeli population preferred making a distinct separation between local and foreign population and making as little integration efforts as possible.
- This separation was mainly caused by negative attitudes towards the immigrants and the belief that they posed a threat to the Zionist idea.

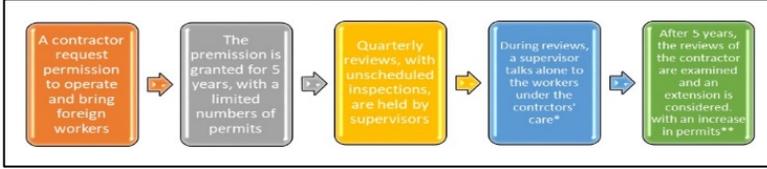
5. Development of a public policy model regarding immigrants and refugees

5.1. Dimensions of the new framework

When designing a new framework for a public policy model regarding immigrants and refugees in Israel, I would like first to address the different dimensions which are relevant for working with immigrants and refugees. The purpose is to develop a model which will truly be directed towards integration and inclusion, affecting different elements and factors at the sectorial level. These dimensions include:

- Public policies
- Programs
- Institutions
- Integration tools
- Involvement of civil society
- Involvement of international organizations

Figure 1: The qualification and supervision process for humanresources contractors



(Source: author's own preparations)

Figure 2: The implementation stages of the new interna immigration policy



(Source: author's own preparations)

6. Conclusion and recommendations

6.1. Conclusions

The issue of economic damage was hardly addressed in the current research. Both the immigrants interviewed and the officials who took part in the focus group paid very little attention to this issue. Hence, I cannot say that I have received any kind of answer to this hypothesis.

In terms of legal aspects regarding the attitudes towards work immigrants and refugees in Israel, I concluded that the second hypothesis was corroborated, since the legislation towards these populations was discriminatory, and was based on the belief that they posed an obvious and immediate threat to the Jewish identity of Israel. That is why their numbers should be limited and reduced as much as possible, and their interaction with the local population should also be restricted by means of detention.

As for the human rights issues, I hypothesized that work immigrants would be discriminated in this regard. When looking at the perspective of the work immigrants themselves, this hypothesis was refuted, since the

immigrants did not feel discriminated, nor did they feel that they were treated in this way. The opinions of the officials, however, told a different story, since they mostly believed that immigrants were being denied some basic human rights. This discrepancy might have something to do with the distinction between work immigrants and refugees and asylum seekers. For the most part, work immigrants have steady jobs and are entitled to many social rights. On the other hand, refugees and asylum seekers are not allowed to work during their waiting process and, as a result, suffer from poverty, while their basic human rights are not being granted.

As far as the cultural issues which are involved in the matter of work immigrants and refugees in Israel, the current research found that the main policy and actual actions were oriented more towards cultural separation, not integration. Hence, the fourth research hypothesis was corroborated. Even in places which did act for the well-being of the refugees and work immigrants, such as the case of Tel Aviv's municipality, which implemented the MESILA program for the benefit of immigrants living in the city, the focus was on providing them with information and assistance, and less on actions that would integrate them into the local community.

The research process took time, and during that time the events of October 7th, 2023, occurred, putting Israel once more in a state of survival. Based on this point of view, I speculated that the immigration policy and the general attitude towards immigrants and asylum-seekers might change again, and that the political climate and the state of war in which the country found itself, might have affected the atmosphere, both in the government and among the public, leading again to a stricter atmosphere. Throughout the process, my main conclusion was that my theory was corroborated: the current immigration policy was based on outdated decision-making, which had not been drastically improved over the years. Moreover, I could argue that since over the years, the governments of Israel had shifted more towards right wing of the political map, the attitudes towards immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers became less accepting in terms of living conditions and human rights. The different governments that ruled Israel over the past few decades did a lot to exacerbate the way in which immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers were being treated. This made them not only unwelcome but also perceived as threats to the population and to the Jewish identity of Israel. One should only remember the statement by Knesset member Miri Regev, who said in 2012 that "the Sudanese are a cancer in our bodies", to understand the atmosphere of hate and discrimination the different governments have spread over the years.

As a result of these discriminating attitudes, it was not surprising that the immigration policy was strict. It mainly focused on Jewish immigrants and empowered the Jewish population in Israel, making it difficult for non-

Jews to be integrated into the population. Non-Jewish immigrants faced hardships, being granted only temporary permits that required constant renewals. Hence, the immigrants encountered difficulties in finding decent jobs, providing for themselves and their families, and attaining stability.

As for work immigrants, the circumstances were somewhat better, but not much. They could come to Israel through international immigration agencies or through human resources contractors. Nevertheless, the second option was more common and less favorable for the immigrants, since they often suffered from unfair treatment, hard living conditions, nor were they granted all the rights stipulated by law.

6.2. Conceptual conclusions

The data gathered for this research allowed the emergence of a model of integration policy that can create change in Israeli society regarding the attitude toward immigrants. After collecting all the information, I defined guidelines of a model for a new immigration policy, taking into consideration all these issues. The new model suggested that all bodies responsible for bringing work immigrants should be regulated and constantly supervised, to guarantee proper treatment of the immigrants. Furthermore, the model suggested that the policy should not be subject to change by the government. It should rather be subject to external supervision by a non-governmental body, that will not formulate the policy based on political and personal beliefs, but on the needs of the immigrants and of the local population. Finally, the new model should act towards inclusion, acculturation, and integration of immigrants in their new surroundings, by education, needs adapted legislation, and the integration of community leaders in local politics, making sure to represent all these interests.

It is noteworthy that after October 7th, 2023, the issue of immigration was somewhat neglected, due to the fact that Israel was in the middle of a war, and the mind of the public and of the government was preoccupied by matters of war circumstances. However, this did not mean that we should have neglected this issue with reference to future legislation.

6.3. Implications and recommendations

The first implication was the understanding that the immigration policy was currently subject to constant change, and it was based on personal opinions and beliefs of the people in a position of power as part of the Israeli government. As a result, and considering the fact that Israel had five different election rounds between 2019 and 2022, there was no political stability in Israel in the past few years. Hence, the personal beliefs, opinions, and even agendas of political figures could impact the lives of immigrants living and working in Israel. As long as the power to impact the policy was in hands of the government, the immigrants in Israel would never feel safe

and they would live in fear of deportation or a change in policy which would worsen their lives here.

The second implication was the development of an integration policy, designed both to educate the local population about the immigrants, and to help the immigrants in being assimilated into the local population. This integration policy was derived from the understanding that one of the main issues which harmed the immigrants today, was the sense of fear and suspicion by the local population, reinforced by the government's negative attitudes the government towards immigrants and foreign workers in Israel.

By developing an integration program that would educate the local population about the history, cultures, and customs of immigrants living in Israel, the local population could stop being afraid of them and even find some common grounds with them. Furthermore, one of the findings obtained from the current research was people's belief that immigrants, mainly refugees, were not in serious danger in their home countries. Consequently, the local population believed that it was safe for immigrants to go back to their homeland, or to leave their family members there. By educating the Israeli public about the dangers which these people face in their origin countries, I believe that we could change people's attitudes towards them and, thus, they would be receptive and open to "foreigners" in Israel. This could be achieved especially when considering the fact that the Israeli people knew all too well the meaning of being persecuted for just being who you were.

Another implication of the current research should focus on public policy. Today, the public policy in Israel regarding immigrants considers them as a burden and a liability on society, public resources, as well as a threat to the national security and the Jewish identity of the country. This policy is obsolete and does not take into consideration the changes that have been made in the Israeli society over the past few decades. Immigrants from the former Soviet Union who came to Israel during the 1990s, were integrated successfully in the population and became prominent members of all aspects of society. The same could be done for immigrants currently living in Israel who came from countries such as Sudan and Eritrea. If given the chance to be integrated in all aspects of society, including the political aspect of society, the community would embrace them, unite them, and promote their interests. Moreover, successful immigrant political leaders could have positive and beneficial implications for the entire society.

Legislation is another area which could be affected by the current research. One of the findings was that the current legislation regarding immigrants in Israel is ineffective. This is due to the fact that it does not consider the lack of resources for the different governmental offices, causing

massive delays for immigrants who are waiting for various permits. Moreover, the current legislation restricts the possibility to work and provide for the immigrants' family, and often restricts freedom of movement, by incarceration and detention. This legislation is not in line with the international law and undermines the basic human rights of the immigrants. Addressing these issues by further legislation could improve their well-being and quality of life.

Furthermore, the current research can have an impact on the education system. The fact that many immigrants living in Israel have a family with children, is common knowledge. Another fact is that these children are admitted to the education system until they are 18 years old, under the Israeli Compulsory Education Law. In the education system, teachers and administrators do not necessarily know how to deal with them in terms of language, history, customs, and level of education. As a result, many of these children suffer from a certain degree of educational neglect, which needs to be corrected so that they have a chance to succeed later in life. In order for this to happen, an implication of the current research should be generation of changes to the education system in terms of training and education of teachers, enabling them to provide tools and proper education to the children.

As far as civil society is concerned, the implications of the current research could come into play with the civil education system which was proposed in the framework. By doing this, the Israeli society will be informed about the history and circumstances which have brought the refugees and immigrants to Israel. Thus, with time they could learn to accept them, stop fearing them, and allow them to be integrated into the Israeli society. This is also true for societal security. Today, the main source of fear and threat, whether it is real or not, is based on fear of the immigrants and their lack of connection to the Israeli society. Consequently, I believe that by changing this, the societal security will increase, and people will not be as scared of immigrants and "foreigners" as they are now.

Another implication that can be addressed at this point is related to the immigrants and refugees themselves. These people are currently living in a certain amount of fear and uncertainty. With the implementation of a new policy that aims to improve their legal and consequently, their social status, the immigrants and refugees living in Israel will become more confident and a more integrated part of the Israeli society. This could have positive implications for their personal sense of self-esteem and enhance their impact on the country's finances. When people feel they belong to a place, as if it is their home, they tend to spend more money domestically.

6.4. Contribution to theoretical knowledge

The current research yielded extensive knowledge about the situation of immigrants in Israel, and especially that of work immigrants. This knowledge could contribute to the existing theoretical knowledge since it had collected current and relevant information about the state of work immigrants in Israel. This information related to work conditions, the way they were brought to Israel, the rights the country and their employers granted them, as well as to the immigrants' duties vis-à-vis their employers and the country.

International relations have often dealt with the issue of work immigrants and immigration in general, especially over the past few years. This area is of vast interest to all parties involved, from decision-makers to the different public and private bodies which are responsible for coping with the immigrants' integration, employment, rights, and so on. The findings of the current research provide valuable information about the way immigrants should be treated, for the purpose of attaining a successful integration and satisfaction of all parties involved. Furthermore, the current research provides valuable information regarding mistakes that can be avoided by the decision-makers and local governments. These mistakes, difficult as they are, can provide insights into the possible damages caused by the insufficient consideration of immigrants' needs.

In the field of European studies, the current research can also provide valuable insights in terms of immigrants' rights and the way they should be treated by host countries. Since Europe has been dealing with change in the immigration demographics over the past few years, it becomes necessary to examine the existing conditions and possibly revise them. I believe that the current research can assist in this regard.

Political science is another field which can benefit from current research and its findings. Many of the problems which have been detailed in length in the literature review and Discussion chapters, have been directly or indirectly connected to political issues. This implies that politics can affect the climate, especially when considering the fact that the current research aims at developing a new immigration policy, which is usually the responsibility of political parties. Furthermore, societal security is a field which can benefit from the findings of current research. The presence of immigrants, especially in large numbers, can impact the societal security of any given society. This is true, especially if society treats them as threats, burdens, or a liability, instead of addressing their needs and rights and, thus, turning them into contributing members of the population.

Much of the information used by academics for the purpose of consolidating their arguments comes from theoretical knowledge and

empirical literature. Hence, the findings of the current research could be quite helpful in that respect.

6.5. Contribution to practical knowledge

The current research tried finding a clear explanation for existing condition of work immigrants, in terms of their entire immigration and work process. By interviewing work immigrants and getting first-hand knowledge, as well as talking to people involved in the decision-making process, the current research tried explaining how work immigrants were being treated, either through their perspective, or through that of the decision-makers. The purpose was to formulate and define some clear guidelines for a new internal policy that would deal with immigrants, and especially with work immigrants.

Moreover, by administering questionnaires to people who worked in the Israeli immigration control authority, the current research was able to collect information about the attitudes towards these immigrants. This information was important, as it helped in understanding the lacunas and the places in which the decision-makers need to make changes for improving the immigrants' lives and the integration process.

Local municipalities, such as that of Tel Aviv, have already exerted quite extensive efforts in order to integrate and inform the immigrants about their rights and obligations on both state and local level. However, when examining the perceptions of certain sectors that deal with the immigrants directly, such as civil servants, policemen and teachers, we can see that there is lack of education, training, and allocation of resources for these specific sectors. Hence, they need to fend for themselves, relying on their experience and often on their intuition, which inevitably leads to mistakes. As part of the purposed framework, I suggested a new examination of the allocation of resources and funds to manpower and professional training programs. This suggestion could be taken in consideration when examining the findings and conclusions of the current research and be used in order to train and fund the different professional sectors that work with immigrants.

6.6. Further research

As stated, the current research had some limitations, and by addressing them, future research could improve some of the problems which arose from them.

First, the current research performed content analysis of a variety of documents engaging in immigrants' work rights and duties. Moreover, documents regarding the rights and duties of employers were examined. However, the current research did not address any documentation regarding standards work contracts offered to work immigrants, or any written

documents about internal policy or immigration. Future research could seek more extensive documentation and explore the different policies, perhaps even compare different policies formulated over the years and the differences between them. Furthermore, since the issue of work contracts did not come up in the interviews, it would be important to address this issue in future research.

Second, the sample size for all the different parts of the research, albeit extensive, might not fully represent the specific population and its sentiment. Future research could interview a greater number of work immigrants, who lived in Israel for different periods of time, to compare the different views and attitudes towards the internal policy. Future research could also conduct more than one focus group and compare the results, to see if different people came to different conclusions about the lacunas in today's policy.

Third, the current research did not take into consideration the public in Israel as part of the research sample. This was due to the fact that the main research aim was to formulate a new policy, which required inside information and people who were directly related to the legislation process. However, combining the information collected by the current research with the information that could be collected from the Israeli public, could help in fine-tuning the suggestions for a new policy even more.

Fourth, the current research was mostly conducted before the events of October 7th, 2023. These events impacted and changed dramatically the atmosphere in Israel, whether by affecting our sense of security, or whether by affecting the way we perceived foreigners living in our country. Future research, which would probably be conducted after these events, would shed some light on the way these events had changed the perceptions and attitudes in Israel.

6.7. Importance of the research

The current research was important in a number of ways. First, it provided first-hand insights and information about the lives of work immigrants who live and work in Israel. This information was crucial for understanding the way the current policy impacted their lives.

Second, the current research offered an insight about people who had very high-level positions in the decision-making process in Israel. These people, much like the work immigrants, provided crucial insight about the process, which was not collected merely by academic information. Much like with the work immigrants, the conversation with these senior participants, provided important and first-hand information.

The questionnaires offered a unique perspective about the state of mind of people who are part of the immigration control process in Israel, which was also invaluable. This information, combined with the previously collected data, offered first-hand insights about immigration policy in Israel, the way the immigrants were being treated, their perspective of Israel, its people, culture and customs, and its attitude towards the immigrants. Furthermore, the current research did its best to examine the internal policy for work immigrants, in order to find the places where there were lacunas and suggest solutions for them.

Finally, the current research offers a new paradigm for immigration policy. This new policy, using all the information gathered along the way, takes into consideration all the existing and noticeable problems in the current immigration policy, and does its best to provide solutions, alternatives, and a new point of view, along with practical suggestions for course of action, for a successful integration and assimilation of work immigrants.

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Orizont Inclusive Education Center (C.S.E.I Orizont) – Integrated Analysis of Therapeutic, Logistical, and Management Services in Inclusive Education

Karla Barth¹ • Angela Marușca² • Marius Țepelea³

Abstract

This paper investigates the activity of the Orizont Inclusive Education School Center in Oradea, focusing on how the institution adapts the educational process to the individual needs of students with special educational requirements. The research combines interviews with teaching staff and therapists, observations during educational sessions, and analysis of institutional documents to paint a practical and realistic picture. The results show a working model centered on a multidisciplinary team, close collaboration with families, and the integration of therapeutic activities into the school routine. The study identifies good practices in personalizing the curriculum, using local resources, and facilitating the transition to social and vocational life. It also identifies major constraints: limited material resources, the need for ongoing staff training, and community barriers to inclusion. The conclusions offer concrete recommendations for strengthening institutional capacity, optimizing local partnerships, and long-term support policies aimed at improving the quality of life and educational opportunities of students served by CSEI Orizont.

Keywords

Inclusive education, CSEI Orizont, disabilities

1. Introduction

1.1. The context of special education in Romania

Special education in Romania has evolved from segregative models to inclusion-oriented policies, but progress has been uneven. Legislative reforms have created the framework for children with special educational

¹ PhD Professor at the University of Oradea, Department of Educational Sciences. PhD supervisor in the field of Educational Sciences, Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca. Dean of the Faculty of Social and Humanistic Sciences. E-mail: kbarth@uoradea.ro.

² Psycho-pedagogical teacher at the Orizont Inclusive Educational Center Oradea, associate professor PhD at the University of Oradea, Department of Educational Sciences. E-mail: cseiorizont.oradea@yahoo.com.

³ PhD Professor at the University of Oradea, Department of Theology. PhD supervisor in the field of Theology, University of Oradea. E-mail: mariustepelea@yahoo.com.

needs to access education, but implementation remains hampered by limited resources and insufficiently adapted infrastructure (Brie et al, 2021). The lack of therapeutic equipment and the small number of specialists (psychologists, speech therapists, physical therapists) affect the quality of interventions, especially in rural areas, as stated by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education — Romania Profile: "Romanian education faces major deficits in terms of specialized resources: many schools do not have adequate therapeutic equipment and there is a significant shortage of qualified staff to meet the needs of children with special educational needs." (EASNIE, 2025).

Success depends on well-trained multidisciplinary teams and parental involvement; school-family collaboration improves the relevance of individualized plans (Vrăsmaș&Vrăsmaș, 2019). Social stigma and community barriers hinder long-term integration and access to vocational opportunities. Although there are public programs and local initiatives that support inclusion, their implementation is fragmented and monitoring of results is limited (Walker, 2009). Targeted investments in vocational training, predictable funding, and local partnerships can increase the quality of services (Barth et al, 2019). Digitization and integrated models that combine education with therapies and preparation for independent living offer promising directions for improving students' transition to adulthood.

1.2. The importance of inclusive education centers

Inclusive education centers translate legislative principles into concrete interventions for students with special educational needs, acting as bridges between policy and practice. They provide complex psychopedagogical assessments carried out by multidisciplinary teams, offer integrated therapeutic interventions—speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and counseling—and develop individualized plans that personalize the learning process (Barth & Florescu, 2016). In addition, the centers provide training and support for teachers in inclusive schools and mediate collaboration with families and the community through counseling for parents and local partnerships (LIP 198/2023). For students, the benefits include increased access to adapted education, progress in social and independent living skills, and a better-prepared transition to vocational life: "Lack of access to quality inclusive education dramatically reduces children's chances of reaching their potential, learning essential life skills, and earning a living as adults." (UNICEF Romania, 2024)

At the system level, the centers strengthen local capacity to respond to diversity, facilitate the dissemination of good practices, and contribute to reducing social exclusion by involving community actors and local employers (Michailakis, Reich,2008). For the impact to be sustainable, the centers must be coherently integrated into the educational network and

supported by stable financial resources, specialized staff, and clear mechanisms for monitoring results.

1.3. Choosing CSEI Orizont as a case study

CSEI Orizont was selected because it provides a clear and replicable local example of how a regional school center manages the challenges of inclusion. Studying this case allows for the evaluation of both everyday practices (organisation, therapeutic interventions, individualised plans) and the link between these practices and the observable effects on students and families.

Among the reasons for choosing CSEI Orizont are:

- Representativeness: operates in a typical regional urban context for specialized services in Romania, allowing for cautious extrapolations to other similar centers.

- Innovation and best practices: centers that have integrated therapies into the school routine and have multidisciplinary teams provide useful examples for formulating practical recommendations.

- Visible local impact: the activities and projects carried out have measurable effects on students' access to education, socio-emotional skills, and vocational transition.

- Data accessibility: the existence of institutional documentation, the possibility of conducting interviews with staff, and the involvement of parents make the study methodologically feasible. In addition, one of the authors has been working there for over 28 years, also holding management positions at the center.

- Partnerships and network: local collaborations (NGOs, social services, employers) allow for an integrated analysis of the support model outside of school.

- Relevance to educational policies: the observations can provide concrete recommendations for decision-makers regarding resource allocation, specialist training, and monitoring mechanisms.

2. Research methodology

2.1. Type of research:

The study is qualitative, using a single case study design, exploratory and descriptive. The aim is to gain an in-depth understanding of institutional practices, the dynamics of multidisciplinary teams, and the perceptions of beneficiaries in the local context of CSEI Orizont.

2.2. Research objectives

The objectives of our research were: 1) to describe the institutional structures and resources available at CSEI Orizont; 2) to identify the pedagogical and therapeutic strategies used to personalize learning; 3) to

formulate recommendations for strengthening institutional capacity and improving inclusion practices

2.3. Participants and selection

- Groups included: teachers, therapists (psychologist, speech therapist, physical therapist), center management, parents, and activity observers (students anonymized in observations).
- Selection method: purposive sampling to include individuals with key roles; convenient selection for parents who were available and willing to be interviewed.

2.4. Tools used:

- Semi-structured interviews with a thematic guide focused on institutional organization, pedagogical practices, multidisciplinary collaboration, and challenges.
 - Direct observation of lessons and therapy sessions to capture routine practices, interactions, and pedagogical adaptations.
 - Documentary analysis of individualized plans, institutional reports, and program materials (anonymized).
 - Field journal in which impressions, contexts, and relevant examples were noted during observations.

2.5. Methodological limitations

The most important limitations we identified were:

- The small sample size and local nature of the study limit generalisation at national level.
- Possible reactivity effects during observations; minimisation measures include repeated observation and positioning the researcher as a non-intrusive observer.
- Dependence on documentation provided by the institution may introduce bias; this is compensated for by multiple data sources.

3. Integrated analysis of CSEI Orizont

3.1. Presentation of the institution

The Orizont Inclusive Education Center in Oradea is a regional institution dedicated to the education of children and young people with special educational needs, offering integrated assessment, therapeutic intervention, and pedagogical support services. The center's mission is to facilitate access to adapted education, develop students' functional and social skills, and support their transition to autonomy and social inclusion. CSEI Orizont operates through a multidisciplinary model: teams of specially trained teachers, psychologists, speech therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and counselors focused on developing individualized learning plans. Activities include adapted curriculum classes, therapeutic sessions

integrated into the school program, independent living skills workshops, and vocational training programs. Psycho-pedagogical assessments and progress monitoring are carried out continuously to adjust interventions.

The institution emphasizes cooperation with families and local partnerships: social services, NGOs, general education institutions, and economic agents that support internships and inclusion in the labor market. Resource centers and continuous staff training contribute to the dissemination of good practices in the region.

In terms of infrastructure, CSEI Orizont benefits from well-equipped therapy rooms, specialized offices, and facilities adapted to the needs of students, but periodically faces the need for additional resources for modern equipment and program expansion. The results observed include improvements in students' communication and social skills, increased participation in community activities, and progress in daily autonomy. The center's vision is to strengthen a regional network of inclusive educational support, expand community services, and increase impact through innovative projects and inter-institutional collaborations.

3.2. Human resources:

3.2.1. Students

Currently, 291 students with disabilities, aged 8–19, are enrolled at the Orizont Inclusive Education Center. Of these, 125 students are enrolled at the Orizont Inclusive Education School Center in Oradea, 61 students are enrolled in special classes operating within the Oradea Penitentiary, and 105 students are enrolled at the Tileagd Structure. The students are divided into 35 classes, of which 18 are primary education classes and 17 are secondary education classes. Of these, 22 classes operate at the "Orizont" Inclusive Education School Center in Oradea, of which: 19 are day classes (9 primary and 10 secondary) and 3 are part-time classes (2 primary and 1 secondary). There are 10 classes at the Tileagd facility (5 primary classes and 5 secondary classes). There are 3 classes at the Oradea Penitentiary (2 primary classes and 1 secondary class).

3.2.2. Teaching, auxiliary teaching, and non-teaching staff

During the 2024–2025 school year, the unit operated with 120.62 teaching positions and 118 employees, of whom 92 were permanent and 26 were substitutes; 118 teachers work directly with students with disabilities, providing specialized services. The staff carries out psycho-pedagogical assessments and early detection, develops personalized intervention programs, and offers integrated therapies (speech therapy, psychotherapy, behavioral therapy, interventions for autism syndrome, kinesitherapy/medical physical culture). Counseling is provided for students, parents, and teachers, as well as schooling and home-based therapies for students who are unable to

travel, and itinerant teachers support students in public schools. Teachers adapt the curriculum for students with mild and moderate mental disabilities and use modern information technologies and innovative teaching aids to increase the effectiveness of the teaching process. Through school and career guidance and counseling activities, the OSP commission ensured the enrollment of eighth-grade graduates in arts and crafts schools, supporting their continued education and professional integration.

The teaching staff at the Orizont Inclusive Education Center comprised 19.5 positions (19 people) and included: a social worker, a specialist doctor, two medical assistants, four nurses, a chief accountant, 1.5 financial administrators, a secretary, an asset manager, five extracurricular education instructors, and four night supervisors. The non-teaching staff numbered 29 positions (26 people) and consisted of three drivers, seven security guards, three maintenance workers, 6.5 cooks, four caregivers, one laundress/linen keeper, and one storekeeper. These teams provide the medical, administrative, logistical, and care support necessary for the operation and smooth running of the center's educational and therapeutic programs.

3.2.3. Managerial communication at school level:

All employees of the "Orizont" Inclusive Education School Center in Oradea form a coherent social group that develops a common sense of belonging and dynamic communication to achieve organizational goals: integration, education, recovery, and socialization of children with special educational needs. The working groups adhere to four fundamental characteristics: clear internal structure, relationships of belonging that support interpersonal actions, strong cohesion due to a common goal, and the development of a collective social identity. The organization builds a specific professional culture based on shared experiences, mutual support, and continuous adaptation, which generates internal dynamics and the possibility of forming functional subgroups. These subsystems are: management (directors and board of directors), the educational team (responsible for integration and interventions), the maintenance department (accounting, secretariat, social assistance), and the support group (administrator, caregivers, porters, cooks, workers). This functional structure ensures operational interdependence, continuity of services, and consistency in achieving the center's mission. Communicative interaction within the groups of the Orizont Inclusive Education Center not only strengthens the sense of belonging to the institution, but also generates collective norms regarding behavior, communication, and professional rituals. The organizational group is strong when its members have their motivations and needs satisfied and can freely exercise internal and external communication; effectiveness depends on working conditions that facilitate dialogue, cohesion, and accountability.

At the institutional level, an informal atmosphere, open communication, clearly defined tasks, active listening, mutual trust, conflict prevention through proactive approaches, frequent consensus in decision-making, freedom of expression, periodic evaluations, and constant contact between management and the team, based on empathy and enthusiasm, are promoted. The organizational culture of the educational center is based on shared values and practices that shape internal behavior and external relations, in compliance with the legislative framework and internal regulations. The director's control chart sets clear quality objectives: evaluating the implementation of the curriculum and extracurricular activities; monitoring and improving the quality of teaching and management; supporting and advising staff in achieving standards; correlating internal and external evaluations; evaluating educational offerings and professional skills; summarizing observations for educational policy proposals; publishing job vacancies in accordance with regulations.

3.3. Resources and support services for inclusive education

3.3.1. Psycho-pedagogical offices

The department of psycho-pedagogical teachers at CSEI "Orizont" Oradea, composed of 16 members, worked during the 2024–2025 school year in accordance with the framework theme "Modernizing special education through the use of new methods and creative means, with a view to preparing students for successful socio-professional adaptation and integration" and with the management plan approved at the beginning of the year. The department's activity focused on both optimizing teaching and therapeutic practices and strengthening the educational offer of the institution through applied curriculum design and personalized interventions. The department developed schedules and intervention plans tailored to the degree of disability and individual characteristics of the students, ensuring constant correlation between the planned and actual content. Activities were organized into individual and group modules, with periodic reassessments and replanning where the situation required changes, in order to maintain the relevance and effectiveness of therapeutic and educational interventions.

Compliance with the legislative framework and methodological guidelines in force was constant; all psychopedagogues studied and applied the documents of the Ministry of Education and Research regarding the conduct of activities in special education. The teaching plan was geared towards the practical nature of the special education curriculum, and the department actively contributed to the design of the institution's educational offer, integrating personal and professional development objectives for students.

The integration of information technologies was an important pillar: digital resources, educational applications, and multimedia materials were

used to increase student motivation, diversify therapeutic methods, and facilitate progress monitoring. The use of assistive technologies allowed for flexible adaptations of activities, differentiated recovery, and a clearer connection between the therapeutic approach and observable results.

There were also two special cases where online interventions were implemented using WhatsApp, Messenger, Google Classroom, Meet, and in the special case where access to technology was lacking, correspondence by mail. Online activities were designed according to teaching principles for the digital environment, including online assessment tools and support materials adapted for synchronous and asynchronous sessions.

The teaching activities combined open educational resources, worksheets, online educational games, videos, and interactive exercises, all tailored to the students' level of attainment and the socio-cultural context of the community. Psycho-pedagogues adapted the methodology to the specific needs of the students, ensuring consistency between curricular objectives, compensatory therapies, and extracurricular activities designed to stimulate social integration and autonomy.

The department's involvement in extracurricular activities and in designing the educational offer has strengthened the link between the therapeutic, educational, and community components of the center. Through these efforts, the Psychopedagogical Office has supported the implementation of reforms in special education, increased the effectiveness of interventions, and contributed to preparing students for social and professional integration.

3.3.2. Boarding school and cafeteria activities

The Orizont Inclusive Education Center in Oradea has a cafeteria at its main location (capacity 60 students), and the Tileagd facility has a boarding school and cafeteria (capacity 120 students). Students receive three meals a day, and at Tileagd they also receive two snacks in addition to the three meals. The boarding school offers accommodation in 22 dormitories and has 5 clubs, a medical office, an infirmary, and an isolation ward; it is staffed by 5 extracurricular education instructors, 4 night supervisors, medical staff, and caregivers. Funds for food and maintenance (heating, energy, cleaning supplies) are provided by the Bihor County Council. The instructors organize leisure activities and complementary educational programs (cultural, artistic, technical, sports, tourism, celebrations, auditions), and the boarding school runs weekly themed workshops tailored to the students' psychological and physical needs, age, and preferences. The activities aim to develop personal autonomy and socialization among children with special educational needs, in accordance with the specific nature of the institution and the plans approved by the management.

3.3.3. School library

In the 2024–2025 school year, the library and cultural activities of CSEI "Orizont" Oradea were carried out in accordance with library standards and internal record-keeping procedures, based on a calendar plan adapted to the structure of the year and the specific characteristics of the school. The library supported the education of students through close collaboration with teachers, providing resources for school activities and for broadening cultural horizons, setting up a training space for the use of information, and implementing pedagogical, cultural, and administrative planning tools. Information technology was integrated into the library's activities, with digital resources and ICT services being used in the design and implementation of educational activities.

Throughout the year, local and regional partnerships were developed with universities, libraries, NGOs, cultural institutions, and economic agents to improve educational offerings and attract sponsorships for equipping and modernizing the documentary collection. The library was involved in various educational projects and activities: local projects ("Internet Safety," "Talented and Special," "I'm Special—I'm Eco," etc.), regional and international projects, such as Erasmus KA229 "Together We Are Strong," and artistic competitions (the "May Flowers" Multicultural Festival, Regional Folklore Competition "The Birth of Christ – Christmas Gift").

In organizing these activities, collaboration was ensured with community representatives (local police, ISU, NGOs, church) and with partner schools in the country and the EU. The library facilitated the participation of students in cultural events, trainings, and exhibitions, as well as the publication and distribution of project materials.

Due to the lack of modern textbooks for special education, the internal committee inventoried the existing stock, scanned and duplicated the necessary textbooks, ensuring controlled distribution to classes and recovery at the end of the school year. At the same time, sponsorships were obtained to enrich the library's collections, with a constant focus on adapting resources to students' needs and supporting the educational process.

3.4. Main committees and their responsibilities:

3.4.1. Curriculum Committee

At the beginning of the 2024–2025 school year, the Curriculum Committee organized its activities by drawing up a management plan, a meeting schedule, and internal regulations, clarifying the responsibilities of its members. The main activities focused on analyzing the needs of students and school resources, conducting a SWOT analysis of previous offers, and designing a personalized and flexible educational offer in accordance with the national curriculum and methodologies for special education. The

committee ensured the implementation of the framework plans, verified the correlation of the timetable taking into account the students' effort curve and human resources, completed the documentation required by the Ministry of Education and the County School Inspectorate, and evaluated teaching performance by attending classes.

The curriculum was designed by adapting national programs to the specific characteristics of the students (age, type and degree of disability, ethnic diversity) and by complying with legal regulations regarding the curriculum at the school's discretion. Proposals for optional subjects were centralized by methodological committees in October–November 2024, and the choice of optional subjects involved consulting parents through meetings and sessions. Teachers designed calendars and personalized intervention plans (PIPs), structured around learning units and lessons, which were balanced but flexible enough to be adapted according to students' progress. The learning units promote a student-centered approach and include a variety of activities to cater to different learning styles and paces.

The curriculum was designed to comply with the planned schedule and to ensure interdisciplinary correlation of content, using teaching strategies appropriate to the specific characteristics of the school population and the type of disability. The assessment of results was planned (initial, ongoing, final), objective, and adapted using tools specific to each type of disability; grading and recording in school documents were carried out in accordance with the law, with at least two assessments recorded for each subject. The commission monitored attendance and absenteeism, identified the causes of failure, and proposed remedial measures within the class councils.

Extracurricular activities were designed and coordinated to align the school's offering with the management plan and student development, with internal and external dissemination of results and evidence of impact on participants and the community. Conclusion: rigorous planning, personalization, and monitoring of the curriculum were essential for ensuring the quality of the educational process at CSEI Orizont.

3.4.2. Commission for the prevention and elimination of violence, corruption, and discrimination in schools and the promotion of interculturalism

The Commission for the Prevention and Elimination of Violence, Corruption, and Discrimination and for the Promotion of Interculturalism was established at the beginning of the 2024–2025 school year and aims to create a safe and inclusive environment necessary for educational activities. Its composition and responsibilities were clearly established, and its interventions focused on preventing and managing forms of violence (verbal, physical, behaviors that fall under the law) and combating discrimination, as well as promoting respect and intercultural dialogue. The commission's

work included collecting data through questionnaires and interviews with students, parents, and teachers, analyzing the contexts in which violence occurs, and disseminating the results to the school community.

Information and debate sessions, prevention campaigns, thematic homeroom classes, lectures for parents, and individual and group counseling programs were organized, as well as the formation of operational teams (school psychologist, homeroom teachers, commission members, police representatives) for rapid intervention. Inter-institutional cooperation with the Community Police, Local Police, Gendarmerie, Mediation Center, ISU, and County Library facilitated the implementation of educational and operational activities. Attention was also paid to monitoring students with aggressive tendencies, developing sports activities as a positive alternative, identifying vulnerable students (e.g., those with parents abroad), and providing support to parents.

The measures implemented included recording incidents on approved forms, displaying regulations and action plans, integrating violence-related topics into school planning, and applying amicable conflict management strategies. Approximately 15 activities were planned and carried out annually (campaigns, creative competitions, training courses, information sessions), and the results and impact were monitored to adjust interventions. The main objective remains to prevent aggression, raise awareness of rights and responsibilities, and strengthen a safe school environment based on collaboration, responsibility, and inclusion.

3.4.3. CEAC Commission

The Commission for Evaluation and Quality Assurance (CEAC) of CSEI "Orizont" organized its activity based on project documents, developing a management plan, operational procedures, and an annual self-assessment report. The objectives were to improve institutional management, increase the quality of education, train staff, and develop partnerships. CEAC developed the internal evaluation strategy, applied and interpreted questionnaires for teachers, students, and parents (including on online learning), and drew up improvement plans based on the results. Following the ARACIP evaluation, the institution obtained a "Very Good" rating on 23 of 24 indicators and a "Good" rating for administrative spaces, identifying the need to optimize some classrooms. Activities included completing the RAEI electronically, monitoring teaching activities, evaluating academic progress, developing procedures, and holding regular support meetings for staff; extracurricular activities were evaluated based on their contribution to skills. Current tasks included managing evidence, drawing up the improvement plan and self-evaluation report, with monthly meetings; future directions aim to streamline management, improve academic results, expand partnerships, and strengthen the institution's image.

3.4.4. Other committees operating in the school:

Other committees also operate within CSEI Orizont, some on a temporary basis, others throughout the year. The committees ensure the governance and safety of the institution through financial and managerial monitoring, risk management, compliance with health and safety regulations, and the organization of emergency response, so that the school operates efficiently, compliantly, and safely. They also support educational continuity and success by monitoring absences and preventing dropouts, continuously evaluating the quality of teaching, and providing academic and career counseling and guidance for student integration and progress. These are: the Internal Management Control Committee (SCIM), the Occupational Health and Safety and Emergency Committee, the Committee for Monitoring Absences, Combating Absenteeism and School Dropout, the Internal Committee for Continuous Evaluation of CSEI "Orizont," and the School and Career Guidance Committee.

4. School and extracurricular educational projects and programs

4.1. Extracurricular and extracurricular activities

All activities carried out within the extracurricular activities committee were mainly aimed at increasing the prestige and quality of the educational institution through activities carried out with students, through partnerships with the local community and its representatives. A significant element worth mentioning is that the implementation of the management project has succeeded in achieving a balance between curricular and extracurricular activities. A totalitarian style of organization has been avoided, and practices that stimulate the initiatives of the members of the collective and the expression of opinions have been established. A constant effort was made to ensure that the school environment was a place where responsibility and decent behavior were demonstrated, including honesty, honor, the ability to keep promises, mutual respect, and tolerance for different opinions. Thus, the school's strategy aimed to improve the quality of education, which is absolutely necessary in the context of complex changes in family life, in the local community, within the community, and in the multicultural society in which globalization is increasingly present. The general orientation was towards high-quality education, which involved applying the diversity model through a differential approach, initiating projects involving all children, teachers, and educational partners (parents, community, civil society, media).

The teachers at CSEI "Orizont" Oradea want to involve their students in special activities. In October, the competitions included in the C.A.E.N. project activity calendar were confirmed: the "Flori de Mai" International Multicultural Festival, C.A.E.R., "Nașterea Domnului – Dar de Crăciun" (The

Birth of Christ – Christmas Gift), by submitting the competition rules to the Bihor County School Inspectorate.

4.2. Partnerships and project at national, county, and local levels

At the school level, we have established good cooperation with local authorities, economic agents, national and regional cultural institutions, churches, and other interested institutions in order to improve the adequacy of the school's educational offer with a view to implementing our own projects and programs.

Contracts have been concluded with various economic agents, NGOs, and other organizations, negotiating the most advantageous supply contracts, and we have tried to attract as many sponsors as possible to help us with materials to improve the teaching/educational process. Such collaboration contracts were concluded with: the University of Oradea, the County Library, the ACTA Center Association, the "Speranța" Association, the "George Toboșarul" Association, the "Stelele Bihorului" Cultural and Musical Association, and the companies DEME Macarale, VALFOREST, and GAD ASER Trans.

In October 2024, applications were submitted for the C.A.E.N. projects "May Flowers" and the C.A.E.R. projects "The Birth of Christ - A Christmas Gift."

Also, as part of the C.A.E.N. projects, the "Flori de Mai" International Multicultural Festival project was submitted. This festival was coordinated by the institution over a period of six months, from January to June 2025, with the main event taking place on May 22, 2025. The festival was attended by 32 artistic groups, 230 students (on stage) from institutions in Bihor, from the country and abroad, 19 artistic groups participated in the DVD section, coordinated by teachers from the country and abroad, and in the decorations section, works by children with SEN were exhibited, coordinated by teachers from 70 schools across the country and abroad. Through the joint efforts of the organising school, collaborators, partners and sponsors, all the children were rewarded for their work with many diplomas and gifts.

Local projects: "Life - Healthy eating and daily physical activity among students," "New horizons through sport," "Internet safety," "Together we will succeed," "Talented and special," "Give Meaning to Money," "Nature, a Wealth of Colors," "The Amateur Craftsman Following in the Footsteps of Tradition," "Decorative Art - Decorative Stained Glass - The Universe of Glass," "Friendship and Harmony," "Together Towards a New Horizon," "Little Picasso in Action," "I tell you stories so you can grow," "Together for our safety," "The joys of childhood, Summer School, Outdoor School," "Giving for giving... with a click," "Fighting violence together," "Colorful Emotions," "With Parents by Our Side," "Friendship—the Most Precious

Gift," "The Joys of Childhood," "My Place Under the Stars," "From the Special to the Most Special," "Earth—the Living Planet," "Special Children Love the Forest," "I am special—I am eco," "I am special, but also responsible," "The joy of living together," "Music through art and children's eyes," SNAC projects "I am with you," "By giving, you will receive" carried out their activities according to the schedule in the project application form.

4.3. International projects

Several educational projects were carried out in partnership with schools in the county and in EU countries, as well as with other institutions: local police, ANAD, ANITP, church, ISU Crișana, etc.

The school ran the Erasmus+ KA 220 project "Together We Are Stronger," identification number 2024-1-RO01-KA220-SCH-000251161, in partnership with educational institutions in Portugal, Poland, Croatia, and Turkiye.

5. SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100% qualified staff. • Existing interpersonal relationships (teacher-student, teacher-parent, teacher-teacher) create an open, stimulating educational environment. • A large number of teachers participate in continuing education and professional development courses through CCD, ISJ, and the University of Oradea. • Teachers and students are involved in various school partnership programs. • More active involvement of parents in the teaching, educational, and rehabilitation process; close collaboration with parents, accountability for learning, to correctly convey messages and work instructions; • The school has teaching plans, school programs, and curriculum aids (workbooks, guides, maps, methodological and assessment guides, videos, and educational software for various subjects). • Use of quality assurance tools in education; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient provision of supplementary teaching materials • The range of extracurricular activities on offer does not meet the needs of all students • Insufficient diversity of teaching staff skills in relation to student demands • Focus of activities on content rather than on students' learning needs • Some dysfunctions in the flow of information within the school (management – teaching staff, teachers – professors); • Lack of teachers – mentors at school level. • Some teachers still have a tendency to be conservative in how they organize and conduct lessons and in focusing activities on student needs. • Lack of effective support methods for all families; • Overburdening of parents; • Decline in the school population in general;

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renovation and refurbishment of school buildings and facilities • Management focused on implementing programs for the social and professional integration of students with special educational needs • Increasing the number of educational partnerships, specific programs, and projects concluded with other schools; • Large number of projects completed and ongoing; • Increasing the number of educational partnerships, specific programs, and projects concluded with other educational institutions 	
<p>OPPORTUNITIES</p>	<p>THREATS</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • C.D.S. offers the opportunity to satisfy the desire for information and knowledge in various areas highlighted by the media • C.D.S. helps reduce school absenteeism and contributes to the development of intrinsic motivation for learning and academic achievement, allowing individual skills to be capitalized on. • Online courses for the use of technologies in distance learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased student motivation to learn • Insufficient funds for purchasing high-performance teaching materials (video projectors, SMART boards, copiers) • Increasing trend in juvenile delinquency;

6. Conclusions

The recovery of students with special educational needs is a priority for the institution. Specialised interventions are carried out by a team of psycho-pedagogical teachers, speech therapists, physiotherapists, psychologists and educators, who work both in classrooms and in specialised rooms (speech therapy, physiotherapy, sensory education, play therapy, psychomotor therapy, etc.). Through adapted programs and repeated exercises, the aim is to develop the fundamental skills and abilities necessary for everyday life and the socio-professional integration of students.

The unit ensures the timely preparation of thematic and special reports requested by the Bihor County Council and manages the archiving and storage of official financial documents. The material base of the "Orizont" Inclusive Education School Center in Oradea is modern, the result of financial and technical support from the Bihor County School Inspectorate

and the Bihor County Council, as well as the involvement of the institution's management and staff.

In order to streamline management at the Tileagd facility, it is proposed that the boarding school be relocated to Oradea, close to the centre's headquarters, and that the students be transferred to this location. The relocation would reduce staff commuting expenses, allow for more frequent supervision and verification of the activities of teaching and auxiliary staff, and improve the quality of management by eliminating continuous travel.

Teaching and support staff are sent on training courses to improve the design and delivery of teaching and learning activities and to learn how to use educational applications. However, the high costs of these programs and limited budgetary resources affect the frequency and scope of training, with the institution only occasionally managing to cover the full cost of participation fees for teaching qualifications and degrees.

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The Druze Minority in the Middle East: Religion, Community Structure, and Policy in Minority–State Relations in Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan

Imad Abu Reesh¹

Abstract

This paper examines the Druze minority across Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan, linking their eleventh-century theological origins (tawḥīd, reason/knowledge, metempsychosis) to kinship-centered institutions that sustain resilience and adaptation. Using multiculturalism and legal pluralism as analytic lenses, it shows how layered identities and overlapping religious–state jurisdictions generate both opportunity and vulnerability. Comparative analysis maps community “types,” governance logics (consociational, security-centered, local substitution), and region-wide trends in education, mobility, and fertility that reshape cohesion and incorporation. Policy recommendations emphasize voice and structured consultation, intercultural education, targeted educational–economic empowerment, and acknowledgment of historical grievances to build trust and parity. The study notes limits of secondary data and urges micro-institutional and longitudinal research to refine durable, rights-consistent minority–state frameworks for the Druze in the Levant.

Keywords

Druze minority; Legal pluralism; Multiculturalism; Minority–state relations; Middle East

1. Introduction

The Druze religious tradition emerged in the early eleventh century in the Levant, amid the Fatimid era’s intellectual ferment, as an offshoot of Ismailism that synthesized Gnostic and Neoplatonic currents into an esoteric doctrinal corpus centered on *tawḥīd* (divine unity), the primacy of reason and knowledge, and metempsychosis (reincarnation) (Al-Dajah &

¹ Judge Dr. Imad Abu Reesh. Appointed as Judge/Kadi in court of appeal from 2017; Appointed as a Judge/Kadi in the Druze Religious Court (2012); 1976-1997-Treasurer at the local council in Yarka Israel; 1997- Chief Secretary to the Druze Religious courts in Israel; BA in law from Netanya College Israel (2014); - LLM degree from Netanya College Israel (2027); PhD in the field of International Relations and European Studies, Babes-Bolyai University from Cluj-Napoca (2025). Yarka Village (Israel). Email: imad120@walla.co.il.

Alshalabi, 2020; Abu Reesh, 2025). The figure of al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh is treated in Druze sources as an epiphany of divine wisdom, while communal organization has historically distinguished between the *‘uqqāl* (initiates) and the *juhāl* (non-initiates), with *majlis* gatherings serving simultaneously as loci of worship, study, and social cohesion (Abu Reesh, 2025; Faraj-Falah & Maman, 2019). Periods of persecution and intercommunal tension forged a resilient group identity but also required continual doctrinal and institutional adaptation in encounters with state policy and multi-religious environments (Johnson & Zeedan, 2024; Kisthardt, 2013).

Modern political upheavals—colonial and post-colonial nationalisms, civil wars, and shifting sovereignty—have further catalyzed Druze identity work, compelling recalibration between religious commitment, national belonging, and communal structures (Abu Reesh, 2025; Ganley, 2012). Consequently, Druze communities in Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and Syria exhibit a persistent synthesis: preservation of core commitments—*tawḥīd*, an ethic of service, and guarded transmission of esoteric knowledge—alongside pragmatic accommodation to state pressures and multicultural orders (Faraj-Falah & Maman, 2019; Falah, 2017).

This study situates the Druze within a comparative, policy-sensitive frame that links theological history to institutional dynamics, explaining both the community’s durability and its variable patterns of incorporation or boundary maintenance across distinct state contexts. In doing so, it underscores the need for historically attuned, identity-responsive approaches to minority–state relations in the Druze case (Abu Reesh, 2025; Hazran et al., 2024; Faraj Falah, 2023).

2. Social structure, demography, and regional distribution

The Druze social field is best read as an ongoing negotiation between inherited communal forms and the pressures of modernization and state policy. Its organizational core, dense kinship, reciprocal support, and high social capital-sustains religious-cultural identity and routine community life amid political and security shocks (Al-Dajah & Alshalabi, 2020; Faraj-Falah & Maman, 2019). Crucially, the Druze are heterogeneous: localized “community types” (rural/mountainous vs. urbanizing; frontier vs. historic cores) yield variation in family organization, institutional participation, and membership thresholds—variation that functions as an adaptive resource for bargaining with the state and shielding communal agency (Abu Reesh, 2025; Faraj-Falah & Maman, 2019; Falah, 2018). Under “liquid sovereignty,” notably in Syria, displaced youth renegotiate norms of belonging; in Israel, identity work oscillates between incorporation and perceived marginality, conditioned by welfare, employment, education, and questions of loyalty and

belonging (Mason & Khawlie, 2016; Teja, 2019; Johnson & Zeedan, 2024; Rowe, 2018).

Kinship remains the backbone across Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan, but governance logics differ: consociationalism structures visibility (and dependency) in Lebanon; local repertoires substitute for weakened state functions in Jabal al-Druze; and military–civic incorporation in Israel coexists with spatial–socioeconomic gaps (Falah, 2018; Johnson & Zeedan, 2024; Al-Dajah & Alshalabi, 2020). Region-wide trends, fertility decline, intensified mobility, and rising education, both expand capacities and strain traditional solidarities; education operates as a mobility engine and civic asset, yet requires policies that preserve social capital and address regional disparities (Faraj Falah, 2023; Kheir, 2024; Winckler, 2024; Zeedan & Luce, 2021; Kisthardt, 2013; Hazran et al., 2024). Overall, Druze actors balance kinship-based traditions with state rule-sets, while education and mobility, anchored in maintained social capital, can convert vulnerability into effective incorporation (Abu Reesh, 2025; Faraj-Falah & Maman, 2019).

3. Analytical/theoretical frameworks

Druze-state relations are best interpreted through a composite lens of multiculturalism, legal pluralism, and the integration–exclusion axis. Multiculturalism supplies a normative basis for affirming minority rights as positive recognitions of cultural distinctiveness and layered identities, especially pertinent in confessionalized orders such as Lebanon and in Israel, while urging policy designs responsive to Druze priorities (Abu Reesh, 2025; Al-Dajah & Alshalabi, 2020; Chukov, 2024).

Legal pluralism, in turn, clarifies how religious and state legal orders co-exist, interact, and sometimes collide, revealing both vulnerabilities and adaptive capacities as Druze actors navigate overlapping jurisdictions; it functions as a diagnostic and navigational tool for preserving communal institutions while engaging state law (Abu Reesh, 2025; Al-Dajah & Alshalabi, 2020; Dahrouge, 2023). Empirically, the implications diverge cross-nationally: protests over Israel’s Basic Law (Nation-State) reflect perceived status erosion among Druze citizens, whereas Lebanon’s consociational settlement embeds confessional jurisdictions in constitutional arrangements (Abu Reesh, 2025; Miles, 2021).

Read along the integration–exclusion spectrum, power appears pendular: incorporation into national institutions coexists with marginalizing pressures, underscoring the centrality of trust grounded in clear rules and legitimate expectations, and highlighting advocacy/civic repertoires that safeguard identity under stress (Faraj-Falah & Maman, 2019). Comparative perspectives, vis-à-vis Kurds or Christians-sharpen

convergence/divergence in autonomy and incorporation, pointing to context-sensitive policy (Johnson & Zeedan, 2024). Future research should trace intersections of Druze identity with shifting geopolitical currents and policy realignments that strengthen or erode communal resilience (Kisthardt, 2013; Hazran et al., 2024), thereby refining a robust framework for Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan (Firro, 1992).

4. Policy in minority – state relations in Syria

Syria's Druze exemplify the contingencies of minority–state relations in a layered regional order. Periods of calibrated tolerance have enabled tactical collaboration with state authorities, securing access to governance and resources, while waves of unrest have stress-tested that cooperation, prompting recalibrated survival strategies and renewed claims to communal autonomy (Johnson & Zeedan, 2024; Al-Dajah & Alshalabi, 2020; Faraj-Falah, 2022). State “management” of sects blends bureaucracy with selective enforcement, producing a duality in which communal particularism coexists with pressures to reproduce dominant national narratives; legislative responses to regional shocks (e.g., the Arab uprisings) have repeatedly reconfigured the Druze–state interface (Faraj-Falah & Maman, 2019; Falah, 2017; Mabon, 2020). In such multi-religious settings, policy powerfully redistributes authority; historical alliances and rivalries shape administrative reactions, sometimes privileging one group over another. Druze actors therefore cultivate pragmatic repertoires that balance civic loyalty with religious–cultural preservation in a mosaic that continually reshapes the minority–state nexus (Kisthardt, 2013; Hazran et al., 2024).

A. Historical relations:

From Fatimid origins, Druze engagements with states oscillated between accommodation and confrontation—local self-rule in mountain districts, resistance to Ottoman authority, tactical alignments under the French Mandate—while seeking to preserve doctrinal integrity (Hazran et al., 2024; Al-Dajah & Alshalabi, 2020). The 20th century recast the landscape: Lebanese independence and consociationalism amplified Druze voice; Ba'athist Syria sought a unitary civic narrative that integrated minorities, including the Druze; in Israel, post-1948 military service and citizenship fashioned a distinctive idiom of inclusion—yet raised questions of identity and internal contestation (Harris et al., 2011; Johnson & Zeedan, 2024).

B. Current challenges:

Civil war in Syria has produced violence and displacement in Druze localities; Lebanon's consociationalism equilibrium is strained by economic crisis; and across settings, sectarian cleavages, globalization, and modernization amplify anxieties over cultural dilution and intergenerational cohesion (Al-Dajah & Alshalabi, 2020; Johnson & Zeedan, 2024; Kisthardt,

2013). Friction at the interface of personal-status norms and secular codes persists (Hazran et al., 2024). In Israel, notable incorporation coexists with paradoxical positionality, “loyal citizens,” yet a distinct minority, requiring continued advocacy for recognition and trust-building reforms (Abu Reesh, 2025; Beaujouan & Rasheed, 2019).

C. Policy implications:

A context-sensitive agenda should: (1) enhance representation and structured consultation with Druze leadership; (2) expand intercultural education on Druze religion and culture; (3) prioritize economic empowerment via quality education, vocational training, and public–private job creation; and (4) address historical grievances through acknowledgement and joint memorialization (Al-Dajah & Alshalabi, 2020; Johnson & Zeedan, 2024; Kisthardt, 2013). Grounded in multiculturalism and legal pluralism, these steps—voice, empowerment, and historical reckoning, reinforce equitable, inclusive minority–state relations and contribute to regional stability (Hazran et al., 2024).

5. Policy in minority–state relations in Lebanon

The Druze trajectory in Lebanon is shaped by intersecting historical, social, and cultural forces within a consociationalism architecture that simultaneously enables representation and constrains minoritarian agency. Civil-war legacies and fluctuating state capacity have produced cyclical shifts in policy toward the Druze, compelling calibrated pragmatism: elites engage formal institutions while safeguarding communal distinctiveness and cultivating strategic alliances to enhance bargaining power (Johnson & Zeedan, 2024; Kisthardt, 2013; Al-Dajah & Alshalabi, 2020). This adaptive repertoire unfolds in a dense confessional matrix that can obscure minority needs; the enduring policy challenge is to advance communal interests without diluting a distinctive Druze identity. Regional turbulence, especially spillovers from Syria and tensions with Israel, intensifies volatility, rendering “liquid sovereignty” a salient descriptor of shifting state authority and raising pointed questions of legitimacy toward minorities (Mason & Khawlie, 2016; Kastrinou, 2014; Hazran et al., 2024).

A. Consociationalism:

In Lebanon, institutionalized power-sharing embeds Druze representation in the confessional order, normatively designed to prevent majority domination and incentivize inter-sect cooperation; in practice, it may entrench communal boundaries and attenuate cross-confessional national identity (Rosiny, 2013). Cross-national contrasts are instructive: in Israel, Druze incorporation (military service, local executive roles) operates within state structures but is refracted through Arab–Jewish relations; proposals to “export” Taif-like formulas to conflict settings (e.g., Syria) reveal

the difficulty of transplanting consociational logics across contexts, whereas Jordan's steadier approach couples practical governance with identity respect (Johnson & Zeedan, 2024).

B. Political identity:

Druze political identity is dynamic, locally differentiated, and molded by institutional environments. In Lebanon it is closely tied to consociationalism, with shared cultural symbols (e.g., narratives of perseverance) reinforcing cohesion and strategic agility; in Syria, cycles of inclusion and repression demand continual calibration between cultural safeguarding and civic loyalty; in Israel, service-based incorporation coexists with negotiations over religious-cultural separateness. Gendered and generational change—especially women's expanded roles and youth mobilization via education—recasts leadership and representation (Johnson et al., 2024; Tørhaug, 2004; Al-Dajah & Alshalabi, 2020).

C. Community responses:

The Druze deploy a pragmatic toolkit across political, economic, and cultural domains. In Lebanon, deft use of power-sharing mechanisms sustains representation; in Israel, education-driven mobility correlates with higher civic satisfaction, illustrating adaptive pathways that improve individual and collective outcomes; across settings, “differentiated non-assimilation” preserves identity while leveraging state-sponsored cultural initiatives to strengthen institutions and solidarity (Al-Dajah & Alshalabi, 2020; Van Praag et al.; 2010; Faraj-Falah & Maman, 2019; Kheir, 2024; Kisthardt, 2013). The cumulative policy lesson is clear: minority-responsive designs that institutionalize voice, protect distinctiveness, and enable equitable participation are pivotal to Druze-state relations and to Lebanon's broader stability (Hazran et al., 2024; Faraj Falah, 2023).

6. Policy in minority-state relations in Israel

Druze-state relations in Israel are marked by a distinctive incorporation trajectory rooted in a historical partnership, especially sustained military and public-sector service, that confers institutional access while embedding the community within a security-centered civic paradigm. This pathway generates recurrent tensions between communal-religious belonging and national citizenship; loyalty-building policies have reshaped intracommunal cohesion and representation, sharpening debates over cultural preservation within a democratic order (Abu Reesh, 2025; Al-Dajah & Alshalabi, 2020; Faraj-Falah, 2022). Situated within broader frames of multicultural recognition and legal pluralism, Druze rights remain uneven in practice—across resource allocation, land-recognition, and political participation—revealing persistent structural inequalities and the collision of citizenship with ethno-religious identity (Faraj-Falah & Maman,

2019; Johnson & Zeedan, 2024; Kisthardt, 2013). Internal heterogeneity and regional volatility further drive policy oscillations between inclusion and exclusion, underscoring the need for strategies that treat communal distinctiveness as a civic asset and deepen belonging through dialogue- and recognition-oriented policy (Abu Reesh, 2025; Hazran et al., 2024; Faraj Falah, 2023; Kheir, 2024; Faraj Falah, 2018).

A. Integration: participation in society and the military:

IDF service has long expressed civic allegiance and facilitated mobility, expanding access to higher education and professional employment while consolidating a differentiated Druze identity distinct from other Arab citizens (Al-Dajah & Alshalabi, 2020; Faraj-Falah, 2022). Yet integration raises difficult questions, cultural-religious accommodation in a predominantly Jewish polity, distributive parity, and public standing. Cohesion anchored in kinship and solidaristic norms undergirds effective engagement with state institutions; local leadership structures mediate rights-claims and heritage protection. Youth-focused educational initiatives illustrate careful navigation between modernity and religious-cultural specificity. Still, loyalty expectations, shaped by male conscription, are unevenly experienced, catalyzing debates over service as a vehicle of cohesion versus personal and communal autonomy. Incidents of discrimination and unequal opportunity indicate that struggles for full recognition persist even under comparatively inclusive regimes (Abu Reesh, 2025; Faraj-Falah & Maman, 2019; Johnson & Zeedan, 2024; Kisthardt, 2013; Hazran et al., 2024; Faraj Falah, 2023; Kheir, 2024; Firro, 1992).

B. Identity complexities: navigating multiple affiliations:

Druze practice yields a multilayered identity—religious, ethnic, national—whose balance shifts across rural-mountainous and urbanizing contexts and across Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan. In Lebanon, consociationalism tightens the coupling of religious identity and political representation; in Israel, formal recognition does not insulate from nationalist frictions and civic discipline. The result is recurrent re-articulation of identity and a spectrum of internal responses (cooperation ↔ contestation), while robust participation in education, labor markets, and public service sustains a complex yet durable identity further shaped by diaspora and cross-cultural ties (Abu Reesh, 2025; Al-Dajah & Alshalabi, 2020; Faraj-Falah & Maman, 2019; Johnson & Zeedan, 2024; Kisthardt, 2013; Firro, 1992).

C. Policy implications: enhancing rights and belonging:

A coherent program should: (1) deepen legal pluralism via clear coordination between religious and state law, respecting identity while clarifying personal-status competencies, and ensure equal access to forums and land/property enforcement (Abu Reesh, 2025; Johnson & Zeedan,

2024); (2) promote inter-state cooperation on minority protections (regional complaint mechanisms, structured dialogue) so Druze perspectives are not eclipsed in national priority-setting (Abu Reesh, 2025; Mahmoud & Rosiny, 2015); (3) invest in targeted educational–economic empowerment (scholarships, vocational training, employment incentives) to address labor-market gaps and strengthen mobility (Al-Dajah & Alshalabi, 2020); (4) expand intercommunal dialogue—curricula foregrounding Druze history/culture and exchange programs, to reduce stereotyping and widen civic consensus (Faraj-Falah, 2022; Faraj-Falah & Maman, 2019); and (5) institutionalize sustained Druze participation in decision-making pipelines to improve transparency, policy efficacy, and shared ownership (Abu Reesh, 2025; Teja, 2019).

7. Policy in minority–state relations in Jordan

Minority–state relations in Jordan, as reflected in the Druze case, hinge on how public policy structures everyday life and socio-economic standing. A historically small minority, the Druze have cultivated a distinctive identity woven into Jordan’s national fabric; civic loyalty has yielded a mixed pattern of political engagement alongside social constraints, typical of minorities that continually negotiate the boundary between incorporation and marginalization (Al-Dajah & Alshalabi, 2020; Quntar, 2016). While the state has promoted cohesion, parts of the community remain wary that rapid, state-led development could erode cultural distinctiveness (Timani, 2021; Quntar, 2016).

Governance dynamics are fine-grained: limited self-administration exists, yet state authority ultimately prevails, underscoring the premium on minority inclusion for regime stability. “Inclusionary” narratives that celebrate Druze loyalty can, paradoxically, narrow communal autonomy. The policy task is therefore twofold: recognize minority specificity while deepening participation; and close gaps between legislative aspiration and implementation through more equitable frameworks (Johnson & Zeedan, 2024; Kisthardt, 2013; Hazran et al., 2024; Quntar, 2016).

A. Stability:

Druze settlement, especially in Ajloun and Karak, has long contributed to national stability. Core values of loyalty and solidarity align with Jordan’s state ethos and gain salience amid regional turbulence (Syria’s war; the Israeli–Palestinian conflict). Military and public service exemplify the community’s stabilizing role, while adaptation without surrendering religious distinctiveness demonstrates resilience and political agency. Patronage-linked representation and civil-society engagement have reduced grievances and reinforced cohesion; recent refugee inflows and shifting alignments complicate policy, yet Druze cross-community ties, education,

and local economic initiatives continue to bolster both communal welfare and the national interest (Al-Dajah & Alshalabi, Johnson & Zeedan, 2024; Timani, 2021; Quntar, 2016; Kisthardt, 2013).

B. Representation:

Regionally, Druze political participation is historically contingent and community-embedded. In Lebanon, civil-war mobilization generated distinctive political awareness (Zeedan & Luce, 2021); in Israel and Jordan, divergent opportunity structures highlight incorporation versus stability narratives (Skorokhod, 2023). In Syria's fluid arena, proliferating non-state actors and foreign intervention have compelled strategic recalibration, with legal pluralism and multicultural practice enabling rights-based advocacy and heightened visibility (Timani, 2021; Quntar, 2016; Amrani, 2010). These variations show how Druze communities shape, and are shaped by, political environments.

C. Future scenarios:

Coming trajectories will reflect demographic change, youth aspirations, and regional shifts. In Lebanon and Israel, factionalism and policy realignments may either fragment or consolidate Druze cohesion; in Jordan and Syria, economic dislocations and geopolitical pressures could spur more assertive advocacy and novel coalitions (Timani, 2021; Al-Dajah & Alshalabi, 2020; Quntar, 2016). International norms on minority rights and state integrity present both constraints and openings; accordingly, sustained monitoring and systematic analysis are essential for anticipating Druze-state dynamics in Jordan's complex socio-political environment (Quntar, 2016; Dostal, 2015; Groenewold et al., 2012).

Summary and conclusions

This study has traced how the Druze community's historical-theological formation, kinship-centered social organization, and contemporary policy interfaces co-produce a durable yet adaptive minority across Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan. Originating in the early eleventh century from an Ismaili matrix that blended Gnostic and Neoplatonic strands around *tawḥīd*, the primacy of reason/knowledge, and metempsychosis, the Druze formed a dual communal structure ('uqqāl/juhhāl) anchored in *majlis* as sites of worship, learning, and cohesion (Al-Dajah & Alshalabi, 2020; Abu Reesh, 2025; Faraj-Falah & Maman, 2019). Recurrent persecution and intercommunal tensions forged resilience but also required doctrinal and institutional recalibration in response to state policy and plural religious environments (Johnson & Zeedan, 2024; Kisthardt, 2013). In the modern era, nationalist projects, civil wars, and shifting sovereignties intensified identity work, yielding a persistent synthesis: preservation of core commitments alongside pragmatic

accommodation to state orders (Abu Reesh, 2025; Ganley, 2012; Faraj-Falah & Maman, 2019; Falah, 2017).

The main findings converge on three points. First, Druze social life operates as an ongoing negotiation between kinship-based institutions and the pressures of modernization and administrative rule. Dense kinship, mutual aid, and high social capital sustain routine life under political shocks, while localized “community types” (rural/mountainous vs. urbanizing; frontier vs. historic cores) function as adaptive resources in bargaining with the state (Al-Dajah & Alshalabi, 2020; Faraj-Falah & Maman, 2019; Falah, 2018). Under “liquid sovereignty,” notably in parts of Syria, youth renegotiate norms of belonging; in Israel, identity work oscillates between incorporation and perceived marginality along welfare, labor, and education gradients (Mason & Khawlie, 2016; Teja, 2019; Johnson & Zeedan, 2024; Rowe, 2018). Second, multiculturalism and legal pluralism provide the most informative analytical lenses: multiculturalism legitimates affirmative recognition of layered identities; legal pluralism clarifies the co-existence—and collisions—of religious and state regimes, as seen in protest over Israel’s Nation-State Basic Law versus Lebanon’s embedded confessional jurisdictions (Chukov, 2024; Dahrouge, 2023; Miles, 2021). Third, read along the integration–exclusion axis, Druze incorporation often coexists with marginalizing pressures, underscoring the centrality of trust, clear rules, and legitimate expectations, and the importance of advocacy/civic repertoires that safeguard identity under stress (Faraj-Falah & Maman, 2019).

From these findings, the study concludes that historically attuned, identity-responsive policy is indispensable. Inclusive designs that institutionalize voice and structured consultation with Druze leadership, expand intercultural education, invest in targeted educational–economic mobility, and acknowledge historical grievances are most likely to yield equitable, stable relations (Johnson & Zeedan, 2024; Hazran et al., 2024; Kisthardt, 2013). Crucially, education and mobility can convert vulnerability into effective incorporation only when social capital is maintained and regional disparities are addressed (Faraj Falah, 2023; Kheir, 2024; Winckler, 2024; Zeedan & Luce, 2021).

The analysis faces limitations. Reliance on secondary sources with uneven country coverage and variable methodological rigor, restricted access to micro-level administrative data (e.g., land allocation, benefit distribution, or court outcomes), and the rapid evolution of conflict settings—especially in Syria—constrain causal inference and temporal generalizability (Kisthardt, 2013; Johnson & Zeedan, 2024). Intra-communal variation by gender, class, and locality is recognized but not fully disaggregated.

Future research should therefore pursue (a) micro-institutional studies linking personal-status adjudication, local governance, and household welfare under legal pluralism (Dahrouge, 2023); (b) longitudinal panels on education-to-employment pathways and social-capital dynamics in Druze localities (Winckler, 2024; Zeedan & Luce, 2021); (c) comparative evaluations of trust-building instruments—consultative councils, complaint mechanisms—and their equity impacts across the four polities (Johnson & Zeedan, 2024; Hazran et al., 2024); and (d) gendered and youth civic repertoires under “liquid sovereignty,” including diaspora linkages and cross-border networks (Kheir, 2024; Teja, 2019). Advancing along these lines can refine policy frameworks that translate Druze adaptive capacity and communal cohesion into durable, rights-consistent minority–state relations across the Levant.

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Local Leadership and Collective Action for Inclusive Development: Enhancing Governance and Branding in Oradea

Luminița Șoproni¹

Abstract

In contemporary urban development, good governance – characterized by responsibility, transparency, inclusivity, and responsiveness – and effective city branding are fundamentally interconnected. As cities navigate an increasingly competitive global landscape, distinguishing themselves to attract investments, tourists, and a skilled workforce has become essential. This branding process is no longer just a top-down marketing effort, requiring profound engagement with local stakeholders to ensure authenticity and relevance.

Oradea, a city located in northwestern Romania, exemplifies how participatory governance and community-driven branding can mutually reinforce one another while promoting socio-economic inclusion. Through active engagement in urban planning, policy-making, and promotional initiatives, local actors harness Oradea's historical, cultural, and socio-economic assets to shape a brand with both national and European appeal. This inclusive approach fosters civic pride and strengthens the legitimacy of governance structures, resulting in a city identity that authentically reflects its community's values.

Oradea's experience illustrates that involving residents and local organizations in governance and branding not only cultivates trust and pride but also empowers cities to strategically position themselves on broader regional and international stages with an authentic, community-rooted identity that reflects their diverse population and shared aspirations.

Keywords

Governance, branding, urban development, socio-economic inclusion.

1. Introduction. Leadership, identity and urban evolution

In the age of decentralized governance and global visibility, cities must navigate not only administrative challenges but also the complexities of creating an authentic and engaging urban identity. Two interlinked concepts – local governance and urban branding – have become pivotal for cities

¹ Senior lecturer Ph.D., Department of International Relations and European Studies, University of Oradea, Romania, E-mail: lumivoicu@yahoo.com.

aiming to enhance institutional effectiveness and project a distinctive image on the national and international stage.

Local governance refers to the structures, processes, and relationships through which local authorities interact with stakeholders, make decisions, and shape policy. It encompasses both the formal institutions of government and the informal mechanisms of collective action, civic participation, and leadership. Meanwhile, urban branding is the strategic construction and communication of a city's identity – its culture, infrastructure, values, and aspirations – with the aim of drawing investment, encouraging tourism, and fostering a strong sense of community belonging.

In this evolving landscape, socio-economic inclusion emerges as a critical dimension that binds governance and branding to the lived realities of urban populations. An inclusive city is characterized by its commitment to guaranteeing that all inhabitants – irrespective of socioeconomic background, educational level, ethnicity, religion, or physical and cognitive abilities – are both facilitated and empowered to actively participate in the social, economic, and political dimensions of urban life (United Nations Habitat, 2022). When urban centers prioritize inclusion, they not only address systemic disparities but also harness the full potential of their human resources, thereby promoting innovation, resilience, and social cohesion.

Inclusive growth seeks to improve both wealth and living standards, while simultaneously diminishing poverty, advancing equity for future generations, and safeguarding economic freedoms. (Agarwal, 2025). By integrating inclusive practices into both governance structures and branding strategies, cities can cultivate identities that resonate broadly across diverse communities. This approach transforms urban branding from a promotional exercise into a participatory narrative. In doing so, cities strengthen their legitimacy, deepen civic trust, and position themselves as models of equitable and sustainable development in the global arena.

In Romania, the city of Oradea has become a noteworthy example illustrating the convergence of these forces. Through participatory planning processes, transparent budgeting, and open forums for civic dialogue, Oradea has cultivated a governance model that values the voices of residents from all walks of life. This inclusive approach is mirrored in the city's branding efforts, which highlight not only its architectural heritage and economic potential, but also its commitment to community well-being. Unlike many cities still struggling to define themselves, Oradea has leveraged visionary leadership and collective civic engagement to transform its governance and strengthen its brand.

2. Methodological approach

Research Hypothesis. This study argues that Oradea's recent trajectory of socio-economic development illustrates how strong local leadership, when paired with inclusive collective action, can improve governance and strengthen urban branding. It further suggests that effective city branding not only reinforces a shared local identity but also relies on participatory decision-making processes that integrate diverse stakeholder perspectives.

Research Design. To address this key premise, the study sets out two specific *research objectives* that guide the analytical framework. First, it aims *to analyze the role of local leadership in shaping Oradea's governance practices and urban branding strategies*, with particular attention to how institutional vision and strategic coordination have contributed to measurable socio-economic outcomes. Second, it seeks *to evaluate the impact of participatory decision-making mechanisms on the development of a cohesive urban identity*, by examining how diverse stakeholder engagement influences policy formulation, implementation, and public perception.

The research employs a *qualitative case study methodology*, selecting Oradea as a particularly illustrative example of integrated urban governance combined with strategic urban branding. This approach allows for an in-depth and contextualized analysis of the complex interactions between local leadership, institutional frameworks, and active community participation. By focusing on Oradea, the study can closely examine how these factors collectively influence policymaking, implementation, and the city's evolving identity.

Data for this research were collected from a diverse range of sources, including local government policy documents, strategic development plans, records of public investment, media reports, and scholarly literature. This triangulation of data ensures a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms driving Oradea's transformation.

This case study is situated within the broader theoretical landscape of sustainable urban development, participatory governance, and place branding. By integrating localized insights from Oradea's experience with established global frameworks, the research offers a nuanced understanding of how strategic leadership and collective civic engagement can drive urban competitiveness, social cohesion, and inclusive growth.

Through this integrated approach, the study delivers practical guidance for urban policymakers aiming to foster resilient and identity-driven cities. The findings demonstrate that effective governance, when coupled with meaningful community participation, serves as a critical

catalyst for sustainable urban transformation – one that balances economic vitality with social inclusivity and a strong sense of place.

3. Exploring the dynamics between city branding and inclusive urban governance: a review of the literature

Existing theoretical frameworks provide important insights into the reciprocal relationship between governance models and branding strategies, highlighting how governance structures shape branding approaches, and how effective branding can, in turn, support and strengthen governance outcomes, ultimately contributing to the promotion of inclusive socio-economic development.

Good governance has emerged as a pivotal factor in shaping urban brand identity and enhancing the appeal of city environments, especially amid growing competition among cities in a globalized world.

Urban governance is a multidimensional construct that underscores the collaborative efforts of diverse stakeholders working toward sustainable city growth. Effective governance structures are essential for navigating the intricate challenges of urban development (Baud et al., 2021). According to Eshuis and Klijn (2017), effective governance encompasses both strategic policy formulation and the implementation of initiatives that address immediate urban needs while positioning cities as attractive destinations for business, tourism, and investment. These governance strategies act as essential instruments for guiding urban development in ways that enhance both reputational capital and economic prospects. Achieving this level of effectiveness depends on the collaborative involvement of key stakeholders, particularly local authorities, private sector actors, and community organizations. This collective effort reflects a deeper understanding that a city's brand image extends far beyond traditional marketing – it is embedded in comprehensive urban development plans that resonate with local identities and values (Eshuis and Klijn, 2017). Consequently, well-executed governance fosters public confidence and civic engagement, both of which significantly contribute to a city's overall appeal for residents and visitors alike.

Freire et al. (2016) highlight both the challenges and opportunities linked to inclusive urban growth, emphasizing the necessity for urban governance to address diverse socio-economic realities. They argue that effective city branding strategies are grounded in a thorough understanding of the local context, enabling a customised approach to urban development. Such strategies often include fostering collaborations with local businesses and community organizations to ensure that branding initiatives reflect and support the needs and interests of all community members.

Public perception plays an increasingly important role in understanding how urban governance interacts with city branding. Governance strategies that actively involve local communities and key stakeholders tend to foster more favorable views of the city. Meijer and Rodríguez Bolívar (2016) highlight that smart governance methods can strengthen public engagement and support creative branding approaches. This governance model leverages technology and data to create branding narratives tailored to a diverse urban population.

Scholars have also examined the economic influence of governance on urban attractiveness. Governance strategies that promote multi-level stakeholder participation are pivotal in enhancing a city's reputational capital. These coordinated efforts not only position cities advantageously within the competitive global arena but also foster social cohesion and support sustainable economic development. The interplay between governance, city branding, and economic vitality thus emerges as a key area of inquiry in understanding contemporary urban dynamics (Morgan et al., 2011).

Urban socio-economic conditions frequently pose barriers to inclusive economic growth. According to Kajiita and Kang'ethe (2024), cultivating a strong city brand can help overcome these challenges by crafting a distinct and cohesive identity that connects with varied communities. They argue that inclusiveness must be a core aspect of a city's brand, allowing marginalized populations to access and benefit from economic opportunities. Without actively involving under-represented groups, branding initiatives may unintentionally perpetuate existing inequalities and social divides within urban settings (Anttiroiko, 2014). Building on this, Anttiroiko and de Jong (2020) introduce the concept of the "inclusive city", which reflects the ideal of shared urban prosperity. Their findings indicate that governance strategies need to adapt by integrating inclusive branding principles that acknowledge and elevate the voices of marginalized populations. Therefore, the city's brand should avoid promoting exclusivity and instead aim to empower all residents, fostering a sense of belonging and encouraging their participation in urban governance.

Merrilees et al. (2014) further develop this discussion by linking the city brand directly to social inclusiveness. They suggest that a city brand represents its commitment to being inclusive, shaping how both residents and external stakeholders perceive and respond to the urban environment. This view highlights that urban attractiveness extends beyond physical aesthetics or infrastructure, encompassing dimensions of social equity. Brands grounded in inclusiveness have the potential to drive meaningful changes in governance approaches, encouraging city planners and decision-

makers to prioritize community involvement and equitable resource allocation.

Smart cities reflect this inclusive approach, as demonstrated by Lee et al. (2022). Their study shows that technology-driven initiatives can support socio-economic inclusiveness by improving access to information and opportunities for all residents. In this context, a city's brand effectively promotes innovation while addressing social inequalities, highlighting a mutually reinforcing relationship between smart governance and the city's brand image. According to Rossi (2016), the economic impact of smart cities on social cohesion depends largely on how the city's brand is strategically managed. When urban governance leverages the city's brand image effectively, it can enhance socio-economic outcomes. Therefore, governance frameworks must evolve to incorporate diverse perspectives, using the city's brand as a strategic tool to foster inclusiveness.

Ginesta and De San Eugenio (2020) emphasize the importance of incorporating political dimensions into city branding, advocating for sustainable governance systems that address community needs. Within this framework, public administrations play a central role in shaping place branding initiatives not only at the local level, but also nationally and internationally. To ensure long-term impact, these strategies must actively involve residents in the branding process, creating narratives that support urban governance, local development, and economic growth.

The synergy between governance and sustainable city branding is increasingly shaped by the principles of public diplomacy. Public diplomacy initiatives enhance a city's global stature by fostering meaningful connections with international stakeholders, showcasing distinctive local attributes, and reinforcing commitments to sustainability. Through its diverse instruments and broad range of actors, public diplomacy creates fertile ground for urban development and regional cooperation (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Șoproni, 2018; Șoproni and Stoica, 2022; Șoproni, 2023). These dynamics affirm that when branding efforts are supported by robust governance practices, local governments can craft compelling narratives that resonate on the global stage.

City brand theories often overlap with governance paradigms, generating new perspectives into how cities shape and manage their identities (Lucarelli and Berg, 2011; Hankinson, 2015).

The city brand focuses on strategic efforts to enhance and promote the identity, reputation, and appeal of a city for residents, investors, and tourists. Kavaratzis (2004) presents a theoretical framework that transitions from city marketing to city branding, emphasizing the importance of building a brand that resonates with the target audience while reflecting the city's

values and aspirations. The research highlights that the brand is not merely a marketing tool but a fundamental aspect of urban governance that shapes public perception and engagement. His analysis is consistent with the findings of Lucarelli and Berg (2011), who emphasize that building a strong city brand depends on a deep understanding of place management dynamics, where governance plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions. Their research shows that effective branding must be grounded in everyday urban realities and supported by governance practices that actively engage citizens in the branding process.

Place branding has emerged as an increasingly prominent topic in both scholarly research and the practical policy-making of local governments (Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013, Kavaratzis et al., 2015). It is often adopted as a strategic governance tool aimed at enhancing environmental quality, social cohesion, and economic vitality within urban and regional contexts (Ma et al., 2019; Chan et al., 2021).

Green et al. (2016) demonstrate that city branding is increasingly intertwined with broader urban governance strategies. According to their analysis, a city's branding success depends on its ability to align governance practices with branding efforts. Recognizing the mutual influence between governance and branding allows cities to use branding as a tool to reinforce governance principles – and, in turn, to let governance inform branding initiatives.

Medeiros and Van der Zwet (2020) emphasize the critical role of sustainable and integrated urban planning in effective governance. They argue that a city's brand image should extend beyond mere marketing to also encompass environmental sustainability, inclusiveness, and socio-economic equity. Their findings support the notion that successful branding initiatives contribute to a more sustainable urban environment when governance strategies adopt comprehensive and inclusive approaches.

Modern branding strategies often mirror broader regional development strategies. When effectively executed by local authorities, these branding efforts can substantially enhance their region's attractiveness (Barkun et al., 2021; Sedra and El Bayed, 2022; Potapovs, 2024).

All things considered, the convergence between urban governance and city branding reflects a multifaceted web of relationships that shape both a city's development and its image locally and internationally. Governance strategies – especially those that emphasize transparency, stakeholder engagement, and sustainable development – play a crucial role in shaping urban reputation and driving economic growth. As cities navigate increasingly complex challenges brought on by globalization and competitive pressures, the importance of effective governance in fostering a distinct city

identity remains essential. To successfully handle through this intricate landscape, cities must leverage their brand image not merely as a marketing tool but as a catalyst for comprehensive governance strategies that address socio-economic disparities and promote equitable growth.

4. Local leadership in action. Collaborative strategies for city branding and governance in Oradea

Cities cannot operate in isolation; they must engage a broad network of stakeholders – including industry, the non-profit sector, academia, and the citizens – whose actions significantly influence sustainable urban development (Argento et al., 2025). Scholars argue that urban development and city branding requires participatory and inclusive approaches to be effective and enduring (Fung, 2006; Kavartzis et al., 2017; Ripoll González et al., 2025). The pursuit of sustainable urban development is often hindered by a range of challenges and uncertainties, which complicate decision-making processes for city managers and policymakers. In response to this unpredictability, a flexible approach to managing relationships between the city and its contributing stakeholders is essential for successful place branding (Källström and Siljeklint, 2024).

The city of Oradea, situated in northwestern Romania near the Hungarian border, has responded decisively and effectively to the challenges of the global economy – challenges that demand innovative solutions grounded in reimagined power dynamics between cities and their citizens (Mihăilescu, 2022). In recognition of its strategic approach and transformative initiatives, Oradea has been designated an "urban development pole of regional importance", playing a key role within three interregional development axes (*The Integrated Urban Development Strategy for the City of Oradea and Oradea Metropolitan Area 2021-2027*).

In recent years, the city has consistently ranked among Romania's top performers, marked by robust economic expansion, significant inflows of European funding, and a growing influx of tourists. Its proximity to the western border offers a strategic advantage, as prosperity often correlates with closeness to this region, through which over 70% of the country's exports are routed (Cristea et al., 2017).

Oradea's local policymakers have recognized that the foundation for a city's internationalization begins with robust local development. This process entails building a resilient and competitive economic base while simultaneously crafting a compelling and distinctive image that resonates with target audiences – whether within the region or across the country. By prioritizing strategic investments, urban regeneration, and effective branding, Oradea has positioned itself not only as a dynamic regional hub,

but also as a city with growing appeal on the national and international stage.

Local authorities, civil society organizations, and private sector stakeholders actively engage in joint initiatives that foster civic participation and ensure governance reflects the diverse interests of the community. These partnerships generate synergies that enhance the efficiency of decision-making and contribute to a more vibrant civic life. By embracing this collaborative model, Oradea effectively mobilizes local resources and expertise to meet the community's specific needs and aspirations while simultaneously strengthening the city's reputation.

In Oradea, participatory governance is actively cultivated through a range of mechanisms aimed at enhancing citizen engagement, promoting operational transparency, and fostering collaborative policy development. Local actors have embraced *cooperative strategies* that bring together public authorities, academia, businesses, and civil society to shape the city's future through shared vision and coordinated action (Oradea City Hall, *Development Strategies*).

The Integrated Urban Development Strategy of the Municipality of Oradea and the Oradea Metropolitan Area (2021-2027) serves as a comprehensive roadmap for urban transformation. It outlines priority areas for intervention across sectors and consolidates the perspectives of key stakeholders into a unified development vision. This strategy ensures that planning is not only technically sound but also socially inclusive, reflecting the contributions of local administration, academic institutions, private enterprises, and community organizations.

The Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan represents a strategic and operational commitment to improving mobility within Oradea. Developed through broad stakeholder engagement, the plan promotes efficient movement of people and goods while positioning the city as accessible, equitable, and resilient. It envisions Oradea as a hub of innovation and urban sustainability, capable of exporting best practices and expertise to surrounding localities in the Metropolitan Area and across Bihor County. In doing so, the city becomes a source of regional "welfare export", offering models of success that others can emulate.

The adoption of electronic governance tools has played a pivotal role in strengthening participatory governance in Oradea. By facilitating a more direct link between public input and policy outcomes, they foster a governance environment that is both responsive and adaptive to community needs. The public administration has introduced several tools to enhance transparency, streamline processes, and improve communication with citizens:

- platform *digital.oradea.ro* – designed to simplify administrative procedures within Oradea City Hall. Through it, citizens can submit requests and complaints, make online payments, register documents, and even sign up for public hearings (Oradea in direct, 2023).
- The digitalization of public services within this project aims to reduce the time required for citizens to access services, simplify procedures, and design user-friendly systems grounded in a citizen-centered approach.
- online *participatory budgeting platform activ.oradea.ro* – an empowering initiative that invites citizens to take an active role in shaping their urban environment. Through this digital tool, residents can submit project proposals focused on enhancing public spaces and improving neighbourhood life across the city. To date, 22 out of the 72 selected projects have been successfully brought to life, reflecting the community’s vision and involvement (Oradea City Hall, *Participatory Budgeting in Oradea*).
- *Oradea City Report* – a free, user-friendly mobile and tablet application that empowers engaged citizens to report complaints and incidents directly to Oradea City Hall and local public service providers (*Oradea City Report*).

These digital tools can have far-reaching effects on the socio-economic landscape by enhancing administrative efficiency, reducing inequalities in service access, and fostering greater civic engagement. By streamlining interactions with public institutions, digitalization can empower marginalized populations, promote social inclusion, and strengthen trust in governance. Ultimately, such transformations contribute to improved social cohesion and a more equitable distribution of opportunities across urban communities.

These transformative efforts in digitalizing public services set the stage for Oradea’s proactive response to administrative challenges through its *Digital Strategy for Oradea Smart City*². Beginning in September 2025, City Hall embarked on wide-ranging consultations with city-owned enterprises, institutional partners, academia, businesses, NGOs, and residents, collaboratively crafting a strategic framework to guide ongoing and future digitalization initiatives (Oradea City Hall, 2025). This framework provides a unified, comprehensive roadmap empowering public institutions to harness technology in ways that effectively address the evolving needs of the city’s diverse population.

² The project’s total budget amounts to €104,770,39. The Digital Innovation Hub secured funding from both the European Commission, under the Digital Europe Programme, and the Romanian Government, through the Operational Program for Smart Growth, Digitization and Financial Instruments (POCIDIF) 2021-2027. This grant was obtained by Oradea City Hall through the Directorate for Internationally Funded Project Management.

Building on this foundation of collaboration and innovation, Oradea prioritizes sustained partnerships across public institutions, the private sector, and civil society to continually refine and expand its digital and participatory programs. This inclusive, ongoing dialogue ensures that technological progress aligns with community values and aspirations, fostering an environment where innovation advances both operational efficiency and social equity. By upholding principles of transparency and inclusiveness, the city cultivates trust and encourages active citizen participation, thereby reinforcing the democratic fabric and enhancing the responsiveness of local governance.

Looking ahead, Oradea recognizes the importance of adaptability in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. To this end, the city is committed to continuous skill development for both public servants and community members, ensuring that all stakeholders can effectively navigate and contribute meaningfully to the smart city ecosystem. By integrating participatory frameworks into e-governance technologies, Oradea aspires to establish a model of sustainable urban development that harmonizes technological innovation with human-centered values, ultimately elevating the quality of life for all its residents. This forward-looking approach ensures that the city not only embraces progress but does so inclusively, maintaining its commitment to social equity and responsive governance.

5. Branding Oradea: identity and communication

The creation and positioning of a city brand must be founded on a comprehensive framework that encompasses historical, economic, demographic, social, cultural, and political dimensions. Successful city branding draws on a blend of economic vitality, strategic geographic positioning, robust infrastructure, skilled human capital, active stakeholder participation, tourism potential, environmental resources, and a distinctive cultural identity. Together, these factors shape the territory's brand identity and serve as strategic inputs in the branding process. Their interplay significantly influences the city's perceived image – whether positive or negative – thereby influencing its attractiveness to investors, residents, visitors, and other target audiences.

Building on this comprehensive approach, Oradea's urban marketing strategy demonstrates coherence by effectively integrating *key success factors that contribute to the creation of a strong and distinctive city brand*. These interconnected elements – planning group, vision and strategic analysis, place identity and image, public-private partnerships, and leadership – work together to ensure the strategy's consistency, fluidity, and meaningful execution (Moilanen and Rainisto, 2009: 22-23).

A committed *planning group*, consisting of public and private local stakeholders, plays a central role in coordinating Oradea's branding initiatives. In addition to steering strategic efforts, this group ensures financial support for these activities, largely by leveraging European funding mechanisms. Such resources have been pivotal in driving Oradea's remarkable development, positioning the city as a national leader in successfully attracting and utilizing European resources (Oradenii.ro, 2025). Between 2008 and 2025, public projects financed through European funds have surpassed €1.6 billion, with investments spanning across key sectors such as infrastructure, healthcare, education, energy, green spaces, and urban regeneration (InfoOradea, 2025a; Digi24 Oradea, 2018). Notable achievements include the development and restoration of Union Square, the construction of the Aquapark, the renovation of Oradea Fortress, and the rehabilitation of historic buildings in the city center. Major infrastructure upgrades have also been completed, including the Metropolitan ring road, central heating system modernization, new transport corridors, passage construction, and the creation of green zones. Efforts to improve mobility and sustainability are evident in the building and refurbishment of bridges to ease traffic flow, the modernization of public transport through the purchase of electric buses, and the expansion of tram lines. The city has also invested in healthcare and education, with hospital renovations, new nurseries, and upgraded schools. Local authorities anticipate that the sustained implementation of non-reimbursable funding projects, combined with strong public-private partnerships, will keep Oradea on a steady path of economic, social, and cultural growth.

These achievements have transformed the city into a model of urban development, marked by significant investments in infrastructure, healthcare, education, and the enhancement of green spaces.

The action group functions as both the designer and coordinator of Oradea's *development and branding strategy*. This effort is grounded in comprehensive *territorial analyses* that have highlighted the city's internal strengths and weaknesses alongside external opportunities and challenges. Based on these insights, a series of strategic documents were developed, outlining the city's vision, general and specific objectives, and the planned actions for implementing its marketing strategy.

Urban Development Strategy of the Municipality of Oradea and the Oradea Metropolitan Area, elaborated by Oradea City Hall, articulates the city's development vision as *an innovative, strong, and sustainable European benchmark, economically developed, integrated into a metropolitan area that defines a living, working, and high-quality lifestyle space*. The document outlines strategic objectives for urban development, along with priority axes, targeted programs to support these objectives, and a detailed action plan to

guide implementation within the urban development pole (*The Integrated Urban Development Strategy of the Municipality of Oradea and the Oradea Metropolitan Area, 2021-2027*).

Public-private partnerships have proven highly effective in Oradea's urban development, generating a critical mass that has already yielded tangible results in fundraising, project implementation, communication, and promotional activities.

Established in 2015, the Oradea Destination Management Organization (*Visit Oradea*) represents a collaboration between the local government and key stakeholders within the tourism sector. This partnership is tasked with shaping and executing tourism policies for Oradea, encompassing destination marketing, visitor services, event coordination, and the cultivation of strategic alliances across multiple levels. (*Visit Oradea, #WeAreVISITORADEA*).

Oradea's local authorities actively promote business growth by leveraging the city's strategic location near the Hungarian border, primarily through the establishment of industrial parks managed by the *Oradea Local Development Agency* (ADLO), in which the municipality holds a majority share. ADLO functions as a crucial link connecting private investors with educational institutions, facilitating interactions with public authorities, and supporting both domestic and foreign investments. Additionally, it plays a vital role in promoting investment opportunities and encouraging entrepreneurship (ADLO Oradea).

These initiatives embody a common belief among local stakeholders that transparency, proactive governance, and collaborative engagement are fundamental drivers for sustainable urban development.

Oradea has developed a *positive image* as a Central European hub for tourism and business, shaped by the city's strategic branding efforts. While its identity is still evolving, proactive initiatives by local authorities have created a unique profile that differentiates Oradea from both regional and cross-border rivals. This distinctive image is actively communicated through carefully targeted channels.

City leadership is secured when local actors recognize and actively apply strategic management, seeing the city as a collaborative network of political leaders, businesses, civic organizations, trade unions, and the wider community (UrbanizeHub, 2017). Demonstrating professionalism and strong managerial expertise, public authorities effectively motivate and guide stakeholders toward achieving shared goals by articulating a clear vision, making informed strategic decisions, and sustaining open communication.

An effective *communication strategy* is crucial for defining a city's brand and projecting its identity to a broader audience. For local authorities, consistently delivering clear and trustworthy messages is key to establishing an authentic and attractive image. However, before initiating any promotional campaign, it is crucial for stakeholders to acknowledge that long-term success depends largely on their dedication to enhancing infrastructure, developing tourist attractions and recreational facilities, and elevating the overall quality of life and attractiveness of the region. This foundational investment ensures that promotional activities rest on a solid base capable of sustaining growth and delivering lasting benefits to the community. Within this framework, Oradea's promotional budget for 2025 totals 18.4 million lei, of which 15.35 million lei is directly financed by City Hall (Bihoreanul, 2005). These funds are dedicated to boosting tourism through carefully targeted online and offline campaigns, along with the production of specialized promotional materials aimed at both domestic and international audiences. Additionally, a significant portion supports the planning and execution of cultural and leisure events that showcase the city's vibrant community and attractions.

Oradea's *communication mix* embodies a carefully balanced combination of branding tools aimed at clearly expressing the city's value and engaging its target audiences. This approach incorporates advertising, promotion, and public relations – each contributing uniquely to the formation and reinforcement of the city's image.

The advertising strategy has utilized multiple media channels to build and strengthen Oradea's brand visibility, including local and national television, print media, outdoor displays, and digital platforms. Promotional activities have encompassed the creation of multilingual brochures, leaflets, flyers, tourist maps, and various other materials; the enhancement of the official tourism website; the development and ongoing management of the Oradea City App; and the introduction of the Oradea City Card, which provides discounts, a city map, and 48 hours of complimentary transportation. Public relations efforts have concentrated on fostering strong media connections through press releases and conferences, coordinating infotrips for travel journalists and agencies, and actively engaging in tourism fairs both nationally and internationally. Communication related to events has involved organizing and supporting cultural and promotional activities in partnership with local institutions and businesses (Visit Oradea, *Activity Reports 2015- 2024*).

As a result of this integrated communication campaign, the main achievements of 2024 were (Visit Oradea, *Activity Report 2024*):

- Event of the year: the extraordinary concert by Andrea Bocelli in November, one of the most significant cultural moments ever organized in Oradea
- Major social media impact: nearly 10 million people were reached through Visit Oradea's own channels
- Instagram growth: the Visit Oradea account surpassed 100,000 followers, strengthening the city's digital presence
- Increase in tourism: over 235.000 tourists visited Oradea, with overnight stays rising by 4% compared to the pre-pandemic period.
- Record-breaking events: Oradea FestiFall attracted more than 120.000 participants, and December marked the best month in Visit Oradea's history, with nearly 31.000 overnight stays.

Together, these coordinated efforts demonstrate the implementation of an integrated marketing communication strategy driven by Oradea's local authorities, effectively harmonizing all channels to deliver a cohesive, persuasive, and distinctive message about the city and its unique character.

Oradea's highly effective branding strategy has firmly positioned the city as a leading destination for tourism and business in Romania. This standing is anchored in a range of *competitive advantages* that collectively boost the city's visibility and attractiveness. Situated at the western border of the European Union, Oradea benefits from a *strategic location* that encourages cross-border collaboration and trade, while its *vibrant economic cluster* continues to draw significant national and international investment. The city's *business environment is increasingly supportive*, particularly in innovative sectors like information technology, and is complemented by significant *infrastructural developments* driven by proactive public investment and urban planning. Oradea's distinctive identity is further enriched by its *rich cultural legacy*, recognized through its title as Romania's Art Nouveau Capital and membership in the European Network of Art Nouveau Cities. This cultural vitality is complemented by a *dynamic culinary scene*, featuring numerous establishments acknowledged in the Gault & Millau Romania guide, alongside *sophisticated leisure and wellness facilities*, including an advanced aquatic and spa center.

Together, these interconnected assets contribute to the city's successful branding and its growing reputation as a competitive urban center in both national and European contexts (Șoproni, 2023). The city's ongoing commitment to leveraging its geographic advantages, economic dynamism, cultural heritage, and quality-of-life offerings underscores a comprehensive vision of sustainable urban development. Looking ahead, Oradea is well-positioned to build upon this foundation by deepening cross-sector collaboration, embracing innovative urban policies, and continuously

enhancing its cultural and infrastructural assets, while prioritizing socio-economic inclusion to ensure that growth benefits all members of the community. This integrated focus will help sustain long-term development and resilience in an increasingly interconnected and competitive landscape.

6. Conclusion: synergy in action

Oradea's governance and branding strategies exemplify a cohesive and integrated approach, anchored in strong local leadership, collaborative action, and a shared commitment to fostering inclusive growth and social cohesion. A clearly defined and authentic city identity does more than attract investment and strengthen vital economic sectors like business and tourism; it also cultivates equal opportunities and reinforces the community's social cohesion. These intertwined aspects collectively influence the city's reputation and are deeply integrated into its urban policy frameworks and participatory governance structures. This comprehensive and inclusive approach has played a crucial role in Oradea's transformation into a dynamic hub of economic growth, creating a powerful regional magnet while guaranteeing that the advantages of development are equitably distributed throughout the community.

This progress isn't just based on stories, but is supported by solid data showcasing **the urban values** shaped by Oradea's strategic approach to urban management across key areas such as city identity, business environment, tourism, and overall quality of life. These measurable achievements highlight how thoughtful governance and coordinated efforts translate into tangible improvements that resonate throughout the community and bolster the city's ongoing growth and appeal.

- **City identity and perceived urban image.** Oradea has steadily positioned itself as a premier urban destination in Romania, renowned for its rich multicultural heritage, lively social and cultural environment, diverse culinary scene, and internationally recognized thermal spa facilities. The city's identity values are firmly anchored in its historical legacy, while simultaneously embracing modern priorities such as clean energy, sustainable urban development (green city), modern educational frameworks, technological innovation – including IoT integration – along with wellness, public health, and a strong focus on family safety.

This approach emphasizes sustainable growth, innovation, and inclusivity, ensuring that development projects not only boost the local economy but also create vibrant, liveable spaces that meet the evolving needs of the community. By integrating smart technologies, green infrastructure, and participatory governance, Oradea fosters a dynamic urban environment where residents actively contribute to shaping their

city's future, making it a model for balanced and forward-thinking urban transformation.

Recent *recognitions and rankings* highlight Oradea's evolving status as a model city (Destination of the Year, 2025; InfoOradea, 2025b; Best Art Nouveau Destinations in Europe, 2025; *City Performance Index – 2024*; ADLO Oradea, *Investors in Oradea*, Transilvania Business, 2022):

- in 2025, Oradea was awarded the title *Destination of the Year* in the category "Cities that Inspire" at the *Gala Destination of the Year*, Romania's leading competition for tourism destinations.

- Oradea ranks among *the top three Romanian cities in terms of resident satisfaction*, according to the *2025 T.R.A.I. Index* published by the Storia platform.

- the city was designated the *second most beautiful Art Nouveau destination in Europe* (following Budapest) by *European Best Destinations* in 2025.

- in the *2024 Urban Attractiveness Index*, Oradea placed *third nationally among the most desirable cities for residential relocation*.

- Oradea ranked among the *top 10 Small European Cities of the Future 2023 for cost effectiveness*, according to a report evaluating the investment appeal of various cities.

- a 2023 analysis conducted by *Numbeo* identified Oradea as the *safest city in Romania*, based on comparative urban safety indicators.

- in 2022, Oradea secured *the second position in the World Bank's ranking of the most liveable cities*.

- a 2022 survey by *UrbanizeHub* placed Oradea among the *top three cities most favored by young people as a relocation destination*.

- in 2021, the *World Bank* included Oradea in its report on *magnet cities*, alongside Cluj-Napoca and Timișoara, highlighting its capacity to attract talent and investment through sustainable urban policies.

These qualities underscore Oradea's rising status as a city that successfully combines cultural heritage, urban safety, and strategic development to promote an elevated quality of urban living.

- **Business environment.** Oradea has emerged as a highly *attractive destination for investors*, driven by its advanced infrastructure and proactive, business-friendly public policies.

In 2025, the municipality's projected total revenues are estimated at approximately €750 million – marking the largest budget in the city's history (Oradea24.ro, 2025). This milestone reflects not only Oradea's financial resilience, but also the local administration's effectiveness in securing external funding to support sustainable urban growth.

The year 2025 is set to be a landmark for investment, with development projects expected to reach nearly €400 million. This unprecedented figure underscores Oradea's position as *a leading model of urban transformation*, where strategic planning, economic vitality, and visionary governance converge to shape a thriving city of the future.

According to the *City Index 2024*, Oradea boasts the *highest entrepreneurial density among cities with populations under 200,000* (RisCo, 2024). This metric, closely linked to regional economic growth and development, is strongly influenced by forward-thinking local policies.

From 2019 to 2023, Oradea led the country in attracting European funds for public development, securing an average of around 5,000 lei per resident. These resources have driven significant investments in urban regeneration, sustainable transportation, heritage conservation, and vital public services.

The city's entrepreneurial spirit is evident in its *dynamic business ecosystem*. By the end of 2022, the city recorded 8 active companies per 100 residents, ranking just behind Cluj-Napoca and Bucharest in entrepreneurial density. This vibrant business landscape contributes to Oradea's notably low unemployment rate and reflects the strength of its local economic model. The city exemplifies an efficient and supportive ecosystem, offering access to financial resources, strategic public policies, tax incentives, business support programs, and robust infrastructure – all of which foster innovation and sustainable growth.

Oradea ranks *4th nationally among Romania's leading cities with tech startup communities*, following Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, and Timișoara. The city is emerging as a dynamic center for startups and entrepreneurial innovation. Its remarkable progress was highlighted in the *2025 Startup Ecosystem Report* by StartupBlink, a globally acknowledged leader in startup ecosystem analysis (StartupBlink, 2025). In the latest report, Oradea jumped 15 positions in the global rankings compared to the previous year, marking the highest national growth rate of 22.1%. The city now holds the 729th spot out of 1,000 cities worldwide.

With a supportive environment for entrepreneurship, Oradea continues to attract talent, investors, and innovators. Key sectors such as IT, software development, e-commerce, renewable energy, and tourism are experiencing rapid expansion. The city's startup landscape is fuelled by a growing number of co-working spaces, incubators, and accelerator programs – most notably Bright Labs Incubator, powered by *Make IT in Oradea*. These initiatives are drawing in young entrepreneurs from across the region and even from the Romanian diaspora.

Oradea's thriving ecosystem is built on strong collaboration between private enterprises, public institutions, and academia, fostering knowledge exchange and cross-industry connectivity.

In 2025, Fitch Ratings reaffirmed Oradea's position among the cities with the highest investment credibility, assigning a BBB- rating for long-term loans (Fitch Ratings, 2025). This reaffirmation within the investment-grade category underscores Oradea's financial reliability and signals a low-risk environment for investors, reflecting the local administration's capacity to manage and repay public loans effectively. Beyond its technical implications, a strong international credit rating acts as a strategic asset, serving as a "business card" that communicates the city's attractiveness, competitiveness, and fiscal discipline to potential investors and development partners.

- **Tourism**

Oradea stands out as *a leading example in Romania for destination development and tourism promotion*. Thanks to strategic investments in cultural and leisure infrastructure, the city has firmly positioned itself as one of the country's most attractive urban travel spots.

Consistently ranked among Romania's top 8 tourist destinations, Oradea continues to captivate visitors with its vibrant atmosphere, diverse recreational offerings, and well-curated events. The steady rise in overnight stays reflects not only increased visitor interest but also the effectiveness of Oradea's tourism strategies, infrastructure improvements, and hospitality services. Over the past five years, the city has demonstrated resilience and adaptability, fostering an environment where tourism can thrive even amid broader global challenges.

In 2024, Oradea recorded a moderate yet sustained growth in tourism, welcoming over 4% more tourists than in the previous year. This increase is particularly significant as it marks the first time overnight stays have exceeded pre-pandemic levels, signalling a robust recovery and renewed confidence in the city as a travel destination (Visit Oradea, *Activity Report 2024*). This milestone underscores Oradea's successful efforts to position itself as a must-visit city in Romania, one that balances cultural richness with modern amenities, ensuring memorable stays for visitors while driving economic benefits for the local community.

- **Quality of life**

Oradea's urban development strategy clearly places *quality of life at the heart of its long-term vision* rather than treating it as a secondary goal. Through smart governance and targeted public investment, the city has

cultivated an environment where well-being is both measurable and widely accessible.

A cornerstone of this strategy is the *Oradea Green City* program, which prioritizes the expansion and accessibility of green and recreational spaces as a means to enhance the overall well-being of residents. By 2030, the city plans to ensure that 91.3% of its population will live within a five-minute walk of a public urban green space. Additionally, the green space available per resident is set to increase from 23 sqm to 29.4 sqm—an impressive benchmark aligned with European standards.

Oradea's commitment to quality of life extends beyond environmental planning. The city offers a multifaceted cultural and social landscape, including:

- a vibrant urban setting characterized by increasing cultural activity and civic engagement;
- recognition by art historians as an “architectural reserve,” featuring 77 officially registered historic monument buildings;
- a robust cultural agenda facilitated by *Oradea Heritage*, encompassing exhibitions, performances, concerts, and community-based programs (Oradea Heritage);
- comprehensive infrastructure supporting both competitive and recreational sports activities.

Together, these assets empower Oradea to pursue its development goals and establish itself as a recognized urban growth center, generating lasting value for the region it serves. In this context, Oradea continues to evolve not merely as a city striving to improve quality of life, but as one in which quality of life is actively realized and experienced by its residents. This transformation is evidenced by sustained improvements in urban planning, cultural participation, and environmental accessibility, positioning Oradea as a model for integrated urban development in Romania and beyond.

Oradea's recent trajectory illustrates how the convergence of robust local leadership and inclusive collective action generates tangible outcomes in both governance and urban branding. The city's achievements – reflected in national and international rankings, economic indicators, and quality-of-life metrics – demonstrate that strategic coordination between institutional vision and civic participation fosters a resilient, inclusive, attractive, and future-oriented urban environment. *These outcomes validate the study's research hypothesis*, confirming that strong local leadership, when combined with mechanisms for inclusive engagement, can significantly enhance governance effectiveness and reinforce a shared urban identity. Oradea's participatory governance model, which integrates diverse stakeholder perspectives into decision-making processes, has proven

instrumental in shaping policies that reflect community needs while advancing the city's strategic goals.

By aligning governance practices with a coherent place identity and leveraging cross-sector collaboration, Oradea positions itself not only as a model of urban transformation within Romania, but also as a compelling case study in the broader discourse on sustainable city development and strategic urban management. The lessons from Oradea's experience offer valuable insights for other cities seeking to navigate the complexities of urban development in a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape. Key takeaways include the need for transparent leadership, adaptive policy-making, and the cultivation of civic trust through inclusive engagement. These elements are not only replicable but essential for cities aiming to achieve integrated growth and resilient urban futures.

Based on the insights gained from Oradea's strategic initiatives, this study recommends prioritizing the integration of participatory mechanisms within urban planning processes, strengthening investments in place-based identity development, and ensuring long-term institutional continuity to maintain and advance transformative progress.

However, the research also acknowledges certain limitations inherent in the Oradea case study. The city's specific administrative structure, regional context, and access to European funding may not be directly transferable to all urban settings. Additionally, while Oradea's success is well-documented through quantitative indicators and public perception, further longitudinal studies are needed to assess the durability of its governance model and its adaptability to future challenges. Despite these constraints, Oradea's evolution remains a powerful example of how strategic vision, community involvement, and institutional capacity can converge to redefine urban potential.

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Customary Law Practices among the Gabor Roma: “Gypsy Court”

Gabriel Sala¹

Abstract

This paper explores the traditional system of justice practiced by the „Gabor Gypsies”, a subgroup of Roma in Transylvania, who explicitly reject the label Roma and insist on being recognized as „Gypsies” (țigani). Based on extensive fieldwork and interviews, the study examines how customary law functions as a mechanism of conflict resolution, moral regulation, and social cohesion. Central to this system are the authority of elders, the symbolic role of communal gatherings, and the sacred oath, which serves as both a spiritual guarantee of truth and a deterrent against dishonesty. Sanctions within this framework are primarily moral and financial, emphasizing shame, restitution, and community reconciliation rather than physical punishment. The persistence of these practices, despite pressures of modernization and integration into state institutions, highlights the resilience of Gabor cultural identity and its deep reliance on shared values, oral tradition, and self-determination. Ultimately, the study demonstrates how the „Gabor Gypsies” justice system („judecata țigănească”) represents both continuity and adaptation, safeguarding their collective honor while affirming their distinct place within the wider social landscape.

Keywords

Roma, „Gabor Gypsies”, customary law; traditional justice; cultural identity.

1. Introduction

This research focuses on the traditional forms of justice among the Gabors Roma, with particular attention to the cultural mechanisms through which conflicts are resolved and social cohesion is maintained. It is important to note from the outset that members of this community strongly prefer the designation „Gypsies” („țigani”) and do not identify with the label “Roma”. For them, the traditional name carries historical and cultural weight, and any external imposition of alternative terms is often perceived as inaccurate or even disrespectful. Acknowledging this self-identification is essential for understanding both their worldview and their systems of

¹ PhD. Technological High School of Applied Sciences, Arad, Romania. E-mail: salagabriel@yahoo.com.

justice. The study investigates the dual system of judgment, the sacred oath, and the symbolic rituals that express the values of truth, honor, and solidarity. Fieldwork was carried out primarily through semi-structured interviews with Gabor men and women of different generations, in several towns and villages in Transylvania, including Târgu-Mureș, Arad, and Crăciunești. Oral testimonies form the backbone of the research, as they offer direct access to the lived experiences and perspectives of community members. Methodologically, the research combines interviews with participant observation and the comparative analysis of existing ethnographic and historical studies. This triangulation ensures that data are not only faithfully represented but also placed within broader anthropological and legal contexts. By giving equal weight to insider voices and scholarly interpretation, the study preserves authenticity while allowing critical reflection. Ultimately, the work aims not only to document a complex and little-known system of traditional justice but also to show how it functions as means of cultural resilience. Despite increasing pressures from modernization and integration into state legal frameworks, Gabor justice continues to embody collective responsibility, regulate conflicts, and safeguard identity, thus ensuring the continuity of a distinct moral order.

2. Origins and parallels of customary justice

The judicial custom among the Gabor involves an unofficial tribunal and a trial organized by the community, representing a customary way of administering justice within the group, a form of parallel justice alongside the official one. The „Gypsy court” finds its approximate counterpart in the councils of elders from medieval Romanian rural communities, traditionalist judicial customs having their genesis in the communities’ desire to resolve internal issues according to their own principles. Whether we speak of Romanians or Roma, these community bodies do not represent a practical product of some ancient Romanians tendency to oppose the ruling authority of the boyar, noble, or state official. The tendency to assume judicial prerogatives, to decentralize justice at the level of local medieval communities, was the consequence of practical reasons meant to make the act of justice more efficient, reasons reinforced by a symbiosis of fear and respect toward authority and local powers. Minor problems - especially those not affecting the economic interests or authority of the local elites - were preferably resolved internally, avoiding unnecessary risks, since the powerful of the time, placed on untouchable pedestals, were implicitly perceived as inhibitory, unapproachable elements, entirely outside the ordinary concerns of community members. Still, in the spirit of tolerating local or community customs for the optimal functioning of medieval and modern society, traditional judicial custom was tacitly accepted or even officially encouraged by state authorities.

Within such a general context, insisting on the originality of the „Gypsy court” is an error. In this case, too, the Roma were decisively influenced by “the others” - possibly by the Romanians, who themselves cannot claim to be the initiators of the principles of traditional judicial custom, as it is a phenomenon found in numerous civilizations throughout history. The historical contact of the Roma with Romanian rural communities, and implicitly their role as observers of how these functioned, resulted in their adoption of the essence of Wallachian traditions and customs - a claim supported by the fact that, according to Saxon chroniclers of the 18th–19th centuries, Roma had a stronger inclination to interact with Romanians than with Hungarians or Transylvanian Germans. If we accept that the social relations of traditionalists accurately and effectively reflected the spirit of the archaic wallachian world, then drawing a parallel with the ancestral customs of the Romanians becomes self-evident in any study dedicated to the norms of „Gypsies law”. Ultimately, the foundation of traditionalist communities lies in their specific norms-rules conditioning both the perpetuation of the group and other community features related to dress, birth, marriage, death, etc. What is certain is that the ahistorical path of the „Gypsies” made possible their encounter with the old customs of the majority population and their adoption, particularly in the 20th century.

The recourse to evoking similarities, where applicable, is undertaken solely for the purpose of clarifying the foundation upon which „Gypsy law” was built - since even in this case the subject itself constitutes a distinct research field - and not to construct any profile of Romanian predominance in this regard. As far as the „Gabor Gypsies” are concerned, their judicial custom is not distinguished by peculiarities or specific exoticism. The communal ethos at the foundational level is virtually non-existent. The general traditionalist rom framework also encompasses and shapes the „Gypsy court” (*„judecata țigănească”*) of the Gabors. What is certain is that the effect of the exclusion of the Roma, of the curtailment of the mechanisms necessary even for the illusion of possible inclusion, and of their historical maintenance at the margins of society, has materialized within the „Gypsy justice” itself through the accentuation of intrinsic tendencies and through a withdrawal beneath the protective dome of intra-community structures. The apology of alterity and the extreme amplification of the antagonistic mental perception of *us versus them* results in the impossibility of an outsider being granted the right to appeal to Roma justice in order to resolve disputes with a member of the group, nor even the honor of being judged as an accused by the patriarchs of the community, the Gabors being guided by the principle that “only Gabors can be judged by Gabors” (Gabor, Francisc, b. 1948). In practice, the community ignores or exonerates reprehensible acts committed internally, if these are directed against individuals from outside the group; this exclusivism is also manifested toward Roma

belonging to other clans. A problem with a non-Gabor is considered a personal matter, not a rupture in the relational machinery of the collectivity. Community peace and group harmony are in no way affected by such a conflict. Therefore, the mechanisms of control and protection of communal harmony find no motivation to be set in motion.

3. The Gabor court: structure, rituals, and authority

The subordination of Gabor justice to the hierarchy of the collectivity means that a Gabor who has erred cannot be judged except by those of at least similar social status; the norms guiding the Gabors in community life do not allow a prominent representative of the clan to be held accountable by his inferiors on the social ladder (Gabor, Francisc, b. 1948). Age is an advantage for a venerable member to become a judge, though not a *sine qua non* condition. Old age essentially signifies experience, emotional control, mastery of impulses, and thus can serve as a guarantee of wisdom. On the other hand, *genocracy* is also materialized in the fact that young Gabors, due to the value seal of lineage, may act as judges among their own. The judges bear the sacred duty of restoring peace within the community, by applying the customary rules of justice whenever context imperatively demands it. Customary justice does not have a predominantly coercive role, but rather a pacifying one; the objective of the entire intra-community judicial system is to reconcile the parties in conflict, even if the longed-for communal peace is achieved through the punishment of the guilty party by the so-called *judges of peace* (Mikloş, Matei, b. 1973).

The Gabors, like any traditionalist Roma group, do not resort to the state's judicial courts for resolving disputes, since the initiation of a trial is tantamount to great shame, and thus implicitly entails tacit community sanctions for the grave breach of communal rules and taboos (Gabor, Matei, b. 1980). The idea of the „Gypsy court” as the sole judicial authority is deeply entrenched in the collective mentality, and as a result, the Roma are convinced that only by appealing to the procedure under study can they obtain justice, since no other court possesses the competence to resolve disputes among Gabors. To replace the „Gypsy judgment” with the official one would be equivalent to a vote of no confidence in the community and its credibility, a course of action synonymous with its dilution or even its disappearance. The conferral of authority upon intra-community judicial custom can only be absolute. The principles of ethnocentrism leave no alternatives here either.

Moreover, conflicts with outsiders - regardless of their nature, the seriousness of the acts, or the moral and material damages - were resolved with the support of community members, even if this required the use of force or violence. This group solidarity is still extended to its exponents

today, even though the Gabors now cultivate pacifist values. Naturally, to avoid such problems, relations with outsiders were, and still are in some cases, profoundly cold in essence, at best warm only superficially. Contacts with others were generally limited to the performance of craft-related activities, and more recently to commercial relations. Exceptions to the rule are permitted, but friendships with majority members are allowed only in a private setting, not in a general one that might provoke the community's sensitivity. Paradoxically, although they do not turn to the state's judicial institutions as a means of obtaining justice, the Gabors respect the laws and avoid breaking them. A Gabor "who has been to prison," regardless of context - even if "he was defending his family or accidentally harmed someone" - loses the respect of the community (Gabor, Matei, b. 1980). Interaction with outsiders is believed to inevitably impregnate the Gabor's conscience with foreign psychological material, since there is no prophylactic mechanism established by the collective spirit. Legal norms and the coercive mechanisms of state authority are perceived as taboos, respected to avoid public disgrace, not out of conviction in the principles of the official legislative system, even though, in practice, the concept of state justice as a means of resolving disputes among members of the group simply does not exist for the Roma in question.

The Gabors correctly perceive the conditional relationship between their clan's reticence toward state authorities and the centuries of persecution endured by their Roma ancestors, including their own. In the collective mentality, the idea persists of rejection at the hands of those who applied the law, to the extent that "the Gabors established the Gypsy court during Austro-Hungarian times, because the gendarmes would beat and insult them if they went to court" (Gabor, Francisc, b. 1948). Without analyzing the lack of concordance with historical reality—given that „Gypsy justice” clearly has much older roots, and the genesis of the Gabors cannot be precisely determined - the essential point remains the identification of the underlying causes for the strengthening of communal ethnocentrism and group self-isolation, namely the relationship between lawgiver and „Gypsy”.

Historicism, as well as the withdrawal of the Roma into *ahistory*, explains the principles of the indissoluble link between community and customary justice. The centrality and attribution of infallibility to the internal judicial system is not the result of relational dynamics specific to an idealized collectivity. Rather, the fear of extrinsic forces progressively welded the clan together, with group unity fulfilling the instinct of conservation and self-protection of nomadic *shatra*. These intrinsic tendencies cemented the community's sense of strength, indissolubly linked to communal peace, in every Roma clan, not only among the Gabors. Any

slight malfunction in the machinery of peaceful relations among members - any tense situation in the community's view - is perceived as synonymous with an assault on the integrity of the group. Justice is therefore subordinated to the principle of securing peace, while custom itself represents the external form of expressing the desire for stability. For this reason, once the „Gypsy court” is convened, the relatives of the litigants attempt to reconcile them amicably, in an effort to avoid the trial and the testing of the authority of the judicial assembly - a fact that in itself confirms the existence of problems within the group. The formalization of disputes, following the failure of reconciliation between accuser and accused, triggers the mobilization of the community, so that members of the collectivity gather, on a pre-established date, to witness the extinguishing of the conflict and the restoration of peace - that is, the resolution of problems - not between two individuals or two families of the clan, but of the entire collectivity as a whole (Rostaş, Luiza, b. 1928).

4. The Gabors court: structure and authority

The patriarchal relations characteristic of the clan are also manifested by the fact that the only one who can summon the „Gypsy court” is the man, including in the hypothetical situation where his own wife is “unjustly accused of having erred with another, and even if the woman wants to prove to the Gabors that it is not true, so that people will not gossip behind her back, about her and her family” (Gabor, Francisc, b. 1948). Despite the peripheral social status of the woman, within the studied community she can defend herself and express her position in regard to an unfounded accusation (Sala, Gabriel, p. 438). The traditional trial, given the clan's particularity, does not have an intimate character, since problems, regardless of their nature, are discussed at length during the process. The judicial custom arouses general interest in the community, capturing the group's attention, and this monopolization of social energies transforms the problem from a personal matter into a general one, a metamorphosis that constitutes a pillar of unity, peace, and the perpetuation of the Gabor Roma community.

The traditional procedure requires that the hierarchical structure specific to the group should also be reflected in the territorial arrangement of the audience at the open-air trial, composed exclusively of Gabors, namely the organization of a circle in which the front rows are occupied by men, arranged in the space according to their importance within the community, behind them, at the periphery of the circle, standing the women and children, the latter being in this way familiarized from an early age with Gabor customs (Gabor, Ştefan, b. 1952). The abrupt interruption of a speaker with prestige is a grave error and “is a great shame for the Gabor

who does this" (Gabor, Tundor, b. 1965), showing a crass lack of respect. Nevertheless, when context demands it, an address from the audience is allowed, provided the speaker employs a full communal repertoire of classical politeness formulas, through which he expresses profound respect for the judges and onlookers, thus excusing his untimely interruption, after which he states his position as a direct participant in the judged events - "that is, he says what he himself saw, nothing else, since he was not asked his opinion" (Gabor, Tundor, b. 1965).

The judicial panel does not comprise of a fixed number of members, this varying according to the social status and financial power of the litigating parties, yet "there must be at least three judges" (Gabor, Tundor, b. 1965), the maximum number being eleven. For the optimal functionality of the judicial custom, the number of judges cannot be even. Only representatives of the clan elites are invested with the status of judge, personalities who enjoy appreciation, respect, credibility, and hold moral authority over the other members of the community, this investiture being also conditioned by belonging to a good family, with economic strength. Practically, to be a judge and "to be someone among the Gabors you need name, value, and money" (Burcea, Ștefan, b. 1950). The quality of the judge represents the corollary of the respect enjoyed by the Gabor, thus the number of judges is extremely small compared, of course, to the total number of community members, and it goes without saying that the withdrawal of investiture is indissolubly linked to the loss of prestige, with the demotion taking place tacitly, as in any community not guided by written rules but by moral norms orally transmitted from generation to generation, as a consequence of a grave error.

Collective memory records that until the beginning of the 20th century, only a small group of Gabors had the honor and obligation of settling conflicts among Roma within the framework of traditional judicial custom. This form of applying community will was possible, just as in the case of recognizing a single leader, during the time when the nomadic tent-dwelling Gabors wintered in the area of the village Trei Sate (Burcea, Ștefan, b. 1950), and the group was *vollens-nollens* forced by circumstances to invest de facto a group of individuals with a unified judicial authority, given the physical interaction for several months among clan members. A large group of individuals was in danger of sliding into chaos without such an internal mechanism to counterbalance entropy. When the Gabors became sedentary, or rather semi-sedentary, building houses in the villages of Crăciunești, Budiu, Cocoși, or Hărtău, the elitist group of judges at first dispersed, after which it recorded a numerical increase, while respecting the elective and hereditary character of the judge's status. Within the local communities such small nuclei of authority formed, composed of local elites, who formally

acknowledged and still acknowledge the moral authority of Crăciunești. During the interwar period, the number of judges did not rise spectacularly. The limited area did not require such a process. Things changed radically, however, after the Second World War, with the migration of the Gabors and their settlement in various towns of Transylvania, and beyond, which led to the irreversible dispersal of the group of judges who, due to the expansion of the habitat and in number growth, irreversibly lost their unity. Thus, each local community was forced, for practical reasons, to create and invest with authority its own cell of judges, who would resolve major issues locally within their sphere of influence and cancel centrifugal tendencies, namely the establishment of anarchy.

The constant increase in the number of judges has not, to this day, determined the alteration of the specific judicial custom, but it has imposed a natural hierarchization of judges according to “rank, family, and the village from which their ancestors come,” so that, if necessary, “if they have problems to solve, they are judged by the great judges from Crăciunești, Budiu or other villages,” but “the Gabors of the highest rank could not and cannot be judged, except by God” (Gabor, Matei, b. 1980). Obviously, the latter statement is an exaggeration, since the community has the power to withdraw investiture in cases of unforgivable mistakes by the elites. The leaders of the Gabor communities become infallible at the moment they are granted judicial authority, yet absolutism and infallibility are circumscribed by clan rules.

On the other hand, infallibility, which in the past manifested in all aspects of nomadic social life and the derived elements of the Gabor hierarchy, has adapted to the new realities of sedentary modernism, through the metamorphosis of real, palpable authority into a moral authority based on the respect imposed by the elite’s rank: “how could I judge the greatest among the Gabors? Such a thing is not allowed” (Gabor, Ruski, b. 1943).

The value of judges also requires material recognition of their merits meaning that they are paid for their participation in the „Gypsy” trial with sums whose consistency grows directly proportional to the social status and economic power of those who request the traditional process and, not least, to the nature of the dispute, so that “it can reach over ten thousand euros per judge” (Gabor, Ruski, b. 1943). This form of remuneration for those who apply archaic law is known within the clan by the term bribe, though of course without the consecrated semantic connotation, since all expenses related to the trial, including collateral ones such as food, transport, and accommodation, are borne by the plaintiff, who pays the amounts requested by the judges before the trial begins.

Regarding the unfolding of the judicial custom, tradition has been preserved both in form and in substance, the procedure requiring the judges to elect a president who coordinates the trial, while the other judges primarily have the role of jurors, with the mention that they also have the right and indeed the obligation to ask questions of the parties in conflict (Burcea, Ștefan, b. 1950). Each of the parties is represented by a lawyer, "chosen from among the family's close ones, of the highest possible rank and better regarded than the one he defends," whose role is to mediate between the judges and his client, to guarantee his client's value in front of the community, and, not least, to serve as a buffer between the two conflicting parties, since through his very presence he imposes on the opposing side a conciliatory attitude and the suppression of aggressive instincts (Burcea, Ștefan, b. 1950). Practically, regardless of the nature of the conflict, disrespectful treatment of the other party is sanctioned by the community and the judges, being perceived as a mockery of the social status of the guarantor, namely the lawyer: "the guilty or the innocent do not argue with each other, because immediately the lawyer says: what, are you arguing with me? And then they must fall silent, for it is a great shame. If they have lawyers, they don't even speak to each other" (Gabor, Szuszana, b. 1963).

The defense lawyer, guarantor of his client, assumes a thankless role in the unfolding of the judicial custom, since defending an individual who has committed a grave mistake from the group's perspective - considered *a priori* guilty by the community regardless of the judges' ruling (since justice is often relative, depending heavily on the „Gypsy oath”, performed after a ritual that will be analyzed in detail later) - can damage his prestige, especially if the guilty party, despite the evidence, maintains his innocence throughout the trial. Practically, "you risk losing your rank if you defend a liar" (Burcea, Iancu, b. 1961). On the other hand, the accused benefits from the presumption of innocence, so regardless of the deed, the defendant has the right to a full trial and implicitly to a lawyer to defend him.

The Roma trial begins at the beginning of the day, immediately after sunrise, with the judges opening the judicial custom, naturally employing standard formulas, the procedure imposing a gradual introduction to the subject, with discussions focusing on general community issues (Burcea, Ștefan, b. 1950). Gradually, however, after this introduction, one of the judges, usually the one invested as president, presents to the audience the reason for the meeting, not before a final attempt at amicable reconciliation of the parties (Burcea, Ștefan, b. 1950). After the failure of this last chance to resolve the conflict, the beginning of the „Gypsy trial” is declared.

The president is the one who chooses the first speaker, addressing him a series of questions related to the dispute, and the one given the floor is most often the defense lawyer, who presents to the audience at length the

character traits and merits of the accused, after which the accuser will refer broadly to the nature of the dispute, avoiding details (Gabor, Ruski, b. 1943). After this introductory stage, jury representatives will dissect the issue in depth, questioning, depending on the inspiration of the moment, both the litigating parties and their witnesses, a decisive factor in the final decision being the lawyers' pleadings.

The judges have the moral obligation to follow attentively and undisguisedly these speeches, true oratorical masterpieces from the community's perspective, especially since nothing is recorded in writing, as well as the statements of the plaintiff, the accused, and, as mentioned, the witnesses, addressing them based on these a series of questions (Gabor, Ruski, b. 1943), to establish as solid an understanding as possible of the facts or to clarify contradictory aspects of the statements. Witnesses, in turn, cannot be contested by either party, regardless of kinship ties to those involved in the dispute, since "at the Gypsy trial there are no lies" (Gabor Ianoş, b. 1969). Witnesses and even lawyers are not indispensable to the unfolding of the Roma trial, their involvement depending on the parties' choice, and on the nature of the dispute. The judges' mission is to resolve "insults, thefts, misunderstandings about property or money, girl kidnappings, deceptions between spouses, and others. Among us, from ancient times, there are no murders or rapes. Anyway, even if there were, they would not be judged because there is no greater shame than for a Gabor girl not to get married virgin" (Gabor, Szuszana, b. 1963).

5. The Gabor Roma oath as a judicial foundation

After the hearings are completed, if necessary, one of the key moments of the trial follows, namely the taking of the „Gypsy oath”. Performed in front of community representatives, it has a sacred character, and therefore “the Gabor who swears is obliged to tell the whole truth” (Gabor, Szuszana, b. 1963), since otherwise it is believed that false oath transforms into an extremely dangerous curse for the family, the children, and for the one who dared to mock this ritual act. The sacredness of the oath for the Gabors makes it so that only a reckless individual would distort the truth under oath and for this reason “the one who knows he has something to hide admits his guilt” (Mikloş, Elisabeta, b. 1933), thus avoiding becoming the victim of malevolent forces.

The oath was also a fundamental ritual element within the judicial custom of archaic Romanian communities. Justice was dispensed depending on the oath sworn by the litigant or litigants. Interestingly, among Romanians, the parties involved in a dispute could counterbalance the decision of the judges in their favor by bringing in a double number of oath-takers to swear for them compared to those swearing for their opponent, the

battle thus unfolding between parties according to the principles of geometric progression. Women could not be oath-takers, only witnesses, making themselves available to the agents of community justice. False oath was punished, historical documents referring to fines consisting of confiscation of a certain number of oxen from each oath-taker suspected of false swearing, these oxen being returned if it was later proven that the oath was true. During the feudal period, and not only then, Romanian villages were guided by the "law of the land" or "custom of the land," in addition to "imperial codes" and "boyar codes," the supreme legislative power being held by the "council of elders," which convened whenever a pressing local need arose.

Among the Romanians, the judgment of the elders took on two relatively distinct forms, depending on the place, time, and technique of their unfolding. Thus, the "judgment at the borders" (*judecata la hotare*) was held at the boundaries of the village estate, beneath a tree with profound spiritual significance for the community, where, according to tradition, the elders of the village would gather periodically or on special occasions. On the day designated for judgment, they arrived in the morning and took their seats in a circle on wooden stumps or large stones. The council listened to the parties in conflict, then to the witnesses, after which they deliberated over a ruling, which usually settled disputes concerning land ownership. Thus, the act of justice delivered at the borders became "the elders' decision." The second form of judgment specific to Romanians was carried out inside the village, either at the threshold of the church—attended only by elders—or in the village square, where the entire community participated. The act of „*Gypsy justice*” evidently presents similarities with this latter form of judgment, since the Roma did not, as nomads, relate to territorial boundaries. The „*Gypsy court*” thus represents an action in which the entire collectivity takes part, not just a restricted group of individuals.

As for Gabor „*Gypsy justice*”, in the very real situation in which a Gabor taints the sacred oath through lying, the community will later sanction him by marginalizing him and annulling his social status, both because of the lie - which is neither forgotten nor forgiven - and because of the curse believed to weigh upon the liar and his family. In practice, in certain litigations, the community grants verdicts in advance, this communal characteristic also making it possible to impose punishments in cases where the judges themselves are unable to sanction the guilty according to merit, due to his having sworn the sacred oath. The community thus assumes once again the role of supervisor and enforcer of justice, with the purpose of conserving and maintaining unaltered the moral principles defining the group, punishing those guilty of distorting the „*Gypsy truth*”. It must be noted that the oath cannot be contested or commented upon by Gabor

present at the trial, regardless of their reservations concerning its authenticity; therefore, formally and only in theory, the oath represents—in the eyes of the assembly—the moment of highest sincerity in the trial (Gabor, Ștefan, b. 1952). Furthermore, in order to prove their good intentions, impartiality, fairness, and incorruptibility, the judges are compelled by archaic rules to take the „*Gypsy oath*” themselves, and they also possess the authority to demand that witnesses perform the ritual act if, in their judgment, it is necessary for the testimonies to be credible or even considered by the jury (Gabor, Ștefan, b. 1952).

The act itself authenticates the good faith of those involved in the trial. Without the consciousness of the ritual’s sacredness, intrinsic justice would no longer be immutable, and the descent of the archaic trial into derision would provoke the implosion of the principles that hold the group together. The intrinsic coercive force counterbalances the centrifugal spirit accelerated by modernity, destructive to the value system. It was this value system that in fact generated the „*Gypsy oath*”, not the reverse; the traditional oath was not the factor that shaped the system of values, but its foundation. The role of the ritual act is to resolve contradictory situations exceeding the competence of judges, after the procedure of hearing parties and witnesses has been exhausted. Thus, the archaic oath is not a stage in the unfolding of the trial but rather an ultimatum against falsehood - an extreme method of deciphering ambiguous situations and identifying truth - used by the community in extraordinary circumstances, as a way of overcoming crises in the resolution of litigation when questions remain after the evaluation of evidence and testimonies.

On the other hand, since the „*Gypsy oath*” is not performed only in exceptional cases, but also by any member of the community about whom “rumors have spread” (Rostaș, Luiza, b. 1928), concerning a possible adultery, theft, etc., and who wishes to dispel all doubt in the eyes of the community and fully rehabilitate his or her dignity, the ritual act automatically serves also to annul slander. The honor of the wronged person is restored, since “a woman or a man of whom it is said that he or she was unfaithful—if they take the oath, it means they are entirely without blame” (Stoica, Lajos, b. 1965).

The necessity for total sincerity in the ritual - since otherwise “the curse will fall upon the liar” (Mate, Gabor b. 1949) - makes most conflicts among Gabors find resolution the moment those involved are compelled to perform the „*Gypsy oath*”: “when it comes to swearing, the guilty one does not swear, because it is dangerous” (Burseca Ștefan, b. 1950). The conviction that falsifying the ritual inevitably attracts misfortune upon liars and their kin is deeply rooted in the collective mentality; thus, the informants consulted for this study insisted that all cases of false oaths ended tragically. Superstition

therefore protects the ritual act from desacralization, and the judgment of the Gabors from dilution.

The „*Gypsy oath*” is carried out according to predetermined rules, combining ritual elements that serve as supports for credibility and truth-detection with elements intended to summon malevolent forces as compensation for lies: “a stick is taken, sharpened at one end, and a cross is carved at the other end; bread and salt are broken over the cross. The stick is then planted in the middle of the Roma. The oath is taken on one’s knees, facing the sun. The swearing is done with four crossed fingers - two from the left, two from the right - over the cross carved on the stick. The oath is sworn upon family, grandchildren, siblings, parents - upon whatever one holds dearest! The judges tell you what to swear on, and you must do it. If not, it means you are lying” (Gabor, Francisc, b. 1948). The doubts surrounding the situation amplify the complexity of the oath, the progressive enlargement of the sphere tainted by falsehood being intended as its counterforce. As a result, family holds a central place in the oath, because of its profound significance to the Gabor and the deep emotional ties with family members. Thus, relatives are integrated into the unfolding of the judicial custom as indispensable elements in the discovery of truth, “because one does not lie upon family” (Burseca, Iancu, b. 1961).

The sacred oath mainly constitutes a guarantee for the community that „*Gypsy justice*” has been done and peace restored - peace being the ultimate objective of this intra-communal mechanism of social control. Their history has taught the Gabors not to waste their energies in vendettas, quarrels, or feuds: “the judges more or less know what happened, and above all they want to cleanse the guilty of shame in front of the Gabors, to make justice and peace among the Roma, because it makes no sense to take revenge on one another. At the end of the trial they say: Let’s make peace! If you show you are sorry, they may forgive you. But if you are stubborn and do not admit your mistake, then they will put you in your place” (Burseca, Iancu, b. 1961). Expressing regret shows that the individual continues to accept the guardianship of communal spirit. To treat with indifference the supervisory role of the group means natural exclusion from it, guided by collective conscience - as in any shame-based culture - and not by individual conscience.

After taking the oath, the parties are compelled to bury the hatchet, at least formally, by shaking hands in a symbolic gesture of the indivisible and indestructible character of intra-community ties. The performance of the oath also officially marks the end of the judicial investigation, the climax beyond which no further questions are addressed to any participant, directly or indirectly involved in the dispute. At this point the „*Gypsy court*” enters its final stage - the delivery of the verdict - rendered if reconciliation has not

been achieved between the parties after the performance of the oath by one of them: “at the end, after the man has sworn, they ask if you are satisfied! If not, they will reconcile you themselves” (Gabor, Szuszana, b. 1963). In practice, the chance of reconciliation is offered both at the beginning and at the end of the trial. A voluntary settlement of the conflict, without judicial intervention, is a much clearer sign of restored communal peace. Imposed peace, by contrast, may leave long-term frustrations and resentments, harmful to group harmony. Consensus on the outcome is thus preferred over the mere acceptance of a verdict.

6. Sanctions, appeals, and the limits of customary law

The verdict is the result of deliberation, with no predetermined duration, by the members of the jury, who recall to one another the testimonies of witnesses and advocates, so that, on the basis of the details presented, „*Gypsy justice*” can be achieved. The judges must reach complete consensus on each issue discussed during the deliberation, held in private, away from curious eyes. There, based on what was heard during the trial - and, at least theoretically, retained in memory - they draw logical conclusions, formulate reasonings and deductions, whose corollary is precisely „*Gypsy justice*” (Gabor, Matei, b. 1980). The verdict is established by consensus, a single dissenting judge being enough to prolong deliberations and, ultimately, to “break the trial,” meaning that all participants, active or passive, return home, after being officially informed that the jury did not reach unanimity and that discussions will continue, with the date of the verdict to be made public later (Gabor, Ruski, b. 1943).

In such a case, the „*Gypsy trial*” “does not break apart, and may last for weeks, until they reach agreement” (Gabor, Ruski, b. 1943). However, in this last situation, the judges are forbidden any direct or indirect contact with either party, to avoid influence or corruption. The failure to achieve consensus - among Gabors, according to collective memory, a hypothetical scenario—leads to the declaration of the judges’ incapacity to reach a common denominator. In such a case, a new judicial assembly must be organized, without either party having to pay the jurors (Gabor, Ștefan, b. 1952). Under normal conditions, when the jury is in agreement, the guilt of the accused is determined concretely and coherently: the charges proven and the unfounded accusations alike are clarified before the community with detailed explanations. After this, regardless of how much time was spent in deliberation, the judicial custom resumes and enters its final stage - the announcement of the verdict.

In delivering the verdict, the judges employ all the bombastic art at their disposal to convince the audience of the logic of their reasoning, the motivation behind approaching the accusations from certain positions, and

the soundness of the decisions made, all in the name of respecting the principles of applying „*Gypsy justice*”. The members of the jury strive to issue value judgments, demonstrating to the Gabor that they possess skills in expression, deductive sharpness, and experience as judges - in short, that they are worthy of the trust invested in them. As representatives of a culture of shame, the Gabor place great value on words in general, and especially on artfully crafted words, so oratorical talent represents a significant means of sifting values: “to be respected, you must know how to speak to the Gypsies. You cannot make them listen by beating them” (Gabor, Ștefan, b. 1952). Throughout the unfolding of the judicial custom, the judges obtain a new certificate of guarantee of their own worth, of the influence they hold among the Gabor, because “their word is listened to” (Gabor, Ștefan, b. 1952). For this reason, each juror speaks in turn before the audience, using respectful formulas toward the judge who grants them the floor, ensuring that no aspect of the case generating the disputes remains unexplained.

The verdict is announced to the community in an appropriate tone - one that requires respect and at the same time gives the audience the feeling of being appreciated by the speaker, whether the jury president or a simple member. The sanctions applied to the guilty can today among the Gabor be of two types: moral or financial, meaning the payment of civil compensation in money, gold, or objects of material value for the Gabor (Stoica, Lajos, b. 1965). The extreme punishment of exclusion from the community, characteristic of other Roma groups as well as Transylvanian Roma of the 19th century (Grigore, Delia, p. 130), is not even remembered by the interviewed subjects as a form applied for grave offenses, although this drastic measure is stipulated in the unwritten rules of „*Gabor Gypsy law*”.

Thus functioning only at a theoretical level, the punishment of exile and the hypothetical labelling of the guilty with the status of pariah for the community nonetheless represents an important guarantee for preserving archaic relationships among members of the group, giving them the assurance that they hold control over levers necessary for carrying out a process of moral prophylaxis within the kin group. In any case, the coercive factor as well as intra-community punishments are not marked by harshness. Modernization has decisively altered the regime and diversity of punishments, which now affect the individual morally and not physically.

The evolution is somewhat surprising given the fact that even today, in various groups of „Romanian Gypsies”, whipping the guilty while tied to the pillar of shame is still practiced, and in the old Transylvanian Roma communities, the judges, knezes, or voivodes of Roma groups, like the leaders of the majority population, held the right of life and death over their subjects, just as their Romanian counterparts did. Indeed, in archaic Romanian communities, punishments applied for violations of local rules

varied: the punishments of the “small court” included reprimand, ostracism, compensation, or beating. As for the “great court,” things became more complicated, since the entire rural community was endangered; it applied harsh punishments such as execution by clubbing, branding, hand mutilation administered by elders to those guilty of murder, or stoning.

The punishment most frequently applied by contemporary Gabor is the fine, the guilty party being obliged to pay material compensation to the injured person. This is an efficient way of resolving a dispute brought before the „*Gypsy court*”, since moral sanctions deeply wound the pride of the individual and his family. The feeling of shame generated by criticism means a great deal for the Gabor, whose culture promotes in every aspect the idea of communal shame: “There is no greater shame for a Gabor than to be mocked at trial” (Burseca, Ștefan, b. 1950). Reprimand is carried out in front of the audience without any restraint, and the one subjected to public disgrace is forced to adopt a humble attitude, to prove receptiveness to the community’s disapproval of his reprehensible acts and to accept that he represented the weak link in the community’s functional mechanism.

In judging disputes that do not involve the application of moral sanctions - such as conflicts related to inheritance, division of property, disagreements over money and other material goods, etc. - after the verdict is pronounced, the parties are consulted by the judges regarding the fairness of the decisions taken, filtered, by definition, through the subjectivity of each individual. And “if they are satisfied,” meaning they publicly declare agreement with the fairness of the measures, the dispute will end with the enforcement of the judges’ decision: “My father inherited from my grandfather a very valuable glass. He was the eldest son, and in our Gabor inheritance system, the eldest is favored. My father’s younger brother received two glasses, not as valuable. He was dissatisfied and called for the „*Gypsy court*”. There, he only dealt in lies, and for reconciliation my father was forced to pay 40,000 lei in compensation, because he accepted the judges’ ruling. Afterwards he regretted it, but there was nothing he could do. Anyway, he later sold his glass for 1,700,000 lei” (Gabor, Szuszana, b. 1963).

If one of the two parties considers that the jurors’ measures lack moral justification in „*Gypsy law*”, they publicly declare dissatisfaction with the way the dispute was resolved, along with the express wish to appeal. The retrial follows the same procedure, except that there are different judges, and the sums demanded by them, namely the bribes, will be much larger: “You can appeal as much as you want, but it costs! From one trial to another you pay more and more bribes. At appeal, it’s about the same trial, only you lose more money. Gypsy justice is justice! You can’t really find other Gabor to please you” (Gabor, Szuszana, b. 1963). Obviously, an appeal decided differently would amplify the problems within the group. The much-coveted

communal peace excludes such situations from the community's mechanism. Not only would the judicial custom face the risk of devaluation, but the prestige of the judges from the first trial would also be affected, since altering the sentence implies an error on their part. If encouraged, such a situation would drag the community into a vicious circle, harmful in the long term to the solidarity of the kin group. As a result, normally, appeals are doomed from the start to lamentable failure, producing further dissatisfaction for the complainant, who essentially pays for insubordination against the community's authorities.

Judicial sentences, once both parties have accepted the verdict, can no longer be contested later, and the payment of the sums imposed by the jury, in the form of civil compensation, can be made on the spot before the audience, with the victim thus being "entitled and peace made between Gypsies" (Mate, Gabor b. 1949). If the fined party is not solvent, a deadline is established by mutual agreement for payment, exceeding which leads to an increase in the amount due to "late-payment interest" (Rostaş, Luiza, b. 1928), set by the judges after pronouncing the verdict. Respecting the sanctions is mandatory, with no room for alternatives or freedom of choice, as the community is inflexible from this standpoint as well: "What the elders say is law, and there is no such thing as not respecting what they have decided" (Rostaş, Luiza, b. 1928). Problems arise only in the case of delaying debt repayment, the postponement not putting into doubt the sacrosanct nature of the judicial decision.

According to the unwritten rules of the kin group, indefinite delay in paying the material obligations imposed by the judges grants the creditor the right to abduct a member of the debtor's family, as collateral against the debts. Logic leads us to conclude that the group has encountered such situations over the course of its history, since this method exists as a solution for extreme cases: "If they don't pay you, you can take someone from the family, wife, son, daughter... and then they surely give the money. The abducted person is treated with respect, only guarded and not allowed to leave home. It's like a kind of servant, because usually they take women... they put them to work, give them food, but no one abuses them. My sister was taken, because after buying a glass, my father had to pay the middleman 50,000 lei during the communist era. That's what the elders said at trial. My father didn't want to pay, so they took his daughter. Immediately he borrowed the money, gathered some kin, and went after my sister. If they had done anything to her, it would have meant bloodshed. He paid, and they gave her back. In the end they came to an agreement, and he didn't have to pay interest" (Gabor, Szuszana, b. 1963). This ultimate method, as a procedure of intimidating the debtor - an ultimatum obliging the poor payer to fulfill his financial obligations - may have appeared only in the 19th

century within nomadic „*Gypsy law*”, as the authority of the leader deteriorated. For centuries, the leader had absolute control over the lives of his subjects, who were forced into unconditional submission (von Wlislöcki, Heinrick, p. 22). His absolutist authority was replaced by the refinement of a system of unwritten laws meant to cover possible breaches in intra-community control. Logic suggests that in a group where the leader had the right of life and death over his subjects, there was no need for a system of norms of great depth.

The adoption of radical solutions to cover the void of authority at the top also encompasses the abduction of a family member of the individual who neglected the community's decision. Essentially, the method represented an efficient means of preventing internal acts of indiscipline, which in the long run would have thrown traditional judgment into ridicule and irreversibly harmed the unity and strength of the group, endangering its very existence. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the Gabor's sedentarization, their numerical growth, their dispersion in the territory, and, not least, the evolution of society, are decisive factors complicating the process of maintaining archaic judicial custom as the sole means of resolving disputes of any kind among the Gabor, as a lever of community control and respect for their traditions. Despite the pressure of modernity, Gabor Roma communities in the major Transylvanian cities still perceive traditional judgment as the purest means of obtaining justice - both for elites and for individuals with peripheral social status within the community - the ancestral wisdom of the group's patriarchs being, by virtue of ethnocentric principles, superior to all the institutions and laws of the state.

7. Conclusions

The research demonstrates that the justice system of the Gabor Roma is not merely a set of practices for resolving disputes, but a profound cultural institution that safeguards truth, honor, and collective responsibility. A crucial observation is that the community firmly identifies itself as "Gypsies" („*ṭigani*") and explicitly rejects the designation Roma. This insistence on self-naming reflects not only a historical consciousness but also an assertion of cultural authenticity, which must be respected in any serious analysis. The two forms of judgment - whether held at the village boundaries or within the community - reveal the symbolic role of space and ritual in legitimizing justice. Central to this system is the sacred oath, a moral and spiritual tool that restores trust, ensures compliance, and protects social harmony. For the Gabor Roma, the oath is more than a legal formality: it is a sacred act that intertwines family, faith, and community, making dishonesty both a social and spiritual transgression. Fieldwork confirms that fear of the curse and respect for tradition guarantee the effectiveness of this justice system

without reliance on external coercion. In this way, justice is not imposed but internalized, grounded in shared values and collective belief. Despite the challenges posed by modernization and integration into state institutions, the persistence of these practices highlights the resilience of the Gabor identity. By rejecting imposed labels and maintaining their own cultural forms of justice, the Gabor Roma demonstrate both resistance and adaptability. Ultimately, their system reaffirms the capacity of the community to preserve cohesion, regulate conflicts, and protect its distinct moral universe in a rapidly changing world.

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The Ethnopolitical Identity of the Gagauz: Between the Russian World and European Integration

Pavel Vintilă¹

Abstract

The ethnopolitical identity of the Gagauz community represents a relevant example of the interaction between culture, memory, and geopolitics in the post-Soviet space. The study examines, from a constructivist perspective, how Orthodoxy, linguistic Russification, and media narratives contribute to maintaining the symbolic attachment to the “Russian World,” while also fostering the emergence of new hybrid identities within the process of European integration. The analysis reveals that Europeanization in Gagauzia does not entail the replacement of traditional identity, but rather a gradual negotiation between cultural continuity and adaptation to European civic values.

Keywords

Ethnopolitical identity, Gagauzia, European integration, geopolitics, Europeanization, Orthodoxy.

1. Introduction.

The ethnopolitical identity of the Gagauz represents one of the most complex and enduring topics in post-Soviet research concerning the Republic of Moldova. A Turkic-speaking community of Orthodox faith, the Gagauz have asserted themselves throughout the twentieth century as a distinct ethnic group with a dual symbolic loyalty: cultural allegiance to Russia and territorial affiliation with the Republic of Moldova. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Gagauzia became a unique case of ethno-territorial autonomy in Eastern Europe, reflecting the tension between national identity-building and competing geopolitical projects in the region. In the 1990s, the adoption of the Law on the Special Legal Status of Gagauzia (Gagauz-Yeri) (1994) represented a political compromise between Chişinău and Comrat, designed to prevent the escalation of ethnic conflict and to provide a framework for peaceful coexistence. However, over the past three decades, the Gagauz identity has evolved in a context marked by the rivalry between the “Russian World” and the European vector, by successive

¹ PhD Student, Doctoral School of Humanities and Political Sciences, “Moldova State University”, vintilapavelmail@gmail.com.

identity crises, and by a slow adaptation to Moldova's political and economic transformations. The scientific relevance of this research stems from the need to understand the mechanisms of formation, preservation, and political instrumentalization of the Gagauz identity within the contemporary context of European integration and the information warfare waged by the Russian Federation in the post-Soviet space. The analysis contributes to the broader study of peripheral identities and center-region relations, offering an explanatory framework useful for social cohesion and cultural security policies in the Republic of Moldova.

1.1. Purpose and Objectives of the Research

The general purpose of the research is to examine the identity configurations of the Gagauz community and to identify how these influence geopolitical orientations and social cohesion in the Republic of Moldova.

In this regard, the study aims to achieve the following specific objectives:

- To analyze the genesis and historical evolution of Gagauz identity in relation to the process of Moldovan statehood;
- To investigate the linguistic, religious, and civic dimensions of collective identity;
- To assess the role of the Russian Federation in maintaining an East-oriented geopolitical identity;
- To examine the perceptions of the Gagauz community regarding the European Union and Romania;
- To determine the correlation between ethnic identity and electoral behavior;
- To anticipate possible scenarios for identity reconciliation and European integration of Gagauzia.

By achieving these objectives, the research contributes to understanding how a minority community negotiates its identity within a polarized geopolitical environment and within a state situated at the crossroads of civilizations.

1.2. Working Hypotheses

The study is based on three major hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The Gagauz identity is hybrid and adaptive in nature, shaped by Soviet heritage, Orthodoxy, and informational dependence on Russia.

Hypothesis 2: The pro-Russian geopolitical orientation of Gagauzia results primarily from the politicization of identity rather than genuine opposition to the European model.

Hypothesis 3: The growth of intercultural contacts and exposure to the European informational space may foster the emergence of an inclusive civic identity compatible with Moldova's European integration.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

2.1. The Theory of Ethnopolitical Identity

The concept of ethnopolitical identity lies at the intersection of political science, sociology, and anthropology, providing an analytical framework for understanding the collective behavior of ethnic minorities. As formulated by Anthony D. Smith (1991), ethnic identity represents a “community of myth, memory, and solidarity,” in which shared symbols and historical experiences ensure transgenerational cohesion. This ethno-symbolist perspective explains how founding myths and collective traditions guarantee group continuity amid historical transformations and external pressures.

In the case of Gagauzia, these elements are reflected in the preservation of Soviet memory, the role of Orthodoxy as a pillar of stability, and the persistence of the “Russian protection” myth as a guarantor of local identity. After 1991, these reference points were politically reinterpreted, becoming instruments for legitimizing both the autonomous status of the region and its Eastern geopolitical orientation.

In contrast to ethnic essentialism, constructivist theories (Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983; Brubaker, 2004) assert that identities are social and discursive constructions shaped by political context. Benedict Anderson defines the nation as an “imagined community” sustained through language and mass communication, while Rogers Brubaker argues that ethnicity functions as a “cognitive frame” strategically used for mobilizing solidarity. Applied to Gagauzia, this perspective explains the post-1991 reactivation of ethnic identity as a reaction to the state-building process in Moldova.

Within a state promoting civic Moldovan identity and the Romanian language as central pillars of cohesion, Gagauz elites transformed ethnic belonging into a political bargaining tool. According to Fredrik Barth (1969), ethnic identity persists due to social boundaries separating “us” from “others.” In Gagauzia, these boundaries are both linguistic (Russian in public life, Gagauz in private) and territorial (the Gagauz-Yeri autonomy).

From a postcolonial standpoint, Homi K. Bhabha (1994) describes hybrid identity as a product of interaction between distinct cultural worlds. The Gagauz identity fits this pattern—Turkic by origin, Orthodox by faith, and Russified by language. This hybridity provides adaptability but also geopolitical vulnerability, turning identity into a field of contestation between Russian and European discourses. As Pål Kolstø (2016) observes, post-Soviet minorities such as the Gagauz, Abkhazians, or Ossetians use ethnicity not merely as a cultural expression but as a political survival strategy.

Hence, the theory of ethnopolitical identity offers a coherent framework for understanding Gagauzia as a space where historical memory (the USSR),

religious loyalty (Russian Orthodoxy), and geopolitical pressure (European integration) intersect in a continuous process of identity redefinition.

2.2. The Relationship between Identity, Power, and Space

In contemporary geopolitical thought, identity, power, and space form an inseparable conceptual triad. John Agnew (1998) emphasizes that space is not merely geographical but also a political and symbolic dimension where collective identities are constructed and instrumentalized. In this regard, Gagauzia functions as a micro-geography of power, where cultural belonging is converted into political capital.

Gearóid Ó Tuathail (Toal, 1996) argues that geopolitics not only describes the distribution of power but also the discursive production of space — the process through which territory acquires meaning via narratives and representations. In Gagauzia, narratives about language, religion, and tradition serve as symbolic tools delineating boundaries between “us” and “others.”

Michel Foucault (1980) provides an explanatory framework through the notion of “technologies of power”: authority is exercised through discourse, education, and institutions. In Gagauzia, Russian media, the Orthodox Church, and Soviet memory operate as such mechanisms of identity reproduction. Pierre Bourdieu (1991) complements this view with the concept of “collective habitus” — a set of cultural predispositions structuring political perception. Among the Gagauz, a habitus shaped by the Russian language and Orthodox values fosters a paternalistic view of the state and skepticism toward Western modernity.

From the perspective of cultural security theory (Wæver, 1995; Buzan, 1998), Russia has succeeded in securitizing Gagauzia’s cultural identity, transforming it into both a geopolitical subject and an instrument of regional influence. The relationship between identity, power, and space thus illustrates how Russia and the West compete to define Gagauzia symbolically, each projecting its own civilizational model and vision of belonging.

2.3. The Geopolitical Dimension of Identity

The Gagauz identity cannot be separated from the post-Soviet geopolitical context, in which the Russian Federation employs culture, religion, and language as tools of influence. Igor Zevelev (2016) notes that Moscow has evolved from the paradigm of “Russian compatriots” to that of the “Russian World” (Russkiy Mir), which legitimizes the protection of Orthodox and Russophone minorities abroad.

In Gagauzia, this discourse manifests through information warfare: Russian media, the Church, and local elites reproduce narratives portraying

Russia as a guarantor of stability and the European Union as a moral threat. In Bourdieusian terms, this represents a struggle for symbolic capital — control over meaning and legitimacy.

Conversely, the European Union promotes a civic and pluralist identity, yet the communication of these values is often perceived as distant and technocratic. This narrative asymmetry explains why a significant portion of the Gagauz population continues to identify with the East, even while materially benefiting from cooperation with the West.

Thus, the identity conflict in Gagauzia is symbolic and informational rather than military, reflecting a confrontation between two civilizational models: one rooted in Orthodoxy and Soviet memory, and the other grounded in European values of pluralism and democratic governance.

3. Research Methodology

The research is based on a qualitative-comparative design aimed at analyzing how the ethnopolitical identity of the Gagauz is constructed, reproduced, and instrumentalized within public and geopolitical discourses. The approach follows the constructivist paradigm, which views identity as a product of social, institutional, and symbolic interactions.

The analysis operates on three levels:

1. **Structural** – the legal and institutional framework of the Gagauz-Yeri autonomy;
2. **Discursive** – identity and geopolitical representations in mass media, education, and political discourse;
3. **Perceptual** – public attitudes and values, assessed through recent surveys (IPP, IRI, IMAS, 2022–2024)

The methods applied include documentary analysis, content analysis, and source triangulation, combining academic, legislative, and sociological data. The study's limitations stem from the absence of in-depth qualitative research specifically focused on Gagauz communities and from the volatility of the geopolitical environment, which may rapidly alter perceptions. Nevertheless, triangulation ensures the robustness of conclusions and the interpretative relevance of the results.

4. Identity Dynamics of the Gagauz Community: Between Cultural Continuity and Geopolitical Polarization

4.1. Linguistic Identity and Processes of Russification

From a demographic perspective, the Gagauz community remains one of the most stable ethnic components of the Republic of Moldova. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the Gagauz population decreased

from 148,000 in 2004 to 112,000 in 2014 and approximately 97,000 in 2024 (preliminary data), maintaining a steady share of around 4% of the total population. Over the same period, the proportion of Slavic-origin groups (Ukrainians and Russians) declined, while the share of those identifying as Romanians gradually increased. This relative stability reflects the internal cohesion of the Gagauz community and its capacity to preserve cultural and religious identity despite broader demographic and migratory changes.

Language constitutes the central marker of collective identity and the main channel for transmitting cultural values. Among the Gagauz, linguistic evolution follows a broader Eastern European trend, where traditional minority languages are gradually replaced in public life by dominant communication languages. According to the 2014 census, the Gagauz language was declared as a mother tongue by roughly 85,000 individuals, but only 51,000 reported using it daily (NBS, 2014). This discrepancy reveals an ongoing process of linguistic assimilation and the consolidation of Russian as the primary medium of communication in education, media, and administration.

During the Soviet era, Russian was associated with modernity and social prestige — a perception that persisted after the USSR's collapse. Today, educational institutions in Gagauzia still operate primarily in Russian, while Romanian-language proficiency remains limited, particularly among older generations. From a sociological perspective, the dominance of Russian sustains cultural autonomy but simultaneously reinforces informational dependence on the Russian media space.

Linguistic Russification in Gagauzia is therefore not merely a historical legacy but a continuing geopolitical mechanism that maintains the region's cultural orientation within Russia's informational orbit. Language functions here as a form of symbolic power through which geopolitical belonging becomes internalized as identity. However, younger Gagauz — especially urban and university-educated individuals — display growing openness to multilingualism and a pragmatic interest in Romanian and English, seen as tools of social mobility. The UNICEF Moldova – Index Youth Report (2019) confirms a steady increase in youth participation in multilingual education and international exchange programs, suggesting a gradual transition toward a more open and adaptable identity compatible with European integration.

4.2. Religion and Orthodoxy as a Vector of Influence

Religion plays a central role in shaping Gagauz identity, serving both as an expression of faith and as a geopolitical marker. As a Turkic-speaking but Orthodox Christian population, the Gagauz represent a unique synthesis in the Eurasian context — combining Eastern cultural heritage with Byzantine spirituality.

Historically, this dual identity translated into a dual loyalty: spiritual allegiance to the Russian Orthodox Church and political affinity with the Russian state, perceived as the protector of Orthodoxy. During the Soviet period, religion was tolerated and reinterpreted within a national framework; Orthodoxy survived as a form of cultural continuity rather than opposition to the regime.

After 1991, the collapse of communist ideology restored Orthodoxy to its central symbolic role. The Church in Gagauzia, canonically subordinated to the Metropolis of Moldova under the Moscow Patriarchate, became an influential actor in shaping public opinion on social and political matters. Locally, Orthodoxy is associated with family, tradition, and order — contrasted with Western liberalism, often perceived as morally and culturally alien.

This dichotomy has been amplified by Russian propaganda portraying Russia as the “defender of true Christianity” and the European Union as the “promoter of moral decay.” As a result, religion has become a geopolitical identity marker, and the Church — a channel of external influence (Shishkin, 2022). However, religiosity is not uniform: surveys show that younger Gagauz are less engaged in religious practice but continue to identify culturally as Orthodox. This supports Grace Davie’s (2000) concept of “*believing without belonging*” — a cultural, rather than institutional, religiosity. Hence, Orthodoxy functions primarily as a communal boundary and as a legitimizing symbol of belonging to the “Russian World.”

4.3. Civic Identity and the Relationship with the Moldovan State

Civic identity — the relationship between regional and national belonging — remains one of the most complex aspects of Gagauz identity. Although Gagauzia is an integral part of the Republic of Moldova, sociological studies reveal a relatively low level of identification with the Moldovan state.

According to the Public Opinion Barometer (IPP, 2023), only 35% of Gagauz identify primarily as citizens of the Republic of Moldova, while over 50% identify first with the region or the “Gagauz people.” This regionalist orientation indicates a fragmented civic identity, where loyalty to the state depends on perceived governmental performance and respect for local autonomy. Perceptions of the Moldovan state remain ambivalent: it is viewed as a source of financial stability and subsidies, yet simultaneously as distant, bureaucratic, and sometimes dismissive of minority interests. Conversely, Russia is seen as a protective and traditional ally, despite limited direct economic interaction. This pattern reflects Pål Kolstø’s (2016) observation that “*weakly institutionalized national identities leave space for stronger proximate identities.*”

The information sphere reinforces this imbalance. In the absence of an effective communication strategy, Gagauzia remains dominated by Russian-language media, which depicts Moldova as “Western-controlled” and under threat of losing its traditional values. This narrative undermines trust in national institutions and reinforces defensive belonging based on fear and nostalgia. Meanwhile, the increasing participation of Gagauz youth in European educational programs (Erasmus+, Romanian scholarships) contributes to the emergence of a more open, civically oriented generation less ideologically polarized than its predecessors.

4.4. The Influence of the Russian Federation in the Autonomous Region

The influence of the Russian Federation on Gagauzia is structural, multidimensional, and enduring. It operates through symbolic, informational, religious, economic, and political mechanisms that together sustain a coherent system of identity-based dependence. As Andrey Goltsov (2020) notes, “*Russia exerts power not through occupation but through memory. Post-Soviet spaces are not lost territories, but enclaves of Russian identity.*”

This influence aligns with the concept of *Russkiy Mir* (“The Russian World”), officially articulated by Moscow since 2007 and described by Igor Zevelev (2016) as a civilizational project intended to preserve loyalty among Russophone and Orthodox communities across former Soviet territories.

Indicator (2020–2024)	Gagauzia	National Average	Source
Support for EU integration	9%	63%	IPP, 2024
Preference for alliance with Russia	82%	29%	IRI, 2023
Association of EU with loss of traditions	63%	28%	IPP, 2024
Trust in the Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate)	88%	61%	Freedom House, 2023
Nostalgia for the USSR	73%	36%	Magenta Consulting, 2023

These indicators reveal the persistence of pro-Russian orientations and the symbolic consolidation of Gagauzia within the “Russian World.”

4.5. The Image of the European Union and Romania in Local Discourse

Perceptions of the European Union and Romania serve as key indicators of Europeanization and of the effectiveness of Moldova’s external communication strategy. Nationally, support for EU integration rose from 52% in 2022 to 63% in 2024 (IPP). In contrast, in Gagauzia, only 9% of

respondents support EU membership, while 78–82% favor a strategic alliance with Russia (IRI, 2023).

This divergence reflects not only economic considerations but also cultural and symbolic differences. In local discourse, the EU is associated with modernization and prosperity, yet also with the erosion of traditional values. By contrast, Russia is portrayed as the guarantor of moral stability and Christian heritage. According to the *Study on Perceptions of Equality in the Republic of Moldova* (IPP, 2024), 63% of Gagauz believe that European values contradict Orthodoxy.

Geopolitical Indicator (2023–2024)	Gagauzia	National Average	Source
Support for Russia as main ally	82%	29%	IRI, 2023
Support for EU integration	9%	63%	IPP, 2024
Trust in Moldovan Government	27%	48%	Freedom House, 2024
Direct contact with EU-funded projects	26%	58%	EU Neighbours East, 2023
Daily consumption of Russian media	82%	43%	WatchDog.md, 2023

Romania is perceived ambivalently: 49% of Gagauz believe that Romania supports Moldova but “has hidden interests,” while only 14% consider it the country’s main European ally (IRI, 2023). Nevertheless, more than 1,200 Gagauz students benefited from scholarships in Romania between 2010 and 2024, gradually fostering a more positive perception among younger generations.

4.6. The Politicization of Identity in the Current Geopolitical Context

The politicization of Gagauz identity represents a deliberate strategy of cultural and religious instrumentalization for geopolitical purposes. Following Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, pro-Russian local elites — notably Irina Vlah and Evghenia Guțul — intensified anti-Western narratives portraying Gagauzia as a “bastion of Orthodox values” and a “fortress of the Russian World.”

According to IPP (2024), 62% of Gagauz believe that European values are incompatible with Orthodoxy, while 73% express nostalgia for the Soviet Union. These perceptions are actively exploited by pro-Russian parties (PSRM, Șor Party), which frame European integration as a form of “spiritual colonization.”

As highlighted by the *Hybrid CoE* (2023), Gagauzia illustrates a contemporary case of information warfare with identity-based instruments, where religious, historical, and linguistic symbols are transformed into tools of political mobilization and societal polarization. This makes the region not only a field of cultural competition but also a critical test for Moldova's capacity to balance autonomy, diversity, and European integration.

5. Electoral Behaviour and the Impact of Europeanization (2014–2024)

5.1. Electoral Profile and Geopolitical Determinants

The electoral behaviour of the Gagauz community reflects the interaction between geopolitical identity, collective memory, and the informational environment, producing a consistent pro-Russian vote. Over the past two decades, Gagauzia has overwhelmingly supported parties and leaders advocating close ties with the Russian Federation, the preservation of the Russian language, and the protection of Orthodoxy. This continuity expresses a defensive identity rooted in the Soviet experience and reinterpreted in the post-1991 political context.

According to the Central Electoral Commission, during the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, Igor Dodon received more than 90% of votes in Gagauzia, while nationally he was defeated by the pro-European candidate Maia Sandu. In the 2019 and 2021 parliamentary elections, the Socialist Party (PSRM) and the Şor Party together obtained over 80% of the regional vote, and in the 2023 local elections these parties secured most mayoral positions in Comrat, Ceadîr-Lunga, and Vulcăneşti.

This trend supports Vladimir Kolstø's (2016) observation that *"in regions dominated by external cultural identities, voting becomes an act of geopolitical belonging rather than ideological choice."*

The determinants of this behaviour are multifaceted:

- Identity and linguistic factors – Russophone and Gagauz-speaking voters tend to support left-wing, pro-Russian parties (IPP, 2024). Following Rogers Brubaker's (2004) framework, in post-imperial spaces language operates as a political instrument and a vector of geopolitical loyalty.
- Informational environment – According to Freedom House (2024) and WatchDog.md (2023), over 70% of daily media content consumed in Gagauzia originates from Russian sources. The lack of media pluralism perpetuates the image of Russia as a protector and of the European Union as morally "decadent."
- Economic factor – GDP per capita in Gagauzia remains 35–40% below the national average (NBS, 2024), and over 40% of the population

works in agriculture. This structural vulnerability amplifies receptiveness to Russian economic narratives, consistent with Cardoso and Faletto's (1979) *dependency theory*.

- Religious factor – The Metropolis of Moldova, under the Moscow Patriarchate, acts as a key vector of influence. Clerical messages about “defending Orthodoxy” and the “moral dangers of Western liberalism” reinforce pro-Russian political choices.

5.2. Dynamics of Geopolitical Orientations and Generational Differences

At the national level, support for European integration has steadily increased — from 60% in 2022 to 67% in 2024 (EU Neighbours East; IRI Moldova). In sharp contrast, only 9% of Gagauz respondents support EU accession, while 82% favour a strategic alliance with Russia (IRI, 2023; IPP, 2024).

However, since 2022, generational differences have become increasingly visible. According to IRI (2025), among young Gagauz (aged 18–29), 33% support “pragmatic integration with the EU while preserving local traditions,” and 29% believe that “economic modernization should come from the West.” This trend confirms Ronald Inglehart's (1997) theory of *intergenerational value shift* — the transition from survival values to self-expression and modernization.

5.3. Europeanization as an Identity Process

European integration in Moldova represents more than a technical process of legal harmonization; it is also an identity reconfiguration. In Gagauzia, Europeanization generates tension between institutional modernization and cultural resistance. As Radaelli (2003) defines it, “*Europeanization beyond compliance*” implies a confrontation between state-driven pro-European discourse and traditional attachments to Russia, religion, and the Soviet legacy. In the regional context, European values are often perceived as “foreign,” while disinformation campaigns associate them with secularism, gender equality, and LGBT rights — topics framed as “threats to Orthodoxy” (Freedom House, 2024; EUvsDisinfo, 2024). Yet direct contact with European-funded programs has produced tangible effects.

Between 2020 and 2025, more than 40 EU-funded projects were implemented in Gagauzia (*EU4Moldova: Key Regions, EU4Education, EU4Business*), focusing on infrastructure, civic education, and SME support. According to *EU Neighbours East* (2024), 60% of direct beneficiaries perceive the EU as a “development partner,” although only 25% can name a specific project. This discrepancy between real impact and symbolic visibility remains one of the main challenges of Europeanization in the region.

5.4. Politicization of Identity and Democratic Risks

Identity politics remains the most effective tool of electoral mobilization in Gagauzia. Since 2022, pro-Russian parties (PSRM, Șor) and local leaders (Irina Vlah, Evghenia Guțul) have strategically used narratives of “defending traditions” and “resisting Western colonization” to convert cultural identity into electoral capital.

Local media campaigns have portrayed Russia as the “defender of Christianity,” while framing the EU and Romania as “moral threats” — narratives confirmed by *Hybrid CoE* (2023) and Freedom House (2024). This rhetoric has produced what Toal (2017) describes as a “borderland identity”, where symbolic loyalty to Russia coexists with administrative adaptation to the Moldovan state.

Nonetheless, Europeanization through education and mobility has begun to partially reverse this trend. Over 1,200 Gagauz students received scholarships in Romania between 2010 and 2024, and Erasmus+ programs introduced civic participation and local governance concepts into the region. These experiences form the nucleus of an emerging civic identity — less ideological, more pragmatic, and increasingly compatible with European values.

5.5. East–West Identity Scenarios

Based on the empirical data and theoretical analysis, three potential scenarios emerge for the evolution of Gagauz identity:

1. Conservative scenario (status quo): preservation of the pro-Russian orientation and traditionalist discourse, with resistance to value-based European integration.
2. Pragmatic scenario (dual cohesion): consolidation of local identity alongside active participation in European programs and institutional adaptation.
3. Transformative scenario (symbolic integration): emergence of an inclusive civic identity compatible with European belonging while maintaining Gagauz cultural distinctiveness.

Although the third scenario is the most challenging, it represents the only path capable of ensuring national cohesion without eroding local diversity. As Thomas Risse (2010) argues, “*multiple identities can coexist as long as they provide meaning and recognition within the same political community.*”

6. The Impact of European Integration on Identity Cohesion

European integration in the Republic of Moldova represents both a transformative political project and a social experiment in reconciling divergent identity narratives. In the context of Gagauzia, this process

operates at the intersection of external geopolitical pressures and internal societal fragmentation. The region's experience demonstrates that Europeanization cannot succeed solely through administrative or economic reforms; it requires a parallel process of symbolic inclusion and communicative engagement that addresses collective memory, cultural security, and local autonomy.

As Risse (2010) and Checkel & Katzenstein (2009) emphasize, Europeanization functions not only through institutional alignment but also through the socialization of norms — a gradual internalization of democratic and pluralistic values. In Moldova, this mechanism remains uneven: while the central state has adopted much of the EU's legislative framework, the peripheral regions such as Gagauzia exhibit low identification with the European project due to competing narratives of belonging.

6.1. Europeanization as a Multilevel Process

Europeanization in Moldova unfolds simultaneously across three dimensions — institutional, cognitive, and symbolic.

- At the institutional level, the government has harmonized key sectors (justice, trade, public administration) with EU standards under the Association Agreement (2014) and the Candidate Status (2022). However, these reforms have had limited visibility in Gagauzia, where the perception of the EU remains abstract. Only 26% of residents report any direct interaction with EU-funded initiatives (EU Neighbours East, 2024).

- At the cognitive level, Europeanization challenges the Soviet-era “mental maps” that structure perceptions of order, authority, and morality. The contrast between the EU's liberal pluralism and Russia's traditionalist narrative creates identity dissonance. According to the IPP (2024), 58% of Gagauz respondents associate the EU with “economic opportunity,” but 63% simultaneously believe it threatens Orthodox values.

- At the symbolic level, Europeanization remains hindered by the absence of a compelling narrative of inclusion. While official discourse emphasizes modernization, it rarely addresses the cultural and emotional dimensions of belonging. Delanty (2003) argues that successful European identity construction requires *dialogic recognition* — the capacity of institutions to engage with diversity rather than merely regulate it.

6.2. Identity Negotiation and Hybrid Belonging

The case of Gagauzia exemplifies what Diez (2012) describes as “*hybrid Europeanization*” — a process in which local communities selectively adopt European norms while preserving alternative sources of legitimacy. This hybrid identity emerges through negotiation rather than replacement. Field research and opinion data suggest that Gagauz citizens increasingly differentiate between Europe as a value system and the European Union as

a political actor. While skepticism toward Brussels persists, many perceive individual mobility, education, and visa liberalization as concrete benefits. For instance, participation in Erasmus+ and Romanian scholarship programs has doubled since 2018, with more than 1,200 students from Gagauzia studying in EU countries by 2024. These micro-level interactions contribute to a gradual redefinition of Europe from an external model to an experiential reality.

Moreover, civic initiatives funded through *EU4Moldova: Key Regions* and *Local Democracy Facility* have created new spaces for participatory governance, involving youth councils and women's associations in decision-making. Although limited in scope, such initiatives embody the "everyday Europeanization" that scholars such as Börzel and Schimmelfennig (2020) identify as essential for embedding democratic norms.

The Europeanization process exposes the tension between modernization and cohesion. In Moldova, modernization tends to be associated with urban elites, while cohesion depends on rural and traditional networks. In Gagauzia, this gap is particularly visible: while urban youth in Comrat show increasing openness toward Europe, rural communities remain anchored in conservative and pro-Russian narratives. This cleavage illustrates what social identity theorists (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) describe as the dynamic between *ingroup solidarity* and *outgroup threat*. The more integration is framed as a challenge to tradition, the stronger the defensive identity becomes. Thus, communication failures — not ideological differences — often reinforce polarization.

The government's European communication strategy has improved since 2023, but its focus on technical achievements (infrastructure, digitalization, legal reforms) rarely resonates with communities that prioritize moral and existential dimensions of belonging. As Freedom House (2024) observes, "in Moldova's regions, Europe is understood less as an institution and more as a metaphor — one that must align with lived identity." The experience of Gagauzia reveals that Europeanization must move beyond conditionality toward cultural co-creation. Inclusive identity policies require three interdependent strategies:

1. Narrative inclusion – integrating local heritage, Orthodoxy, and linguistic diversity into the broader story of Europe, rather than positioning them as opposites.

2. Participatory communication – empowering regional actors, youth, and local media to co-produce messages about what Europe means in their daily context.

3. Educational bridging – expanding multilingual education and exchange programs that transform Europe from a geopolitical abstraction into a lived experience.

If successfully implemented, these measures could transform Gagauzia from a peripheral region of resistance into a model of plural integration — a laboratory for reconciling East and West within a shared civic framework. As Risse (2010) concludes, “*Europe’s identity project succeeds not when diversity disappears, but when it is institutionalized as part of belonging.*” Gagauzia’s trajectory may thus foreshadow Moldova’s broader challenge: to build a European future that respects cultural differences while strengthening political unity.

General Conclusions

The present analysis demonstrates that the Gagauz identity represents one of the most intricate and multidimensional identity constructions in the post-Soviet space, where cultural, religious, and linguistic traditions intersect with geopolitical determinants.

Although numerically small, the Gagauz community holds major strategic importance, as it reflects the civilizational tensions defining the Republic of Moldova itself — positioned between Eastern heritage and Western aspiration. Based on the empirical and theoretical findings, several key conclusions can be formulated:

1. Gagauz identity is hybrid and adaptive. It combines elements of Orthodox tradition and the Russian language with a strong sense of local belonging and a predominantly Eastern geopolitical orientation. This hybridism does not indicate a lack of authentic identity but rather the community’s capacity to negotiate its symbolic survival within a fluid political and cultural environment.

2. Linguistic and religious Russification has been reinforced by informational dependence. The Russian language, the Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate, and Russian-controlled media operate as complementary mechanisms of enduring cultural influence. In this context, the *Russkiy Mir* (“Russian World”) functions not merely as a geopolitical doctrine but as an identity infrastructure sustained through symbols, rituals, and narratives.

3. The pro-Russian orientation of Gagauzia stems not solely from propaganda but also from the absence of effective strategic communication by the Moldovan state and the European Union. While European initiatives provide tangible economic benefits, their communication remains largely technocratic and disconnected from local symbolism. Without culturally translated and emotionally resonant narratives, Europe continues to be perceived as distant and abstract.

4. The politicization of identity has transformed autonomy from a mechanism of cultural recognition into an instrument of internal geopolitical competition. Local elites, notably Irina Vlah and Evghenia Guțul, have converted religious symbols and Soviet memory into political

capital, consolidating a defensive and Eurosceptic identity. Consequently, autonomy risks functioning as a channel of external influence rather than as a laboratory of internal pluralism.

5. The younger generation represents the main vector of change.

Gagauz youth educated in Romania and across the European Union are developing a pragmatic and civic identity less shaped by ideology and more by experience. Direct exposure to European societies fosters what may be termed “*Europeanization through experience*,” gradually reducing geopolitical polarization.

6. The Europeanization of Gagauzia depends on the capacity of both the European Union and the Moldovan state to transform integration into a process of cultural inclusion rather than identity substitution. European values must be communicated through respect for tradition, religion, and local autonomy in order to become attractive rather than imposed. As Joseph Nye (2004) observes, “*soft power is effective only when values are desired, not merely admired.*”

In summary, the research confirms that Gagauz identity is not a relic of the past but an evolving field of negotiation between East and West. It can serve either as a source of division or as a bridge of cohesion — depending on how the state and European actors succeed in transforming autonomy from a geopolitical buffer zone into a partner of modernization. Reconciliation between local and European identity cannot be achieved through coercion but through symbolic cohesion — by valuing difference within a shared political community. Within such a framework, Gagauzia may become not an obstacle, but an example of autonomy compatible with Europeanization, contributing to the consolidation of Moldova’s civic identity as a plural and modern European state.

Recommendations

The research findings underline the need for multidimensional policies aimed at strengthening social cohesion and improving the communication of European integration in culturally diverse regions such as Gagauzia. The following recommendations are proposed for both national and European actors:

1. Adapt communication strategies on European integration to the cultural and linguistic specificities of Gagauzia.
2. Complement disinformation countermeasures with local media literacy initiatives.
3. Reduce Russian influence and increase the political engagement of pro-European actors in the Gagauz Autonomous Region.
4. Increase the visibility of the European Union and Romania in Gagauzia through tangible educational and social projects.

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BOOK REVIEWS

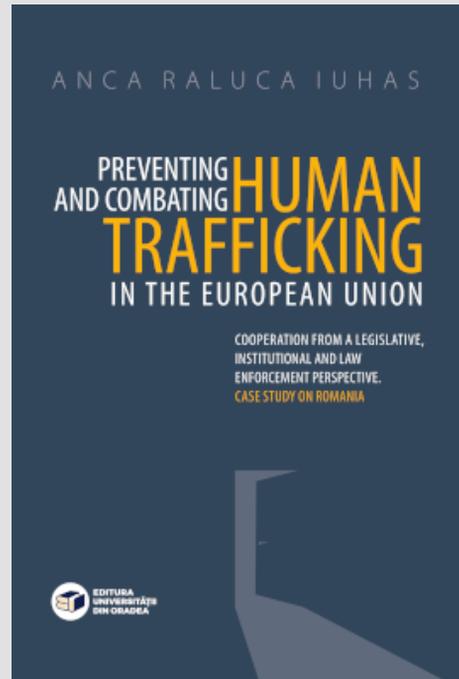
Anca Raluca Iuhas

Preventing and Combating Human Trafficking in the European Union. Cooperation from a Legislative, Institutional and Law Enforcement Perspective. Case Study on Romania

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Review by *Roxana Ivașca*¹



The book published by Anca Raluca Iuhas in 2024 under the aegis of the University of Oradea Publishing House, the author's doctoral thesis, tackles one of the most sensitive and challenging topics in our society in recent years: human trafficking (HT).

The title of this extremely rigorous and comprehensive research in the field of international relations *Preventing and Combating Human Trafficking in the European Union. Cooperation from a Legislative, Institutional and Law Enforcement Perspective. Case Study on Romania* announces from the very beginning its inter- and transdisciplinary perspective, and ambitious goals.

The paper uses a multilayered analysis to explore the legislative and institutional frameworks, mechanisms, and law enforcement practices currently used for EU transnational cooperation concerning the prevention and combating of human trafficking, with a case study on the Romanian context.

The author's undertaking emerges both from a personal concern and the realization that human trafficking continues to present multiple

¹ PhD, Editor, University of Oradea Publishing House, "Silviu Dragomir" Center for Interdisciplinary Studies, University of Oradea, Romania, e-mail: roxana.ivasca@yahoo.com, rivasca@uoradea.ro.

challenges to the European Union and its Member States (MS), faced with a constant pressure to develop viable solutions to this continuously expanding phenomenon, in all its proliferating forms.

According to Eurostat statistics, 10,793 victims of human trafficking were registered in the EU in 2023 alone, which is a 6.9% increase compared to 2022 and the highest recorded value in the period from 2008 to 2023 (Eurostat, 2025). This emphasizes an increasing trend over a time frame of 15 years.

In this regard, Anca Raluca Iuhas addresses some of the most significant challenges in transnational cooperation to combat human trafficking, particularly in identifying victims and investigating such cases. She focuses on the difficulties Romania faces when cooperating with destination countries where Romanian victims are identified, especially in the absence of a much-needed European Transnational Referral Mechanism.

Aware of her paper's possible limitations due to the subject's complexity, the author not only proves the validity of most of her preliminary hypotheses, ensuring a strong basis for the understanding of this multifaceted phenomenon, but also, most importantly, she provides solutions to pressing issues and makes valuable recommendations for improving future policies at the EU and national levels, with significant impact on the fight against human trafficking (HT).

The book proves to be all the more relevant considering Romania's current situation, as the top source country for victims of human trafficking in the EU for more than a decade, while also in the midst of implementing the Action Plan against Trafficking in Human Beings, as well as the upcoming GRETA's fourth country report on Romania.

Structured into five chapters, along with an introductory section, conclusions, and a section on public policy recommendations, complemented by a vast and relevant bibliography and substantial annexes, the book proves to be instrumental for understanding key concepts related to human trafficking (HT), the legal context and the institutional mechanisms underlying transnational and cross-border cooperation in combating and preventing HT within the EU. The book also covers legal variations across different Member States, current challenges, and necessary measures to develop appropriate solutions and referral mechanisms.

The first chapter grounds the research from a methodological standpoint, while also setting out its main objectives, in a deliberate effort *"to contribute to the academic discourse surrounding transnational*

cooperation in the area of preventing and combating human trafficking within the EU and to offer insights and recommendations that can support policy decisions and law enforcement strategies.”

Using a modern, interdisciplinary methodology, the author easily navigates complex concepts at the intersection of international relations, law and political science. She explores an extensive bibliography and thoroughly analyzes primary and secondary sources, official documents, databases, literature in the field, and case law.

The second chapter, *Theoretical Framework and Conceptualization of the Cross-border Cooperation in the Area of Human Trafficking*, resorts to an in-depth analysis of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the international cooperation in general and cross-border cooperation in particular, as they pertain to preventing and combating HT. This analysis is conducted through the lens of three main international relations (IR) theories: realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Thus, it provides a strong basis for exploring EU legislation and policies around this topic, which are addressed further in the next chapter.

Following her multi-layered analysis of each IR theory at the individual, state, and international systems levels, the author reaches an intriguing conclusion. She pleads for a reconsideration of the state's responsibility and response capacity, especially with regard to counter-trafficking. She notes the necessity of a paradigm shift in the security discourse on HT, as *“it is evident that traditional state-centric security approaches have become outdated, particularly in the complex realm of counter-trafficking. In this multi-dimensional issue, it's imperative to consider new security perspectives. The role of the state in the security discourse on HT cannot be exclusive or primary anymore, although it should not be disregarded either.”*

According to the author there is a direct link between using an inclusive approach on the matter and the possibility of designing optimal anti-trafficking policies and fostering cooperation across different levels and among various actors.

On this matter, Cornelius Friesendorf states in his 2007 article that human trafficking (HT) is an issue that can only be solved within a security governance system, where all macro- and micro-actors need to cooperate effectively to reach any positive and lasting results (Friesendorf, 2007).

The third chapter, titled *The Legislative, Policy and Institutional Framework of the EU in the Area of Preventing and Combating Human Trafficking*, showcases EU's legislative, policy and institutional frameworks. This chapter uses qualitative research methods, such as content and thematic analyses of official documents, scientific articles, international

organizations' guidelines, anti-trafficking EU strategies, progress reports and monitoring mechanisms. It also compares the EU anti-trafficking monitoring mechanism with the Council of Europe's (CoE) mechanism to assess its effectiveness.

By focusing on three pillars—legislation, policy and institutions—and examining relevant cases and examples, the author establishes a conceptual basis and reliable perspective on the whole process of combating HT, prompting a proper understanding of this complex phenomenon and creating a solid reference point for subsequently analyzing the Romanian legislation and the shortcomings of the anti-trafficking frameworks.

Chapter 4, *The Legislative, Policy and Institutional Framework of Romania in the Area of Preventing and Combating Human Trafficking*, is an essential part of the book, coagulating the author's findings and recommendations, derived from a thorough evaluation of human trafficking in Romania as compared to the EU, and Romania's compliance with international and EU standards.

Following a comparative analysis of statistics on HT from 2011 to 2021 concerning Romanian victims of HT and perpetrators, or persons suspected, prosecuted and convicted of HT and based on a selection of relevant Case Studies analyzed, the author identifies two major areas of concern: the lack of proactive identification of the victims of trafficking and the limited cooperation between Romania and countries of destination in assisting the victims.

While pinpointing the system's deficiencies, with a focus on those that impede the efficiency of transnational cooperation in cases involving the sexual exploitation of victims abroad, the paper also makes a case of proposing strategies for improving the national legal and judicial system, which also stands for one of the main merits of this book.

The fifth chapter, *European Cooperation in Transnational Human Trafficking Cases*, explores the topic of transnational cooperation in the EU concerning HT, with a focus on cooperation between Romania and other EU countries regarding sexual exploitation. This chapter is based on qualitative research involving 17 interviews with anti-HT experts and practitioners (15 Romanian experts and 2 foreign experts) and a written response from the Romanian Police General Inspectorate.

After corroborating interview results, case studies and analyzed data, the author was able to identify the vulnerabilities of transnational cooperation regarding human trafficking cases, particularly sexual exploitation. This was accomplished by examining the deficient cooperation between Romania and other Member States (MS) and analyzing different

legal approaches toward prostitution in various EU MS, as reflected in the different outcomes of investigation of such cases, thus pointing out to the urgency of establishing a European Transnational Referral Mechanism and a cohesive European legislation model on prostitution and HT investigation.

The expertise provided by the interviewees proved to be extremely valuable. Together with the author's own findings, it enabled her to develop a recommendations section, adding a practical dimension to the research and showcasing the necessary reforms and steps to be taken for improving future policymaking. These reforms would increase the number of identified victims and support the authorities more efficiently in investigating HT cases.

Adopting a modern, transdisciplinary approach that combines critical thinking, a comparative perspective, and an analytical approach with a complete mastery of a sophisticated conceptual apparatus, the author sharply identifies misalignments, omissions and dysfunctionalities in the legal frameworks surrounding HT in the EU, issues partly due to the extremely diverse political spectrum of the EU Member States and of their equivalent mechanisms. What makes her endeavor stand out, however, is the author's ability to propose appropriate solutions with a real impact in the fight against human trafficking, going beyond a mere assessment of this phenomenon.

In this respect, the book proves to be a valuable resource, making a significant contribution to academic discourse and specialist literature on HT, both at European and national levels.

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