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Specifics of the Social Work with Refugees in Bulgaria – Actual Topics, Achievements and Challenges

Siyka Chavdarova – Kostova¹

Abstract

Over the past three decades, Bulgaria has gained significant experience in social work with refugees arriving from areas where their lives are threatened by military actions. Until a few years ago, refugees were predominantly Muslim, from countries in the Middle East, while in recent years they have been predominantly Christian, mostly from Ukraine. Regardless of their origin, they have access to social services related to their residence on the territory of Bulgaria, which aim to ensure access to education, health care, and employment. A specific feature of the social work with refugees in Bulgaria is the very good interaction between state institutions, non-governmental organizations, international organizations, which work together, seeking the best solutions to support the stay of refugees in the host country and their social integration. As a result of this good cooperation, there are already refugees who have received Bulgarian citizenship, deciding to stay and live in Bulgaria. Of course, there are also challenges that still need solutions, such as providing sufficient opportunities for learning the Bulgarian language as a means for optimal educational inclusion and integration into the labor market, housing, etc.

Keywords

refugees, protection, social work, integration

1. Introduction and Methodology

Over the past three decades, Bulgaria has gained significant experience in social work with people seeking and receiving international and temporary protection, arriving from areas where their lives are threatened by military actions.

In the last years some changes are observed in the the flows of people seeking asylum:

- until a few years ago, refugees were **predominantly Muslim, from countries in the Middle East;**

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- in recent years they have been **predominantly Christian, mostly from Ukraine.**

As an illustration, some statistical data will be presented, providing information on the specifics of refugee flows passing through Bulgaria over the last years.

According to data from the State Agency for Refugees, the countries from which there are the largest number of asylum seekers in Bulgaria for international protection (01.01.1993 – 31.03.2025) are: Syria - 69467; Afghanistan – 56692; Iraq – 23934; Morocco – 7886; Pakistan – 4124 (State Agency for refugees. Top 5 countries of origin, 2025).

For comparison, data for the applications for international protection for the first three months of 2025 are:

- people from Syria - 328;
- Afghanistan - 185;
- Morocco - 144;
- Iraq - 44;
- Egypt – 30, as from Turkey, Pakistan, Tunisia, Algeria, Israel...
- total number - 823 (State Agency for refugees. Actual information, 2025).

As can be seen from the data, there is a coincidence in the first four countries that have a dominant Muslim population. Some of them are from the Middle East and other parts of Asia, and others are from countries in North Africa.

Regarding people with temporary protection from Ukraine, the data are as follows: The total number of Ukrainians who passed through Bulgaria in 2022 was 976 776. People with temporary protection, registered in Bulgaria:

- 2022 -149 685; for the first 3 months - 112 918;
- 2023 - 38 091; for the first 3 months - 5 795;
- 2024 - 24 536; for the first 3 months - 4 831;
- 2025 - for the first 3 months - 3 840;
- total number: 201 203 (State Agency for refugees. Registrations for temporary protection, 2025).

The term of validity of temporary protection in the Republic of Bulgaria for Ukrainian citizens was extended until 04.03.2026 by Decision No. 79 of 20.02.2025 of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria amending Decision No. 144 of the Council of Ministers of 10 March 2022 on granting temporary protection to displaced persons from Ukraine (State Agency for refugees. Actual information, 2025).

According to the data, the number of Ukrainian citizens registered for temporary protection for the period 2022 - 2025 exceeds the number of those

seeking international protection from the five countries with the largest number of people entering the territory of Bulgaria. However, this does not mean that Ukrainian citizens have experienced greater difficulties in terms of the social integration compared to other asylum seekers. The proximity of the languages as slavic - Ukrainian and Bulgarian, some cultural similarities, including the religious aspect - predominantly Christians in both countries, facilitates the process of adaptation and integration into Bulgarian society of Ukrainian citizens.

What is specific to Ukrainian refugees is that among the registered mostly are women, for example, data from 2023 show that women are 49%, children – 33% and men - 18% (Statistics for the period January – August, 2023). In contrast to these data, men predominate among those seeking international protection. For example, as of 31.08.2023, the data are as follows:

- Persons seeking international protection: Men – 89% (11773), Women – 11% (1471).
Distribution by age: 0-13 – 1356; 14-17 – 2437; 18-34 – 8236; 35-64 – 1198; 64 – 17.
- Persons granted international protection: Men – 73% (2877), Women – 27% (1080).
Distribution by age: 0-13 – 969; 14-17 – 299; 18-34 – 2046; 35-64 – 623; > 64 - 20 (Statistics for the period January – August, 2023).

The methodology of the study is based on secondary analyses of statistical and public data, mainly in internet sources of main institutions engaged in working with refugees in Bulgaria. Based on these analyses, through the synthesis method, a picture of the main aspects of contemporary social work with refugees in Bulgaria is outlined.

2. Literature Review. Theoretical, conceptual and contextual framework

In the last few years, there has been a resurgence of research interest in work, including social work, with asylum seekers and refugees in Bulgaria. A significant contribution to this has been made by the Academic Bulletin, published in Bulgarian language online 15 issues from 2020 to 2023 by the Bulgarian Council for Refugees and Migrants with the support of the representation of the High Commissioner for Refugees.

Its issues reflect the opinions of practitioners, representatives of state and non-governmental organizations, as well as lecturers from higher education institutions engaged in research on refugee issues. There, one can find statistical and other information related to the current situation in the relevant period, about achievements in the process of social integration of

refugees, as well as about the main challenges they face in it not only in Bulgaria, but also abroad (Academic bulletin).

The social work with refugees in Bulgaria has been gradually built as a practice over the past three decades. It can be said that at the beginning it developed mainly thanks to the activity of the Representation of the High Commissioner for Refugees in Bulgaria through a network of non-governmental organizations, which practically implement a variety of activities - from initial humanitarian aid, through assistance in learning the Bulgarian language, orientation on the labor market, social assistance to meet basic needs, psychological counseling, etc. On the part of state institutions, the leading role is played by the State Agency for Refugees, that through its structures implements state policy in this direction.

In the social work with refugees in Bulgaria, there is a mutual complementarity between the state and non-governmental sectors, which requires the results achieved in both to be taken into account, also this publication. That is why the leading approach in this study is the holistic one.

3. Actual topics of the social work with refugees in Bulgaria

Regardless of their origin, all people – with international and temporary protection, **have access to social services** on the territory of Bulgaria, which aim to ensure access to education, health care, and employment.

Specific topic that is very well developed in Bulgaria is **the social work with children** seeking and receiving international protection. These children are considered as one of the vulnerable groups whose representatives need special care. A key focus in this area is working with **unaccompanied children**.

Since 2017, the number of unaccompanied children in Bulgaria has been growing. By mid-2024, their number is about 70% of children with submitted applications for international protection. Within three years - between 2021 and 2023, applications for international protection were submitted by 10 363 unaccompanied children, in the first 5 months of 2024 the number was 416 (Opening of a safe zone for unaccompanied refugee children in RAC-Harmanli, 2024).

For the first 3 months of 2025, such children are from countries as:

- Afghanistan- 52;
- Egypt - 23;
- Syria - 20;
- Morocco - 9;
- Tunisia - 3;

- Iraq - 3;
- Algeria - 1 (State Agency for Refugees. Actual information, 2025).

As can be seen from the data, unaccompanied children are from countries with a dominant Muslim population, which confirms the above-mentioned characteristic of the flows of people seeking and receiving international protection in Bulgaria. This undoubtedly reflects on the specifics of the approaches to working with such children, including ensuring access to education and learning the Bulgarian language in an out-of-school or school environment, as well as providing people working with them who speak their languages and have the same/similar cultures of origin.

In response to the specific needs of this group of children, separate areas – **protected zones** have been created in the last few years where they are accommodated separately from adults seeking international protection. These zones are considered as a “temporary measure” for children - their stay there should “be as short as possible and they should be promptly provided with a family or family-like environment, in accordance with generally accepted international standards”. It is important, after the accommodation in the safe zones, “access to alternative care and social services (such as foster care, family-type accommodation centers, transitional or protected housing)” to be ensured, through which children refugees could feel “a security, a sense of belonging, as well as a close-to-family environment, which is essential for their well-being and development”. Unfortunately, it is noted that “despite efforts to increase the number and capacity of services for children in the country in recent years, many of them are still not ready to work with refugee children in order to meet their specific needs” (Opening of a safe zone for unaccompanied refugee children in RAC-Harmanli, 2024).

Such zones were created in the Registration - Reception Center (RRC) of State Agency for Refugees in Sofia (SAR) as an initiative of the mission of International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Sofia. The first zone in Voenna Rampa was opened on June 19, 2019, with a capacity of 100 children. The second zone was opened in Ovcha Kupel in January 2020, with a capacity of 138 children. The work in them is carried out on the basis of a specially developed “Methodology for the conditions and organization of social support provided in the Safe Zones for unaccompanied minors and underage children seeking international protection”. The zones provide 24-hour care by social workers, most of whom are from the children's countries of origin. In the first zone, the majority of minors are from Afghanistan, but there are also those from Pakistan, Iran, Bangladesh, mainly males. In the second, there are again predominantly male minors from Syria, Iraq, Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Libya, etc. Social workers, as well as the IOM mobile teams,

which include psychologists and lawyers, have the following main commitments:

- “Registration and accommodation of newly arrived children (after registration by SAR);
- Checking the presence of children in the zones every morning and evening;
- Explaining the rules in the zones and ensuring their compliance, as well as compliance with the daily schedule by the children;
- Individual consultations - social, psychological and legal;
- Case management;
- Escorting to medical services outside the RRC and purchasing medicines;
- Distribution of non-food items such as hygiene materials, clothes and shoes;
- Organizing group activities - information sessions on various topics, sports events, art and music workshops, informal educational activities, visits to cultural, natural and historical sites and events, etc.;
- Cooperation with the legal representatives of the children appointed by the National Bureau of Legal Aid (NBLA);
- Supporting the educational process – regular contact with the class teachers of the children who attend school and assistance with studying Bulgarian and school lessons, as well as support for preparing homework”.

Working in the zones poses a number of challenges for the people working in them: “The presence of a high turnover of unaccompanied children, mainly in the Safe Zone in the RRC Sofia, Voenna Rampa district, which does not allow for in-depth work with the children, including from the point of view of resolving issues related to their health and psychological state”; “A large part of the children accommodated in the zones are between the ages of 15 and 17 and consider Bulgaria a transit country, which makes it difficult for them to be motivated to attend school, as well as to comply with the rules in the zones, including maintaining cleanliness and good hygiene in personal and common spaces in the zones and participating in activities organized by IOM and other organizations.” (Safe zones for unaccompanied children in the RAC Sofia)

The third zone was opened in town Harmanli on May, 16, 2024, in the frame of the biggest Registration - Reception Center of the State Agency for Refugees on the Turkish-Bulgarian border, with a capacity of 98 children. In all three zones there are separate areas for girls and children with disabilities. At the opening, 58 children have been accommodated there. Among the main goals for its creation are “every child to receive appropriate care and protection, support for accommodation in a social service,

monitoring of the individual case and needs, as well as the opportunity to reunite with his or her family” (Opening of a safe zone for unaccompanied refugee children in RAC-Harmanli, 2024).

From 2019, when the first zone was created, to mid-2025, more than 10 000 unaccompanied refugee children have passed through them. While in 2019, 197 children were accommodated there, in 2022 they were 2 116, in 2023 – 2 569, for the first half of 2025 they were 294. This large number of unaccompanied children is a serious challenge as it requires answers related to their accommodation, care, education, and personal development (SAR, 2025).

The most recent fact related to the referral of refugee children to various types of social services is the project launched by the State Agency for Refugees entitled “Creation of Alternative Social Services for Unaccompanied Refugee Children in Bulgaria”. The project is funded by the European Union through the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, and is being implemented in partnership with several Bulgarian municipalities, mainly in Southeastern Bulgaria - Burgas, Malko Tarnovo, Tunzhda and Ivaylovgrad, UNICEF Bulgaria and the Mission of the International Organization for Migration in Bulgaria. The project aims to pilot “sustainable alternative solutions outside of institutions - for better integration, social protection and quality care” for unaccompanied minors in these four municipalities.

In the words of the Mayor of Burgas, Dimitar Nikolov: “Burgas was the first to create specialized transitional housing for unaccompanied minor refugees. /.../ Our experience has shown that with a professional approach and humane attitude, these children can be a full part of society. I am glad that with this project we will expand the opportunities and pass on our model to other municipalities.” Deputy Mayor for Education, Health and Social Activities of Burgas, Mihail Nenov, adds that this is not just a “community service” for unaccompanied minors, but also an opportunity to take “responsibility for their care and their overall development”. This Transitional Housing for Unaccompanied Minors and Underage Refugees “provides specialized care for children and youth aged 15 to 18, through a team of specialists who provide individual and group support, psychological counseling, occupational therapy and interest-based activities”. These activities aim to build „skills for independent living and full integration into society“. The project envisages training by the Municipality of Burgas for the application of the developed model in other municipalities, among which an exchange of experience will be carried out, as a result of which a „sustainable network of services for supporting unaccompanied children and young people between 15 and 18 years of age“ plan to be created (A project to provide social services for the integration of refugee children, 2025).

In addition to caring for unaccompanied children, Bulgaria also has other focuses aimed at the integration of refugee children in general. The main challenge here is **the learning Bulgarian language**, which is a key tool for successful integration into the education system. In recent years, the number of learning resources available free online for learning Bulgarian by refugees, from level A1 to level B2, has increased.

UNHCR Representative Office in Bulgaria and its partners in the country provide **a variety of free and accessible study materials in Bulgarian language:**

- Bulgarian language - levels A1, A2, B1, B2 - textbooks, exercise books, notebooks - dictionaries, audio files, grammars, including translations into English, French, Arabic, Farsi
- educational materials in Bulgarian on refugee-related issues for different age groups - 6-9, 9-12, 12-15, 15-18 years;
- various didactic materials supporting the study of the Bulgarian language, developed through projects by non-governmental organizations (Teaching resources. UNHCR Bulgaria).

Such resources are also available on the website of the Ministry of Education and Science, in the “Inclusive Education” section:

- Bulgarian language textbook for primary school level - A1 and A2 - part 1
- Bulgarian language textbook for primary school level - A1 and A2 - part 2
- Bulgarian language textbook for lower secondary grades - A2
- Bulgarian language textbook for lower secondary grades – B1 (Children and students seeking or receiving protection).

Teaching aids are also developed and applied in work with children by non-governmental organizations, for example, the Reachout Foundation, which creates a “package of educational materials “ABC First Steps”. This package includes a handbook and a workbook, with the content developed within the framework of “10 topics through which words, grammar and interesting facts about Bulgaria are learned” (ABV - first steps).

It can be said that there is already sufficient resource provision in terms of ensuring the acquisition of Bulgarian language by refugees - children and adults. As for the inclusion of refugee children in the education system - equal access is ensured for all, and for this purpose, relevant normative documents have been developed within the framework of Bulgarian policies in the field of inclusive education. In 2017, an Regulation on the conditions and procedures for the reception and training of persons seeking or granted international protection was adopted. According to the Regulation, Art. 2: “Persons seeking or granted international protection shall

be provided with free education in state and municipal schools of the Republic of Bulgaria under the conditions and according to the procedure for Bulgarian citizens.” Enrollment is possible throughout the school year, with the exception of the last 30 days of the second school term (Art. 4). It can be said that the care of children with international and temporary protection is one of the priorities of the educational and social work systems in Bulgaria. For these children, additional Bulgarian language training is provided for those who are of mandatory preschool and school age (Art. 8) (Regulation No.3 of April 6, 2017).

Learning the Bulgarian language is one of the main challenges facing the social inclusion of adult refugees and migrants in the labor market in Bulgaria. It is a key condition for finding a job and satisfying their basic needs. Therefore, it is extremely important to overcome the existing language barrier, taking into account the fact that “the nature and intensity of these challenges vary across different groups”.

As for the acquisition of Bulgarian by adults with international and temporary protection, results from a recent study conducted in 2024 show that there are several main challenges, among which the following stand out:

- For those who work and those who take care of children, “consistently find it very difficult to attend existing language classes, which frequently take place during conventional working hours”. This affects the effectiveness of learning the Bulgarian language. A solution to this problem may lie in organizing „more flexible, accessible, and context-sensitive language learning programs that accommodate the realities of refugees' lives“.

- Low motivation of some refugees, for example Syrians, who intend to move to other countries in Western Europe (specifically Germany), where their communities are already established.

- Ukrainians show a much better command of the Bulgarian language compared to the other refugees and also have “a greater interest in learning Bulgarian”. 62% of the Ukrainian participated in the survey showed “some ability to speak Bulgarian – a linguistic capacity far exceeding that of their Syrian counterparts”. The reason for this is the proximity of the Bulgarian and Ukrainian languages.

Overall, the successful social integration into Bulgarian society presupposes the availability of “adequate and consistent language support” for child and adult refugees, without which there is a likelihood of deepening “their isolation and marginalization, making it exceptionally difficult to navigate daily life and services in the host country without a means of basic communication” (UNHCR, 2025). It is interesting to note that despite the provision of accessible and free textbooks and teaching aids for studying Bulgarian by refugees, one of the main difficulties they face is the problem

of “access to adequate Bulgarian language classes”, which is considered as a “fundamental barrier to integration” (UNHCR, 2025). The issue of motivating refugees to learn Bulgarian should not be overlooked, especially for those who wish to move to other countries where they have relatives or compatriots, and see Bulgaria more as a transit country than a final destination, taking into account the fact that learning any language requires a serious personal investment of „time and effort“ (UNHCR, 2025).

Another key issue related to the effective social inclusion of refugees is that of **employment opportunities** and achieving “sustainable livelihoods”. And here differences were found between the Ukrainian and Syrian refugees. Ukrainians have been more successful in the Bulgarian labor market than Syrian refugees. The main challenge for both groups is the nature of the jobs they are employed in - mainly low-paying jobs that are insufficient to support their livelihoods (66 % of all persons that have found a job) and “unfavorable working conditions” in many cases. This also applies to refugees with previous work experience and developed professional skills, including Ukrainians. Here, the problem of the availability of “opportunities for refugees who wish to start their own businesses or find employment that genuinely matches their existing skills and work experience” comes to the fore. This situation with the employment of adult refugees in Bulgaria raises several additional questions, one of which is related to the employment opportunities of women with more children, since the salary of the man alone is not enough to cover the family’s expenses. Here, the question of employment opportunities and additional training for refugee women comes to the fore, directly related to the opportunities for caring for their children when they are engaged. It is no coincidence that in this context the more general question of “ensuring the proper integration and well-being of refugee families” is raised (UNHCR, 2025).

The topic of refugee **well-being**, in its diverse dimensions - social, emotional, intellectual, has only recently begun to be discussed as an important issue related to their integration and inclusion in the host societies. It is important to emphasize the necessity of both the contacts and interactions created with people from the local community, as well as the opportunity to maintain relationships with representatives of their communities, which is “vital to refugees' mental health, well-being, and overall inclusion”. In Bulgaria, both Syrian and Ukrainian refugees maintain contact with other compatriots. Ukrainians, for example, note that they receive “various forms of support and information from their community networks in Bulgaria”. Syrian women in particular “specifically expressed feeling safe within their neighborhoods”. In general, refugees have “positive observations about the overall receptivity of the host community, noting an absence of harassment or ill treatment”. Regardless

of the above, there are still specifics in the process of social integration in local communities. While positive interactions are noted at the beginning, some refugees point to “limited ongoing engagement with Bulgarian co-workers and neighbors”. One of the reasons for this fact is the presence of “persistent language barriers, which hinder more profound communication”. Among the refugees there are also those who fear rejection by the local people, which is interpreted as a “deterrent to proactively reaching out and forging closer bonds with Bulgarians” (UNHCR, 2025).

Despite the many opportunities for effective social integration of refugees into Bulgarian society, there are still limitations that are considered “barriers to achieving full social and economic inclusion”, some of which have been commented on as “systemic”. Overcoming them requires a combination of efforts, at the state and local level, by institutionalized structures and civil society organizations, in order to provide all refugees with “comprehensive, tailored, and sustained support across all key integration domains” (UNHCR, 2025).

A specific feature of the social work with refugees in Bulgaria is **the very good interaction between state institutions, non-governmental organizations, international organizations**, which work together, seeking the best solutions to support the stay of refugees in the host country and their social integration. A recent example is the establishment of the the above mentioned Zone for Unaccompanied Children in the town of Harmanli as a result of the cooperation between the State Agency for Refugees, UNICEF Bulgaria, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Bulgaria and with the financial support of the State Department for Migration (SEM) of Switzerland (Opening of a safe zone for unaccompanied refugee children in RAC-Harmanli, 2024).

Another example is the **Compass Bulgaria Network of Protection and Inclusion Centres** – since the beginning of 2024. This is a joint initiative between: UNHCR and partners as Bulgarian Red Cross, Caritas Bulgaria, Foundation for Access to Rights, Ukraine Support and Renovation Foundation, Energy Association Varna. Such centers were created in six cities with concentration of refugees in Bulgaria - Sofia, Plovdiv, Burgas, Varna, Dobrich, and Harmanli. These centers are “established to promote collective empowerment, integration, and social cohesion for refugees of all nationalities and vulnerable people among the local host communities alike, through comprehensive support tailored to their diverse needs” They “complement services offered by the national/regional authorities and the municipalities with activities addressing mid-to-longer term needs of refugees, including language, cultural and livelihood”.

The services in the Compass Centers are free of charge and include:

- **“Legal assistance and social protection** - Legal counselling on international –temporary protection and documentation; Support with referrals for access to health care services and rights; Access to social services and labour rights.
- **Specialized child protection services and child-friendly spaces** - Play and child development activities, Pre-school groups.
- **Women empowerment and life skills sessions** - Community activities and safe space; Support self-organization and leaderships skills.
- **Recreation, events, and workshops for local and refugee community.**
- **Community mobilization and social cohesion.**
- **Psychosocial support services** - Community and family support services through groups and art-based; activities, including parent groups; Individual counselling.
- **Livelihood and economic inclusion support** - Individual counselling on livelihood opportunities according to specific needs and market requirement (Entrepreneurship, TVET and soft skills training, mentorship programs and job placement support).
- **Education** - Language courses; Providing guidance on education and skills certification.
- **Mobile services and mainstreaming inclusion of persons with disabilities** - Coordination with municipal services to assist transportation for people with limited mobility (Varna); Assistance with social protection benefits, including disability benefits; Support with referrals for access to health care services and rights.” (Compass Bulgaria Network).

All of these services represent key aspects of the effective social integration of children and adults with international and temporary protection, and naturally the expectations are that the activities of these centers will contribute at the local community level to their active social inclusion.

A number of non-governmental organizations continue to work to help people seeking and receiving asylum. Traditionally, the Refugee and Migrant Service of the Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC) is very active in this regard. According to their data, “annually, the BRC provides assistance and a wide range of social services to about 1 300 foreigners, mainly persons granted refugee or humanitarian status” (About Refugee – Migrant Service. Bulgarian Red Cross). Among their main “activities to assist foreigners who are in the process of granting status” are: “Social consultations, accompaniment and translation before state and municipal institutions, health facilities, etc.; supporting the education of children studying in Bulgarian primary and secondary schools.” With regard to people who have received refugee or

humanitarian status, the activities carried out by the Bulgarian Red Cross are: “Conducting Bulgarian language courses for persons who have received international protection; consultations on issues concerning the life and rights of refugees in Bulgaria; supporting access to medical care and services; assistance in finding a job; social and cultural orientation; supporting the education of children studying in Bulgarian schools through additional Bulgarian language training, provision of textbooks and teaching materials, etc.; supporting refugees with special needs - disabled people, single parents, adults, separated children.” The description of activities shows their main orientation in the field of social work in support of the process of adaptation and integration of these groups of people into Bulgarian society (Work with refugees and migrants. Bulgarian Red Cross).

Another non-governmental organization that works actively in the field of social work with refugees is Caritas – Bulgaria. According to their data, in 2024 they supported 9 833 refugees from both Ukraine and other countries. Among their main activities are: “complex support in the Caritas integration centers in Ruse, Plovdiv, Burgas, Varna and Sofia” for citizens of Ukraine, expressed in “assistance with Bulgarian language training, extracurricular activities with children, specialized consultations for access to healthcare, finding a job, enrolling children in kindergarten and school and other types of support helping their integration in Bulgaria”; activities “to promote sustainable livelihoods and socio-economic integration of refugees in Bulgaria”, provided by Caritas career centers in the indicated cities for those seeking and receiving international and temporary protection – “assistance in finding a job, information and career counseling, training for professional qualification and upgrading of work skills, Bulgarian language courses for workers/job seekers, preparation of individual career development plans, mentoring and accompaniment, entrepreneurial program and assistance in starting one's own business” (Activities – refugees. Caritas – Bulgaria).

Among the non-governmental organizations carrying out active social work with those seeking and receiving international and temporary protection is the “Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria”. Their main mission is to assist these people “in the process of social, economic and cultural adaptation, striving to help them develop social and life skills, increase their faith in their own efforts and success, and promote active integration” in Bulgaria. Among their main activities are: providing “humanitarian assistance, social consultations, translations and representation before institutions and informing the refugee community about their basic rights and obligations”; assistance in “celebrating holidays, providing information about the countries of origin, familiarizing the public with them, as well as introducing the refugee community to Bulgarian culture, traditions and customs”. Their website is in five languages -

Bulgarian, English, Arabic, Farsi and Ukrainian, which facilitates access to information for those seeking help and assistance.

The Council of Refugee Women has two main “programs for direct work with refugees and persons seeking protection” – “social mediation and humanitarian support”. The first program involves social mediators who are both Bulgarians and people from Middle Eastern countries. The languages spoken by the social mediators are Bulgarian, English, Farsi and Arabic. They “go through mandatory internal training upon entry and subsequent upgrading training on a number of topics such as: humanitarian context of working with persons fleeing from countries of armed conflicts; protection of children at risk; difficulties in social adaptation, measures in cases of domestic violence and gender-based violence; responding to a crisis situation and developing a security plan, and others”. Some of the social mediators work with people in the reception center of the State Agency for Refugees in Sofia. The main emphasis of the humanitarian support program is the receipt of “essential items, according to the social situation in which they find themselves” – “clothes, shoes, blankets, cosmetics, baby supplies, children's toys, school supplies, kitchen and household supplies”, “baby milk, porridge and purees, partial furniture, cleaning products”. Regular donation campaigns are organized to collect these items and products. Donations are made both by “large corporate donors - manufacturing and/or importing companies, as well as individual donors”. The humanitarian program is more focused on the initial adaptation after arrival in the country, especially for people from vulnerable groups such as “unaccompanied children, as well as people in difficult social, health and economic situations - separated mothers and fathers, widowed spouses, people who have lost their relatives and are left alone, large families, adults and children with severe medical and psychological traumas” (Council of Refugee Woman).

Access to information is extremely important for those seeking and receiving international and temporary protection - both for initial orientation after arrival in the host country and for subsequent steps in the social integration process. For this purpose, the information website “Platform Refugee Integration in Bulgaria” was created by the Bulgarian Council on Refugees and Migrants. This website contains important information in the areas of integration as: “Identity documents; Housing; Helthcare and health services; Education; Employment; Social assistance; Family reunification; Citizenship”. The information is extremely practically oriented, detailed, highlighting individual steps in the process of carrying out relevant activities, available in Bulgarian, English, French, Ukrainian, Russian, Arabic, Farsi, Kurdish (Platform Refugee Integration in Bulgaria).

4. Conclusion

The article presents several **main reasons for the challenges** facing contemporary social work in Bulgaria with people seeking and receiving international and temporary protection - children and adults:

- specificity of cultural differences due to nationality, ethnicity, religion, spoken language;
- ideas about life, expectations, perspectives, goals that people arriving in the host countries have, to what extent they coincide or diverge from reality;
- readiness to make efforts - intellectual, emotional, physical, for integration into the life of the host country and active inclusion in various areas of life realization.

In the practical work there are still some **challenges that need solutions**, such as:

- providing sufficient opportunities for **learning Bulgarian language** as a means of optimal educational inclusion and integration into the labor market;
- realization on **the labor market** - validation of professional qualification documents issued by the country of origin, acquisition of new professional skills relevant to the labor market in the host country, continuing education, etc.;
- **housing** - finding a place to live, accommodation;
- **active inclusion** in the social life of the host community in various forms, etc.

Despite the positive experience gained over the past three decades in terms of receiving and integrating refugees in Bulgaria, it is clear that there is still much to be done to improve these processes so that refugees can develop their potential in their new place of life and actively participate in its various aspects - professional, educational, cultural, etc., thereby contributing to the development of the host society. The main determinants of achieving such results are both the motivation, efforts and commitment of the refugees, as well as the support from the local society, including high-quality professional social work provided by state, non-governmental and international structures.

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A Critical Reading of Official Data on School Segregation Affecting Roma Children in Romania

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Abstract

This article examines school segregation affecting Roma children in Romania through a county-level comparison between demographic data and recently published administrative monitoring data. It combines the share of the Roma population in each county, based on the 2021 Population and Housing Census, with segregation alert rates reported in the Ministry of Education's 2024-2025 monitoring exercise. Two indicators are analysed separately: segregation alerts at school-structure level and at class level. The results show a positive relationship between Roma population share and segregation alerts in both cases, stronger at class level than at school-structure level. At the same time, demographic composition alone does not explain the territorial distribution of segregation. Several counties report substantially higher or lower levels than would be expected based on Roma population share alone. The article argues that these differences reflect not only demography, but also variation in implementation, reporting practices, and local institutional context, while also acknowledging important data limitations.

Keywords

Roma children; school segregation; Romania; desegregation; educational inequality; county-level analysis

1. Introduction

Roma ethnic segregation in education remains a persistent challenge in Romania and across Europe, with direct implications for educational quality, equal opportunities, and the effective enjoyment of fundamental rights. At EU level, the right to education and the principle of non-discrimination are explicitly recognised in the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* (European Union, 2012, Art. 14 & 21). These principles are operationalised through EU anti-discrimination law, notably the Racial Equality Directive (Council Directive 2000/43/EC), which prohibits discrimination on grounds of racial or ethnic origin in key domains including education (Council of the European Union, 2000). In

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parallel, the EU's policy framework increasingly treats desegregation as a prerequisite for meaningful Roma inclusion, including via the EU Roma Strategic Framework 2020-2030 and the Council Recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation (European Commission, 2020; Council of the European Union, 2021).

Beyond EU law and policy, segregation has also been addressed as a rights violation within European human-rights jurisprudence. The European Court of Human Rights has held that separating Roma children into different educational tracks or classes (under apparently neutral rationales) can amount to unlawful discrimination in the enjoyment of the right to education (e.g., *D.H. and Others v. the Czech Republic*; *Oršuš and Others v. Croatia*) (European Court of Human Rights, 2007/Grand Chamber; 2010/Grand Chamber). These legal and policy positions align with a growing scholarly emphasis on segregation as an institutional mechanism that reproduces educational disadvantage and entrenches social exclusion, especially when segregation becomes “normalised” through administrative routines, school choice dynamics, or socio-spatial inequalities (Burger, 2019; Costache et al., 2022). In Romania, the issue is particularly salient because segregation is shaped by intertwined ethnic and socio-economic vulnerabilities, while measurement and governance rely heavily on administrative categorisations and local implementation capacity (Ivan & Bănică, 2022; Varga, 2022). EU-level guidance cautions that segregation is not only a matter of “*where children attend school*” but also of unequal access to quality mainstream services, and it stresses that public funding should avoid reinforcing separation (European Commission, 2015). Rather than seeking to measure the “true” prevalence of school segregation in Romania, this article examines what the first nationwide monitoring exercise can reveal—and what it cannot reveal—about the territorial distribution of segregation affecting Roma children. Its contribution therefore lies less in producing a definitive map of segregation than in offering a critical reading of how segregation becomes visible through official data under uneven conditions of reporting, eligibility, and ethnic self-identification.

Against this backdrop, the present article contributes an empirically grounded perspective on how officially measured segregation aligns (or fails to align) with demographic realities. Specifically, it links administrative measures of Roma-related school segregation with the county-level share of Roma population reported in Romania's 2021 national census, in order to examine whether segregation correlates with Roma population distribution and to identify counties displaying segregation levels that appear higher than expected given their demographic composition. This approach aims to support evidence-

informed discussion on monitoring quality, implementation gaps, and targeted desegregation policy design.

2. Conceptualising school segregation

School segregation is commonly understood as the systematic separation of social groups across educational settings, such that children who differ by ethnicity, socioeconomic background, disability status, or migration background are educated in unequal and often isolated learning environments (Burger, 2019). Conceptually, segregation is not reducible to “difference” or “diversity”; rather, it denotes a patterned distribution that departs from what would be expected under an even allocation of groups across schools and classrooms. This distinction matters because high group presence can reflect demographic concentration in a locality, whereas segregation implies *separation* that is often linked to differential opportunities, resources, and expectations.

A core analytical boundary separates inter-school (between-schools) segregation from intra-school (within-school) segregation. Inter-school Roma segregation refers to the uneven distribution of Roma and non-Roma students across schools (often shaped by residential segregation, school catchment areas, and school choice dynamics). In contrast, intra-school segregation exists when Roma students are separated within the same school, for example through class formation, tracking/ability grouping, placement in separate buildings or shifts, or other organisational practices. Romanian scholarship explicitly emphasises that analysing school segregation only at the “school average” can obscure within-school separation mechanisms, thereby underestimating the lived reality of segregation (Costache et al., 2022). This distinction is consequential for research design: a county may appear “integrated” if overall school-level shares are balanced, while substantial segregation may persist *inside* schools through classroom sorting.

Relatedly, segregation can be examined at multiple nested levels. A socio-spatial perspective highlights the role of catchment areas and local settlement patterns in structuring unequal school composition (Burger, 2019). At the institutional level, Romanian policy and monitoring frameworks treat the “*school structure*” (e.g., main unit and subordinate structures) as a meaningful unit for identifying segregation risk, alongside more granular levels such as buildings/wings, classrooms, and even seating arrangements (e.g., the “last two desks”), which are explicitly recognised in national regulatory language. These levels matter because each can embody a different mechanism: spatial separation between buildings may reflect infrastructural inequality; classroom separation

may reflect administrative sorting; and micro-level practices (including seating) may reflect everyday discrimination.

To avoid conceptual slippage, it is useful to distinguish concentration from segregation. Concentration describes a high share of Roma students in a given school or locality (potentially driven by demography and settlement patterns) without necessarily implying intentional sorting. Segregation, by contrast, signals separation relative to the surrounding population, often accompanied by differential access to quality instruction, resources, and expectations. The concept of separation (as the social-spatial splitting of groups) captures the experiential dimension of segregation (education “in isolation”) which the Council of Europe’s policy discourse has repeatedly connected to inclusion deficits and rights concerns.

A final conceptual boundary concerns legality and causality; *de jure* segregation refers to separation mandated by law or formal policy, while *de facto* segregation results from residential patterns, administrative routines, or “neutral” practices that nonetheless produce ethnically differentiated outcomes. In EU law, this distinction maps onto direct versus indirect discrimination: direct discrimination involves less favourable treatment explicitly on ethnic grounds, while indirect discrimination arises when an apparently neutral provision or practice puts members of an ethnic group at a particular disadvantage unless objectively justified and proportionate (Council Directive 2000/43/EC, Art. 2). This framing is particularly relevant to education, where school assignment, class grouping, and tracking can be defended as neutral yet operate in ways that systematically separate Roma children. Needless to say, in contemporary EU member states, *de jure* segregation is neither a plausible nor a policy-relevant baseline; the analytically and normatively pressing concern is therefore *de facto* segregation, especially where it is produced and sustained under the cover of seemingly reasonable institutional rationales and routine administrative decisions. This gap between *de jure* protection and *de facto* exclusion is not unique to school segregation, but echoes broader regional evidence showing that formal rights often remain weakly realised in practice when support systems are fragmented or underdeveloped (Tanasijević et al., 2025).

These conceptual distinctions clarify why a county-level comparison between measured segregation and the Roma population share can be analytically useful while remaining incomplete. Counties approximate the policy-relevant administrative scale at which resources, governance capacity, and demographic composition vary; thus, county patterns can reveal macro-level associations consistent with socio-spatial mechanisms. Yet segregation is also produced (and experienced) at micro-

levels (schools, buildings, classrooms) that may not be visible in aggregated indicators. Accordingly, county-level correlations can identify where segregation aligns with demographic concentration and where patterns deviate, but they cannot on their own adjudicate the *mechanisms* (e.g., within-school sorting, reporting practices, or local administrative decisions) that generate segregation on the ground (Costache et al., 2022; Ivan & Bănică, 2022). The county is not assumed here to be the level at which segregation is directly produced or experienced. Rather, it is used as the most meaningful territorial scale at which the newly available administrative data become comparable, allowing differences in demographic composition, reporting patterns, and implementation capacity to be examined within a common analytical frame.

3. Legal and policy framework: EU anti-discrimination, desegregation principles

The legal and policy architecture governing Roma (de)segregation in education in Romania is best understood as a multi-level regime: EU primary law and anti-discrimination legislation establish binding principles and enforceable rights, while EU Roma policy frameworks and funding conditionalities translate these principles into governance expectations; Romania, in turn, operationalises them through national anti-discrimination rules and sector-specific education regulation. These instruments make school segregation neither a “local anomaly” nor a merely pedagogical matter, but a rights-sensitive domain where states are expected to prevent, identify, and remedy discriminatory separation in education.

At the level of primary EU law, the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* guarantees the right to education (Article 14) and prohibits discrimination on grounds including racial or ethnic origin (Article 21) (European Union, 2012). These principles are concretised in secondary law through the Racial Equality Directive (Council Directive 2000/43/EC), which applies to both the public and private sectors and explicitly covers education within its material scope. Its Article 2 distinguishes direct discrimination from indirect discrimination, the latter capturing situations where apparently neutral rules or practices put persons of a certain racial or ethnic origin at a particular disadvantage unless objectively justified by a legitimate aim and proportionate means. This legal distinction is highly consequential in schooling, where separation may be defended via ostensibly neutral rationales (catchment boundaries, ability grouping, language, “special needs”, or parental choice), yet still produce systematic ethnic stratification. In the Roma context, legal scholarship has shown how the

indirect discrimination standard is particularly relevant for challenging segregation patterns that are not openly ethnic but predictably and disproportionately affect Roma children (van den Bogaert, 2011). EU Roma policy frameworks reinforce the expectation that education systems should move from formal equality to effective inclusion. The European Commission's *EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation 2020-2030* frames Roma equality in education as a core objective and calls for stronger implementation, monitoring, and accountability mechanisms (European Commission, 2020). The Council Recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation (2021/C 93/01) further urges Member States to adopt and implement targeted measures to combat discrimination and segregation affecting Roma, including in education, and to improve the monitoring and evaluation of policies. A critical operational layer is added by EU funding guidance, which treats desegregation as a governance and investment requirement rather than a purely normative aspiration. The Commission's guidance for Member States on the use of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESI Funds) defines segregation in terms of physical and social separation and links it to unequal access to quality mainstream services; it emphasises that investments should avoid reproducing segregation and should support desegregation and spatial integration where relevant (European Commission, 2015). Importantly for education, the guidance distinguishes between *non-segregation* (preventing new segregation and ensuring that mainstream provision is accessible and non-discriminatory) and *desegregation* (actively dismantling existing segregated arrangements). It also underscores governance needs that are directly relevant to empirical work: mapping, diagnostics, and monitoring are prerequisites for credible interventions and for safeguarding rights-based use of funds. Recent Council of Europe work complements the EU framework by documenting how segregation persists across Europe despite formal prohibitions and by stressing that inclusion requires enforceable, well-monitored desegregation strategies. For instance, the Council of Europe's *Mapping Study on School Segregation of Roma Communities: Trends and Pathways Towards Educational Inclusion* highlights that Roma segregation in education perpetuates inequalities and underscores the role of legal norms and implementation pathways in advancing educational inclusion (Council of Europe, 2024).

4. Monitoring segregation in Romania. Legal obligations, national coordination, and reporting limitations

Romania's regulatory architecture on school segregation combines an early, explicit prohibition with newer institutional arrangements

designed to steer implementation and coordination. The cornerstone is The Minister of Education's Order No. 6,134/21.12.2016, which formally prohibits school segregation in pre-university education and frames segregation as incompatible with the principle of equal access to quality education. The Ministry's published presentation of the order makes clear that the prohibition covers multiple criteria (not only ethnicity, but also disability/special educational needs, socio-economic status, residence, and school performance) and explicitly targets physical separation across groups/classes/buildings and even micro-level arrangements (e.g., "the last two desks") when such separation produces disproportionate concentrations relative to the majority. This legal framing is important analytically because it recognises segregation as a multi-level institutional practice, not merely a between-school demographic outcome.

Later, Romania strengthened the institutional layer of desegregation policy by creating a dedicated national coordination body. Order No. 6,832/20.12.2023 approved the "*Regulation on the organisation and functioning of the National Commission for School Desegregation*", published in the Official Gazette in January 2024. The order explicitly anchors the commission in the new pre-university education law and references the 2016 anti-segregation order, while also reorganising the national governance landscape (including the abrogation of an earlier commission framework established in 2019). Institutionally, this move signals that desegregation is treated as an issue requiring system-level coordination, technical support, and policy steering, rather than being left solely to ad hoc local compliance. More recently, the Commission's organisational framework has continued to evolve. A Regulation dated 4 July 2025, approved by Order No. 4,482/04.07.2025 and published in the Official Gazette in July 2025, reiterates the National Commission's consultative status and assigns it a central role in coordinating implementation of an action plan for school desegregation and educational quality improvements in pre-university education. The 2016 prohibition and the subsequent creation and updating of a national desegregation commission illustrate a shift from rule-setting toward institutionalised governance (i.e., building administrative structures meant to translate legal norms into routine monitoring, coordinated interventions, and sustained implementation).

While this regulatory and institutional architecture signals increasing policy attention, academic research has repeatedly cautioned that formal prohibitions do not automatically translate into effective desegregation on the ground. Studies focusing on Roma children's educational experiences in Romania describe segregation as a persistent, system-level issue, maintained through routine local practices and

implementation gaps, even when national-level frameworks prohibit separation. In this reading, Romania's challenge is not primarily the absence of rules, but the difficulty of turning national commitments into consistent local compliance and enforceable change across diverse territorial contexts (Varga, 2022). A key recent development is the Ministry of Education's "*National Report on School Segregation Risk Analysis (school year 2024-2025)*", which operationalises the state's monitoring obligation through a nationwide data-collection exercise (via SIIIR - "The Integrated Information System for Education in Romania", an official administrative tool) intended to generate actionable signals for prevention and intervention. Importantly, the report also provides unusually transparent evidence about the limits of the current monitoring capacity. It documents that the dedicated SIIIR module was only partially completed at the end of the first reporting cycle and notes a significant number of units that did not provide the data needed for robust monitoring; specifically, the report states that 603 school structures did not submit the data required to calculate segregation scores at class level, which triggered automatic "maximum alert" scoring under the methodology, an approach that improves compliance incentives but complicates interpretation of prevalence patterns (Ministry of Education and Research, 2026). The same report highlights structural constraints that affect building-level diagnosis and, by extension, policy targeting. For ethnic segregation at the level of buildings, it notes that in 55.2% of school structures the necessary information linking classes to buildings was not available in SIIIR, making it impossible to assess segregation at the building level for those units; an additional share had only partial data. This matters for governance because it shows that, despite an increasingly robust legal mandate, Romania's monitoring system is still in a transition phase where administrative data quality can limit the state's ability to systematically identify where desegregation interventions are most urgently needed (Ministry of Education and Research, 2026).

Finally, Romania's current desegregation monitoring efforts intersect with a well-known measurement dilemma in Roma policy: both census ethnicity and many administrative records rely on self-identification, which can produce undercounts in contexts shaped by stigma or fear of discrimination. Methodological scholarship on Romania's census data has shown that "undeclared ethnicity" and selective self-identification can materially affect Roma population estimates, and critical work on ethnic quantification highlights why official counts may systematically diverge from other measurement approaches. Studies that compare census figures with alternative measurement strategies discuss systematic gaps between official counts and other estimates, which matters for any analysis that relates

administrative education indicators to census-based Roma shares (Surdu, 2019). This is not simply a technical issue: it affects how policymakers interpret “need” how resources are targeted, and how success is assessed over time (Cernat, 2021).

5. Methodology

This study uses a descriptive-comparative, county-level approach to examine whether administrative indicators of school segregation (as revealed by the official 2025 data) tend to be higher in counties with a larger Roma population share, and whether some counties appear to report higher (or lower) segregation risk than the national pattern would suggest. The unit of analysis is the Romanian county (*județ*, in Romanian). Two public sources were combined:

- Ministry of Education segregation monitoring data (school year 2024-2025). The Ministry’s national report summarizes the first nationwide monitoring exercise implemented through the SIIIR platform, producing “alert scores” that flag potential segregation risk. The report also documents substantial constraints in data completion and eligibility that affect interpretability.

- Roma population shares from the 2021 Romanian Population and Housing Census (RPL 2021). County-level Roma shares were computed using the census’s ethnicity tables, where ethnicity is based on self-identification.

To support comparability across counties of different sizes, the segregation indicators were treated as shares (percentages) rather than raw counts. In practice, the analysis uses **a**) the percentage of eligible school structures that were flagged with an alert at the *school-structure level*, and **b**) the percentage of eligible school structures that were flagged with an alert at the *class level*. The key demographic indicator is the percentage of the county population that self-identifies as Roma in the 2021 census.

The analysis has three steps:

1. Territorial variation (we first present how Roma population shares and segregation alert rates vary across counties).

2. Correlate the two indicators. (we then examine whether counties with higher Roma shares tend to report higher segregation alert rates, using standard correlation measures as reported in Results).

3. Identify counties that deviate from the national pattern (we highlight counties whose segregation alert rates appear notably higher or lower than what the overall national relationship would suggest given

their Roma share. These are treated as “*counties of interest*” for policy discussion, not as proof of causality).

Major limitations and interpretive cautions

(1) Incomplete reporting and limited eligibility in the Ministry dataset. The Ministry report itself emphasizes that this was a “first-time national exercise” and that the SIIIR module was only “partially completed” at the end of reporting. A significant number of units did not provide the data needed for robust monitoring at key levels. The report notes explicitly that 603 school structures did not provide the necessary data to compute segregation scores at class level. In addition, the report highlights a broader structural limitation: 55.2% of school structures lacked complete information needed to link classes to buildings, making building-level assessment impossible in those cases. While our analysis focuses on the county indicators that are available (structure-level and class-level alerts), these constraints mean that the resulting measures should be treated as administrative signals under conditions of partial reporting, not as a definitive estimate of the true prevalence of segregation.

A related limitation is that many school structures are not “eligible” for certain forms of assessment (e.g., where there is only one relevant structure/class configuration). As a result, county rates can be based on subsets of the total school landscape, and the size of the eligible base may vary substantially across counties, an important reason to interpret cross-county comparisons with caution.

(2) Likely underreporting of Roma identity in census data. As mentioned before, Roma population shares in the census depend on self-identification, and a consistent point in the literature is that Roma populations can be undercounted in censuses because some individuals avoid declaring Roma ethnicity due to stigma, discrimination concerns, or complex identity dynamics. For Romania specifically, recent research using alternative identification approaches finds substantial underreporting relative to official census figures, and critical scholarship discusses how census-based Roma numbers can systematically underestimate Roma presence. (Mitruț et al., 2025). While the official RPL 2021 data show a total of 569477 Roma persons in Romania, some alternative sources (even official ones) estimate around 1,85 million Roma people in Romania (Government of Romania, 2022). This interpretive caution is consistent with recent evidence from Northeastern Hungary, where different ethnic classification methods produce markedly different territorial pictures of the Roma population and, therefore, different readings of segregation risk (Pénzes et al., 2026). For this study, the practical implication is that the census-based county Roma shares

should be treated as a lowerbound indicator, not as an exact demographic measure.

(3) Similar self-identification constraints in school administrative records. The Ministry report refers to “students who declared Roma ethnicity,” indicating that ethnicity information used in the monitoring exercise relies on reported identity rather than external classification. In practice, this creates a parallel measurement challenge to the census: if Roma identity is under-declared in some local contexts, then both the demographic benchmark (census) and the school-based indicator may be affected in ways that are difficult to quantify.

6. Results

This section presents the main findings in three steps. First, it examines the overall relationship between county-level Roma population shares and the two segregation indicators used in this study. Second, it compares the **expected** and **observed** levels of segregation at the **school-structure level**, in order to identify counties that stand above or below the general national pattern. Third, it performs the same comparison for segregation at the **class level**.

Correlation between Roma population share and segregation alert rates

The first step of the analysis examined whether counties with a higher share of Roma population also tend to report higher segregation alert rates. Two indicators were considered separately: the percentage of eligible school structures flagged with an alert at structure level and the percentage of eligible school structures flagged with an alert at class level. The results show a positive relationship in both cases. At the structure level, the Pearson correlation coefficient between the county Roma population share and the segregation alert rate is 0.515 ($p = 0.0005$). This indicates a moderate positive association: counties with larger Roma population shares tend, in general, to report higher structure-level segregation alerts. The relationship is stronger at the class level. Here, the Pearson correlation coefficient is 0.674 ($p < 0.0001$), suggesting a clearer positive association between the proportion of Roma population and the class-level segregation alert rate. Our findings suggest that counties with larger Roma populations are generally more likely to report higher segregation alerts. However, the relationship is not strong enough to explain all county-level differences. In other words, demography matters, but it does not fully account for the territorial distribution of segregation alerts across Romania.

Table 1: Correlations between Roma population share and segregation alert rates

Variables compared	N	Pearson's r	p-value
Roma population share and structure-level segregation alert rate	42	0.515	< 0.001
Roma population share and class-level segregation alert rate	42	0.674	< 0.001

(Source: author's calculations based on data provided by Ministry of Education and Research, 2026, and National Institute of Statistics, 2023)

Expected and observed segregation at school-structure level

The second stage of the analysis focused on segregation alerts at the school-structure level. In order to move beyond the overall correlation presented above, the analysis estimated an expected structure-level alert rate for each county based on the general national relationship between the Roma population share and the structure-level segregation alert rate. In practical terms, this means that each county was assigned an estimated value derived from the overall national trend linking the two variables. Expected county values were estimated through a simple linear regression, using the county Roma population share as the predictor and the structure-level segregation alert rate as the outcome. These expected values should be understood only as estimates derived from the overall national linear trend and not as substantively “normal” or normatively appropriate levels of segregation for any given county. The observed county value was then compared with this estimated value. The difference between the two was used to identify counties that stand above or below the broader national pattern. This comparison makes it possible to identify counties where the reported structure-level segregation alert rate is higher than expected or lower than expected, given the county's Roma population share. In substantive terms, counties above the expected level can be seen as places where segregation at school-structure level appears more pronounced than the broader national pattern would suggest. Counties below the expected level, by contrast, report lower values than expected.

The results show that several counties stand clearly above the expected pattern. The most notable case is Satu Mare, which exceeds the expected value by 30.84 percentage points. Other counties with substantial positive deviations are Olt (+23.09), Harghita (+21.05), Argeş (+16.29), and Vâlcea (+15.77). Brăila also stands out, with a positive deviation of +14.95 percentage points. These counties report structure-level segregation alert rates that are considerably higher than would be expected on the basis of demography alone (the national linear trend). At the other end of the distribution, several counties fall clearly below the expected pattern. The strongest negative deviation is recorded in Sălaj, which is 26.86 percentage points below its expected value. Other counties with marked below-expected

values are Dolj (-18.99), Călărași (-16.63), Galați (-12.56), and Timiș (-12.35). In these counties, the observed structure-level segregation alert rate is noticeably lower than the national pattern would suggest given their Roma population share. Lower-than-expected values should not be read as evidence of inclusion in any straightforward sense, as they may also reflect reporting or data-quality differences.

Table 2: Counties above and below the expected pattern at school-structure level

County	Roma population share (%)	Observed structure-level alert rate (%)	Expected structure-level alert rate (%)	Deviation (Observed / Expected)
Above expected				
Satu Mare	4.94	57.35	26.51	+30.84
Olt	2.56	41.18	18.09	+23.09
Harghita	1.69	36.07	15.02	+21.05
Argeș	2.99	35.90	19.61	+16.29
Vâlcea	2.41	33.33	17.56	+15.77
Brăila	2.64	33.33	18.38	+14.95
Below expected				
Sălaj	7.87	24.00	50.86	-26.86
Dolj	4.99	7.69	26.68	-18.99
Călărași	6.19	14.29	30.92	-16.63
Galați	3.09	7.41	19.97	-12.56
Timiș	1.91	3.45	15.80	-12.35

(Source: author's calculations based on data provided by Ministry of Education and Research, 2026, and National Institute of Statistics, 2023)

Expected and observed segregation at class level

The third stage of the analysis focused on segregation alerts at the class level. Expected county values were estimated through a simple linear regression, using the county Roma population share as the predictor and the class-level segregation alert rate as the outcome; the difference between the observed and predicted values was then used to identify counties above or below the general national pattern. In practical terms, this means that each county was assigned an estimated class-level alert rate based on the overall national relationship between the Roma population share and the class-level segregation alert rate. The observed county value was then compared with this estimated value. Counties with observed values above the expected level can be understood as places where class-level segregation appears more pronounced than the broader national pattern would suggest, while counties below the expected level report lower values than expected.

The results show that several counties stand clearly above the expected pattern. The most notable case is Satu Mare, which exceeds the expected value by 18.50 percentage points. Other counties with substantial positive deviations are Harghita (+13.68), Cluj (+12.53), Arad (+12.11), and Ilfov (+8.87). Giurgiu also stands out, with a positive deviation of +8.22

percentage points. These counties report class-level segregation alert rates that are considerably higher than would be expected on the basis of the national linear trend. At the other end of the distribution, several counties fall clearly below the expected pattern. The strongest negative deviation is recorded in Argeş, which is 13.72 percentage points below its expected value. Other counties with marked below-expected values are Vaslui (-10.40), Olt (-10.31), Sibiu (-9.30), and Neamţ (-7.12). Timiş also falls below the expected level, with a deviation of -7.00 percentage points. In these counties, the observed class-level segregation alert rate is noticeably lower than the national pattern would suggest given their Roma population share.

Our results show that, although the relationship between Roma population share and segregation is stronger at class level than at structure level, demography still does not fully explain the territorial distribution of class-level segregation alerts. Counties with similar Roma population shares may still report very different class-level alert rates. This suggests that local administrative practices, school-level dynamics, reporting patterns, or broader territorial factors may also influence how segregation is identified and recorded. A caveat, however: deviations should be interpreted with caution in counties with small eligible denominators.

Table 3: Counties above and below the expected pattern at class level

County	Roma population share (%)	Observed class-level alert rate (%)	Expected class-level alert rate (%)	Deviation (Observed / Expected)
Above expected				
Satu Mare	4.94	63.89	45.39	+18.50
Harghita	1.69	47.31	33.63	+13.68
Cluj	2.62	49.53	37.00	+12.53
Arad	4.08	54.39	42.28	+12.11
Ilfov	1.69	42.50	33.63	+8.87
Giurgiu	4.57	52.27	44.05	+8.22
Below expected				
Argeş	2.99	24.62	38.34	-13.72
Vaslui	1.41	22.22	32.62	-10.40
Olt	2.56	26.47	36.78	-10.31
Sibiu	3.30	30.16	39.46	-9.30
Neamţ	1.27	25.00	32.12	-7.12
Timiş	1.91	27.43	34.43	-7.00

(Source: author's calculations based on data provided by Ministry of Education and Research, 2026, and National Institute of Statistics, 2023)

7. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that county-level demographic composition does matter for understanding the territorial distribution of segregation alerts in Romania, but only up to a point. In both models, counties with higher Roma population shares tended to report higher segregation alert rates, and this relationship was stronger at class level than

at school-structure level. At the same time, the pattern was far from uniform: several counties recorded substantially higher or lower alert rates than would be expected on the basis of Roma population share alone. This is an important result because it suggests that school segregation cannot be reduced to demography. Rather, the data point to the continued relevance of local administrative practices, institutional routines, and territorial differences in how segregation is produced, identified, and reported. This interpretation is broadly consistent with the Romanian and regional literature, which has long argued that Roma school segregation is not simply a reflection of population distribution, but a more complex institutional and social process (Moisa & Roth, 2011; Varga, 2022). In this sense, the county deviations identified in this study should be read not only as possible signals of uneven segregation, but also as possible signals of uneven administrative visibility. Put differently, the monitoring system may be capturing both segregation itself and the variable local capacity (or willingness) to detect, report, and classify it.

A second important conclusion concerns the stronger association observed at class level. Substantively, this may indicate that the more persistent forms of separation are often located within schools rather than only between schools or school structures. In other words, segregation may survive even where children formally belong to the same institution, through class-level sorting, differentiated expectations, or everyday administrative decisions. This reading is in line with earlier work showing that school segregation in Romania often persists through internal organisational arrangements and through apparently routine practices that reproduce unequal educational spaces over time (Moisa & Roth, 2011; Varga, 2022). It also resonates with ethnographic research showing that segregated educational trajectories are sustained not only by formal rules, but also by broader institutional settings, financing logics, and local social relations that shape how schools function in practice (Plainer, 2021). The counties that appear above the expected pattern are especially important from a policy perspective. They should not be interpreted as proof of intentional discrimination in any simple sense, but they do indicate places where the observed level of segregation is higher than the national demographic trend would predict. In the context of Romania's anti-segregation framework, this matters because the legal prohibition is already in place, and a national monitoring architecture has also been developed. Yet the new ministerial report itself shows that monitoring capacity remains uneven: the first nationwide exercise was affected by partial reporting, incomplete data, and uneven eligibility for assessment across schools and structures (Ministry of Education and Research, 2026). The present findings therefore support a broader interpretation already present in the literature: the main challenge in Romania is no longer only the absence of legal norms, but the gap between

formal prohibition and effective implementation on the ground (Moisa & Roth, 2011; Varga, 2022). At the same time, the counties falling below the expected pattern should be interpreted cautiously. A lower-than-expected alert rate does not necessarily indicate a more inclusive educational reality. It may reflect better local practice, but it may also reflect differences in reporting, in the operational use of the alert system, or in the quality and completeness of administrative data. This caution is especially important because both the census-based measure of Roma population share and parts of the school-based identification process depend on self-identification. Research on the Romanian census has shown that ethnicity data can be affected by undercounting and undeclared ethnicity, which complicates the use of official figures as a precise demographic benchmark (Cernat, 2021). In this respect, the contribution of the present study is not to offer a definitive measurement of segregation, but to identify meaningful territorial patterns within the limits of currently available public data.

Overall, the study points to a broader implication for Romanian education policy. If segregation alerts are only partly explained by demographic composition, then desegregation policy must go beyond demographic reasoning and focus more directly on implementation. This includes better reporting compliance, more reliable monitoring tools, closer scrutiny of within-school separation, and stronger follow-up in counties that repeatedly appear above the national pattern. The results also suggest that future research should combine administrative data with qualitative inquiry at local level, especially in counties that deviate strongly from expected values. Such an approach would make it easier to distinguish between genuine implementation problems, differences in reporting practice, and the wider social conditions that continue to reproduce segregated educational spaces (Plainer, 2021; Varga, 2022). Comparative minority-policy research also suggests that even relatively developed legal and institutional frameworks do not automatically overcome the persistent educational and social disadvantages affecting Roma communities (Villányi, 2026).

8. Conclusion

This article has examined school segregation affecting Roma children in Romania through a county-level comparison between census-based Roma population shares and the segregation alert rates reported in the Ministry of Education's recent monitoring exercise. The findings show that counties with larger Roma population shares tend, in general, to report higher segregation alert rates, especially at class level. At the same time, the results also show that this relationship is only partial. Several counties report levels of segregation that are either substantially higher or substantially lower than what would be expected based on demographic composition alone. This

is an important finding because it suggests that school segregation in Romania cannot be understood simply as a demographic outcome. Rather, it appears to reflect a broader combination of territorial, institutional, and administrative factors. In this sense, the study supports the view that segregation persists not only because of the distribution of Roma communities, but also because of differences in implementation, monitoring, and local educational practices.

The article also highlights a broader governance problem. Romania has, on paper, a clear anti-segregation framework, supported by legal prohibition, a national desegregation commission, and a new monitoring mechanism. However, the available evidence suggests that the gap between formal commitment and effective implementation remains significant. The Ministry's own report points to incomplete reporting and unequal data quality, while both census and school-level ethnicity data remain affected by the limitations of self-identification. These limitations do not make the analysis unusable, but they do narrow what can reasonably be claimed. The findings suggest that the current monitoring system is useful as an initial diagnostic tool, but not yet sufficient as a fully reliable measure of the territorial distribution of segregation. This implementation gap also resonates with broader inclusion-policy findings showing that targeted projects may generate local benefits while still failing to secure durable policy change and institutional sustainability at the systemic level (Bergmann, 2026).

Future policy efforts should therefore focus not only on strengthening legal commitments, but also on improving reporting quality, increasing follow-up capacity, and paying closer attention to counties where reported segregation exceeds the broader national pattern. At the same time, future research would benefit from combining administrative data with qualitative investigation at local level, in order to better understand the institutional and social mechanisms through which segregation continues to be reproduced.

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Immigration Policy of Romania. Challenges and Recommendations

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Abstract

International migration is a major policy issue across Europe due to direct external and internal pressures on asylum and integration systems; this review article compares Romania's immigration policy to European migration governance by focussing on structural challenges of immigrants and refugees. The legal conformity of Romania with EU asylum legislation, international refugee conventions and the Dublin Regulation is examined via qualitative examination of literature, policy papers and institutional reports. The insights from the existing literature discourse revealed that legislative responsibilities are not fulfilled in Romania across the areas of integration, institutional capability and long-term protection as Romania has asylum application and border management procedures but integration of immigrants is still slow due to poorly integrated policies, a centralised administration and a lack of social and economic support.

Keywords

Romania; Immigration Policy; Refugees; Integration; Dublin Regulation

1. Introduction and Methodology

International Migration is become one of the most complex policy challenge faced by the region of Europe in 21st century because the international migration and arrival of immigrants directly associated with the factors like geopolitical instability, economic inequality, environmental concerns and human rights breaches. The large-scale refugee and migrant movements from the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa exerted pressure on EU immigration procedures and integration frameworks (Friel, 2021; Danisi et al., 2021). The EU policy framework and international conventions like the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol provide normative guidance for protecting displaced populations but migration governance effectiveness depended on the operationalisation of these commitments within the national policy frameworks and following the operationalisation dynamics: Romania is an important but understudied case because it is situated on the eastern border of Europe and serve as a transit

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and destination country for migrants and refugees. The immigration policy of Romania modified since joining the EU to reflect European interests like border security, legal migration and humanitarian assistance but Jianu (2019) and Maes and Debusscher (2022) found that Romania struggles to implement legislative commitments into comprehensive integration despite adopting major international refugee instruments and aligning some of its legislation with EU standards. National Strategies for Immigration for 2015-2018 and 2021-2025 addressed migration governance but both of the frameworks lacked a comprehensive refugee integration policy the 2021-2025 strategy is under public evaluation and lacks an action plan which consequently restricted its ability to address long-term integration issues (Mareci et al., 2023).

The increased susceptibility of Romania to migration makes the lack of a structured integration mechanism very concerning because according to Aydın (2021) and Bharti and Bista (2023), the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has significantly changed migration dynamics in Eastern Europe; Romania initially hosting over 130,000 Ukrainian migrants and sustaining millions more by 2023-2030. The global modifying dynamics tested the asylum infrastructure, social support networks, and administrative ability of Romania while highlighting gaps between emergency humanitarian measures and long-term integration; the National Agency for Refugee and Migration provides temporary housing, legal registration and basic health and security support but unable to address the challenges of employment access, social inclusion and legal stability (World Health Organisation, 2021). The presence of National Agency for Refugee and Migration reflected that Romania has institutional asylum and migration procedures providing registration, document verification and temporary shelter during asylum determination but non-EU migrants staying longer than 90 days must get residence permits while the permit is correlated to employment or educational competencies (Migration and Home Affairs, 2025). The process of permits demonstrated legal governance commitment for the immigrants but Neureiter (2022) argued that procedural compliance does not ensure effective migrant rights or social integration without coordinated national initiatives and consistent monitoring systems thus; the utilisation of ad hoc evaluations and fragmented surveys by the Romanian authorities highlighted the lack of institutionalised integration monitoring within the immigrations of refugees.

Moreover, the immigration policies can be compared using the Migration Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) as MIPEX study by Croitoru (2021) found Romania lagged behind many EU member states in labour market mobility, education, political involvement and migrant long-term security because the Romanian government focused on integrating talented non-European immigrants to support employment shortages and promote economic

development but Hack-Polay et al. (2022) illustrated that rigid administrative practises and insufficient social support structures undermine the overall policy effectiveness; reflecting the policy conflict between economic migration and humanitarian protection. The immigration policies of Romania are also impacted by its border security and strict migration priorities as the risks of human trafficking, smuggling and irregular migration routes forced Romania to strengthen border surveillance, document verification and cross-border policing (Mlambo et al., 2022; Brusylovska and Maksymenko, 2019). The frameworks with strict migration priorities improves the overall national and regional security, but Niemann and Zaun, (2023) stated that a security-based approach risks marginalising refugee protection and integration because the resources are diverted to enforcement rather than social inclusion.

The current review explores immigration policy literature on Romania to examine immigrants and refugees' structural challenges by focussing on legal protection, institutional capacity and integration gaps; reflecting the misalignment between international legal commitments and national policy implementation by contextualising Romania in the European migration governance environment. The author claims that Romania's immigration policy will fail to protect refugee rights and promote sustainable integration without a structured and comprehensive national integration strategy supported by clear legislative frameworks, transparent data collection and continuous evaluation hence; the review contributes to scholarly and policy debates on migration governance in Eastern Europe and stresses on the need for strategic innovation in refugee and immigrant integration systems.

2. Literature backed Theoretical Foundation

The comprehensive understanding of immigration and asylum involves theoretical models explaining the motivators of migration and the response by the states towards the displaced population; managing the effects of structured inequality, political instability, social interactions and legal regime changes. The **Push-Pull Model** is one of the relevant theoretical paradigms within the immigration literature discourse due to its capacity to include structural mobility determinants as Stoica and Voina (2023) found that a combination of “push” and “pull” factors influence migration decisions. The push factors military conflict, economic instability, unemployment and environmental degradation increased across the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Africa while the pull influences included the perceived safety and economic possibilities with political stability (Mousa Sabti and Sri Ramalu, 2024) therefore: Romania is becoming a transit and destination country in Europe due to its political stability and proximity to crisis zones like Ukraine-Russia war which consequently reflected that the Push-Pull Model is effective for evaluating refugee migrations into Romania because it correlates macro-

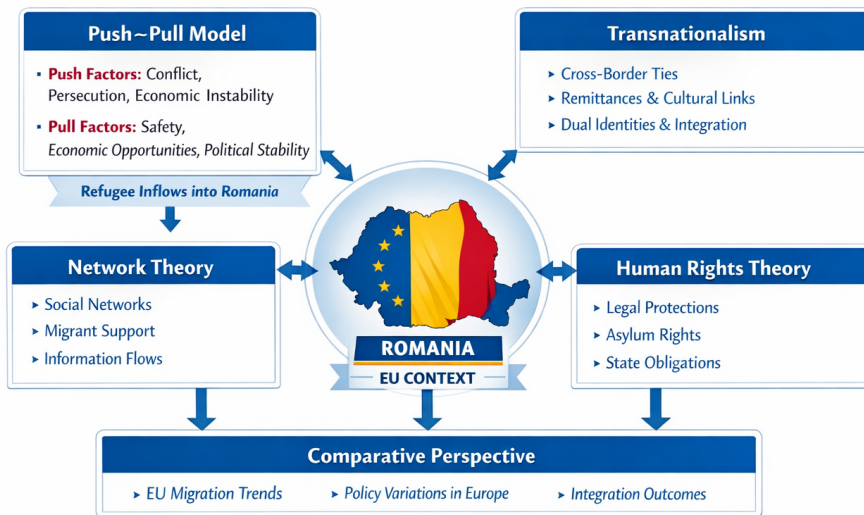
level factors in sending nations to destination-level policy and opportunity structures. The Push-Pull Model is also criticised for oversimplifying individual decision-making and discounting social relations in the literature discourse despite its potential of explaining immigration; Duan et al. (2021) stated that transnationalism provides a more comprehensive view of immigrant experiences because transnationalism emphasised on maintain economic, social, cultural, and political with the home nations. The concept of transnationalism rejects one-way assimilation and recognises migrants as active agents in diverse national contexts under which Mügge (2015) further stated that transnationalism is important for refugees and labour immigrants in Romania because they are connected with their home countries via remittances and communication. The translational connection affect the integration, identity and long-term settlement of the immigrants because transnational practices directly support the integration by ensuring emotional and financial support but Iqbal et al. (2025) argued that transnational measures sometimes hindered the integration process subjected to their fundamental exclusion from host-country institutions.

The **Network Theory** emphasised on the influence of social networks for the effective immigration and integration of the immigrants also closely related to the transnationalism as Network Theory proposed that interpersonal links undermine migration costs and risks (Spiegel, 2022) thus; family, friends and ethnic communities networks support immigrants on asylum, job, housing and legal rights. The expanding migration networks create self-perpetuating immigration systems that impact destination decisions as empirical evidences of Bélanger and Silvey, 2020 illustrated that asylum seekers and economic immigrants manage complex legal and administrative processes in host countries using established networks. The informal networks often fill state deficiencies in refugee integration support in Romania but Lórinicz and Németh (2022) cited that networks can promote social inequalities because migrants lacking social capital are more vulnerable and marginalised within the regions like Romania. The theories of transnationalism and network both focuses on migration factors and social processes around immigration **Human Rights Theory** provides normative yet legal frameworks for assessing state immigration and asylum responses; universal right to refuge and state obligation to protect individuals from discrimination and harsh treatment are incorporated in international documents like the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol (Cantor et al., 2022; Dieudonne, 2021). The human rights paradigm stressed on ethical and legal obligations for government in migration governance rather than emphasising on motivations of migrants under which the theory supports the examination of the gaps between legal promises and practical implementation in Europe and Romania; Romania adopted international refugee agreements, but integration programs, legal clarity and long-term

protection mechanisms gaps are creating concerns about migrant rights (Mareci et al., 2023).

The contrast of Romania with European immigration dynamics enhances the analytical relevance of these theories as compare migration studies highlighted that economic opportunity, security and political stability are common push and pull variables across locations but policy responses and institutional capabilities are the variable factors (Heilbrunn and Iannone, 2020). Snyder et al. (2023) added that the access to housing, work, healthcare and legal support in European immigration procedures is inconsistent with international legal requirements; reflecting that national policy design and administrative capabilities influence the immigration outcomes beyond shared legal frameworks. Comparative datasets also illustrated that social networks and institutional support are important to integration success because Ilie et al. (2022) found that states with fragmented or security-based methods fail to address long-term requirements of refugees while the nations with strong integration policies and coordinated welfare systems support rapid integration of immigrants within the economical workforces; supporting the utilisation Network Theory and Human Rights Theory to examine the informal support mechanisms addressing institutional gaps at the expense of legal certainty and social equality.

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework for the Immigration Policy Dynamics in Romania



(Source: Developed by the Primary Researcher: Balsam, 2026)

3. The Case of Inward Immigration Flow in Romania

Inward immigration to Romania constantly increased over the past decade, reflecting both European migration patterns and transition of

Romania from an exodus country to a host and transit state; official statistics reveal 4,200 refugees and immigrants with the rise of 17.29% in Romania within 2021 from 2020 (Topor, 2020). According to the General Inspectorate for Immigration (GII), 148,000 immigrants were lawfully residing in the country and around 96,000 of legal immigrants are third-country nationals (TCNs) with residency permits (Balica and Marinescu, 2019) hence; the numbers demonstrated that the demographic and policy landscape of Romania is influenced by inward migration. The composition of Romanian inward migration highlighted its multi-functionality as the employment, family reunification and international protection are the key pull factors; foreign-born population is 2% including 38.2% labour migrants, 26.6% family members, 25.3% international students and 10% short-term or other migrants (Besoiu, 2022). However, Culic (2019) cited that Romanian National Institute of Statistics estimates that only 1% of foreign-born inhabitants were long-term residents in 2019 due to majority of the transient and transitional inward migration.

Moreover inward immigration is majorly asylum-related as in 2021 Afghanistan (4,260), Syria (1,243), and Bangladesh (875) demographics raise the asylum applications to 9,591 yet only 1,120 were granted the legal immigration however the rise of applications from 1,260 to 9,000+ reflected the susceptibility of Romania to forced immigrations thus; Afghans, Syrians, Iraqis, Moroccans and Turks are the largest asylum-seekers (AIDA, 2022). The time trends highlighted the instability of the inward migration as immigration rose gradually between 2015 and 2019 (post-European refugee crisis) but COVID-19-related border restrictions and stronger migration controls reduced the immigration flow in 2020 (Matei et al., 2020). However, Devitt (2023) cited that majority of the asylum seekers are still under-represented in official migration statistics since they are not classified as foreign-born residents until permanent residency hence; internal immigration of Romania is low but complex asylum pressures, labour needs and rigid quotas made it peripherally relevant as an EU immigration prospect.

4. Problems for Immigrates in Romania

The immigrants in Romania encountered structural, legal, and socio-economic challenges that are different from any other member of EU despite the official agreement of Romania with EU asylum requirements and international refugee law. The pressure on asylum systems, irregular migration and integration barriers are common across the EU region but post-communist governance structure, centralised migration management and underdeveloped integration policies are unique challenges within the region of Romania (Porumbescu, 2019; Gherghina, 2021) hence; the

literature reflects that misalignment between legal compliance and practical implementation makes the immigrants of Romania vulnerable. The **absence of a comprehensive and structured operational integration framework** is one of the consistent challenges faced by the immigrants as the integration is inconsistently implemented in Romania despite adopting EU asylum directives and international norms (Cerna, 2019; Cimpoeru et al., 2023). According to Besoiu (2022) Romania classifies refugees and other migrants as “immigrants” while Pteroni (2021) found that other Western EU countries have structured national and municipal integration programmes for housing, language acquisition, employment access and civic participation with the funding support from Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). The general categorisation of migrants and refugees undermine the humanitarian attention on refugees, having different requirements than general immigrants and family reunification applicants thus; refugees generally get short-term aid while immigrants found limited opportunities for social involvement.

The **limited access to socio-economic integration opportunities** in employment, education, and housing is another correlated issue for the immigrants because EU migration policy focuses on labour market integration as a medium to self-sufficiency (Freeman and Lewis, 2021) but Gherghina and Miscoiu (2025) found that Romania struggle to implement this focus with lack of occupational training, skills recognition and language support for employment. Jianu (2019) and Rehejeh (2020) both illustrated that immigrants experience protracted uncertainty, prohibiting them from working during the processing of their immigration or asylum petitions yet the skilled immigrants better achieve legal status and employment rights however; Joormann (2019) stated that Sweden encourage early labour market for all immigrants to ensure integration and reduce welfare dependency. The **legal uncertainty and prolonged immigration or asylum procedures** also served as core challenge for the Romanian immigrants as *Law 122/2006* established official procedures but its bureaucratic structure lead to delays and lack of transparency (Roşca, 2021; Polese et al., 2022). The immigrants similar to refugees need to in temporary housing centres for long periods while awaiting their documentation however, these delays are common across the EU but inferior administrative competence and institutional coordination in Romania compounded the complexity hence; the immigrants lacked the permanent residency rights until their petitions are validated.

The **dominance of a security-based and centralised migration governance model** is another issue for Romanian immigrants because the migration system of Romania is strictly regulated by the Ministry of Interior's General Inspectorate for Immigration, with limited municipal or civil society

input (Schöfberger, 2020). Panebianco (2019) highlighted that unlike Romania many other EU states use multi-level governance models with collaborative roles of local governments and NGOs to ensure integration of immigrants however, the Romanian approach prioritises border control and irregular migration management with increased border monitoring (Üstübcici et al., 2022) hence; the strict border policy complements EU security goals but also undermines the integration and protection concerns, promoting the assumptions that immigrants are security risks rather than rights-holders. The **irregular migration and restrictive border practices** made immigrants and refugees more vulnerable as Cimpoeru et al. (2023) reported that 1,420 Syrians and 2,365 Afghans acquired the immigration in 2023 due to the location of Romania between the Balkan and Eastern migration routes; the increased border restrictions and interceptions have led to denied entrance or delay prior the immigration filing which reflected that Romania prioritises prevention and control above immigrants reception (Triandafyllidou et al., 2019).

Furthermore, **lack of reliable data and systematic monitoring for immigrant's integration outcomes** complicates the integration processes in Romania as Gabriel (2020) cited that Romania lacks employment, education, health access and long-term integration datasets for immigrants due to excessive refugees. The gaps in datasets undermine the evidence-based policymaking and integration measure evaluation while the established EU states like Germany utilise integration indicators and monitoring frameworks aligned with EU benchmarks to evolve policy (Papadopoulos and Fratsea, 2022) thus; underdeveloped data infrastructure of Romania hindered the accountability and combines refugees with working immigrants. Following the fragmented data infrastructure, the **social exclusion and limited societal engagement** is persistent for the immigrants because the history of Romania as a country of emigration rather than immigration and decades of communist isolation; impacted public perception and institutional preparation for diversity (Fratsea and Papadopoulos, 2020). Romania is currently adjusting to its host status, unlike Western European countries with long-term multicultural policy histories yet the language hurdles, cultural remoteness and limited community-level integration marginalise the immigrants (Pripoaie et al., 2022) however; NGOs International Organizations for Migration (IOM) trying to manage the marginalisation but the centralised governance of Romania limits their positive influence (Fitzek, 2021). The Romanian immigrants often generalise as refugees and exposed to the complicated interrelated issues that represent EU migration issues and country-specific limitations however, Romania is compliant with European migration requirements but integration policy, legal certainty, governance decentralisation and socio-

economic support marginalised refugees more compared to the other member states of EU.

5. Dublin Policy Support Framework in Romania

The Dublin Regulation governs the asylum and immigration policies in Romania as the country is a vulnerable Member State, using to Dublin system to comply with EU responsibility-allocation mechanisms and its structural constraints of asylum system. According to Gherghina and Munro (2023) Romania received 9,493 Dublin asylum petitions in 2021 with a rise from 3,221 in 2020, reflecting increased secondary movements and rising importance of Romania in EU migration corridors however OECD (2025) reported a low transfer rate of 1.59% despite 815 outgoing requests; demonstrating a misalignment between formal policy design and practical implementation.

Brandl (2016) highlighted that family unity aligning with the humanitarian goals under Dublin III Articles [8-11] is the ultimate policy strength for Romania; Romanian authorities are flexible enough to accept photocopied documents instead of DNA testing while unaccompanied minors were successfully reunited with family in Germany and Belgium due to the family unity (Wallis, 2023). The Articles [119] and [127] of the Asylum Act in Romania governs the govern responsibility determination, interviews and transfers while implementing the Dublin framework across the immigration processes; Eurodac fingerprinting and Dublin interviews are strong but their punitive aspects such as prolonged confinement for refusing to fingerprint raise uncertainty over authority trust across the immigration process (Bartel, 2024). However, Linos and Chachko (2022) established that appeal and suspension mechanisms of Dublin support framework protect the immigrants by providing judicial review and free legal aid yet the five-day appeal deadline and the restricted examination of destination state reception conditions by the courts impaired the substantive protection. The Dublin Policy Support Framework in Romania manages complex immigration because it provides legal clarity and humanitarian safeguards but the limitations of high case turnover and discretionary suspensions reflected structural contradictions between EU solidarity principles and national competence; reflecting that Dublin processes facilitate asylum seekers rather than regulate the mobility of immigrants within Romania.

6. Recommendations

Following recommendations are develop to support the immigration policies in Romania while managing the current challenges for the immigrants:

A) Integrated national strategy: Romania needs a comprehensive and legally applicable national integration framework to differentiate refugees, asylum seekers, labour migrants and family reunification applications while the differentiation strategy must include measurable targets for employment, language acquisition, housing and education within a comprehensive action plan, and dependable financial methods.

B) Multi-level and Decentralised Governance: Migration governance should go beyond security-focused centralisation by empowering local governments, municipalities and civil society organisations under which the General Inspectorate for Immigration, local governments, NGOs and international organisations should work together to improve service delivery, minimise administrative bottlenecks and facilitate community-level integration.

C) Strong Monitoring and Data Collection Systems: Romania should institutionalise integration monitoring by collecting trustworthy data on employment, education, health and long-term stay because aligning national indicators with EU benchmarks like MIPEX will promote evidence-based policymaking, transparency and continual review; ensuring that policy reforms benefits for immigrants and refugees.

7. Conclusion

The review article assessed the immigration policy of Romania within the European migration governance framework while following the structural, legal and institutional barriers for the immigrants; the evaluation revealed that Romania has formalised its legal framework with EU asylum directives and international refugee agreements but policy execution is still underdeveloped while the refugee infrastructure, administrative capacity and social support services stressed amid the geopolitical crises like the Russia–Ukraine conflict. The migration governance of Romania is majorly centralised by focusing on border control, procedural compliance and regulation-based task distribution yet the Dublin framework provides legal clarity and humanitarian safeguards; its low transfer rates, operational inefficiency and procedural rigidity undermine substantive protection of asylum seekers. However, without a national integration policy the employment, legal stability, education, and social inclusion are further impacted but the international protections are majorly ignored by treating immigrants and refugees as a single group. The research collectively found that current immigration policy of Romania associated with the risks of marginalisation rather than sustainable integration without institutionalised integration mechanisms, decentralised governance and regular monitoring however; protecting migrant rights and strengthening long-term social cohesion and compliance of Romania with European

migration standards required a balance between institutionalised integration mechanisms and decentralised governance.

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Diversity of Ethical Decision-Making Frames and Departmental Differences. A Structural Topic Model Analysis of Open-Ended Responses

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Abstract

Ethical decision-making research has accumulated extensive findings on the factors that shape judgments and choices, but less attention has been paid to how people frame and justify their responses to the same ethical dilemma in their own words. This study analyzes open-ended responses from Japanese university students to a vignette involving corporate misconduct in order to examine the diversity of ethical decision-making frames. Using a Structural Topic Model (STM), we extracted latent topics from the responses and estimated differences in topic prevalence by department and role. The analysis identified 13 topics, revealing notable differences between business and engineering students in the frames they emphasized, whereas no clear differences were found between the accountant and director conditions. These findings extend ethical decision-making research by showing that group differences may appear not only in choices themselves but also in the interpretive frames and justifications underlying those choices.

Keywords

ethical decision-making; structural topic model; open-ended responses; vignette method; departmental differences

1. Introduction

When wrongdoing occurs within an organization, what do individuals define as “the problem”, and how do they justify the course of action they choose? Research on ethical decision-making has accumulated evidence by

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quantifying attitudes and behavioral intentions using closed-ended items and psychometric scales (Craft, 2013). However, even when individuals face the same situation, the considerations they regard as salient are diverse, and reducing such considerations to a predetermined set of items has clear limitations (Treviño, 1986).

This study analyzes open-ended responses to an ethical dilemma using a Structural Topic Model (STM), which enables estimation of latent thematic structure in text, to extract “decision frames” as topics (Roberts et al., 2014; Roberts et al., 2019). We further examine whether the prevalence of the extracted topics differs by (1) academic department (business vs. engineering) and (2) assumed role in the scenario (accounting staff vs. board member). In this paper, we treat departmental differences as the primary comparison dimension.

In addition, preventing corporate misconduct is closely related not only to formal controls such as internal regulations and auditing systems but also to ethics training and compliance education. Yet, even in an identical misconduct-discovery scenario, individuals and groups do not uniformly prioritize the same considerations when making decisions. Accordingly, a framework like ours—which extracts decision frames from open-ended responses and summarizes them as group-level differences—can provide a basis for applying the same vignette survey within organizations in the future to identify department and occupation-specific tendencies and to design training that is tailored to the considerations that are most likely to be underemphasized.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Perspective

2.1. Theoretical Development of Ethical Decision-Making Research

In the ethical decision-making literature, individuals’ ethical judgments have been understood not as outcomes determined solely by personal traits, but as products of interactions between individuals and their situational and organizational contexts. Treviño (1986) proposed a framework that conceptualizes ethical decision-making as an interaction between individual and situational factors, and highlighted the limitations of explaining ethical judgment exclusively in terms of personal moral characteristics. Within this framework, ethical judgment is assumed to emerge through the interplay of individual factors—such as personal values and stages of moral development—and situational factors, including organizational culture, norms, and authority structures.

Jones (1991) further showed that ethical decision-making is also shaped by the nature of the issue itself, namely its “moral intensity.” He argued that elements such as the degree of social consensus, the magnitude

of consequences, and the scope of impact inherent in an ethical issue influence actors' ethical awareness and decision processes. This argument suggests that even when individuals face the same situation, their judgments may differ depending on how they construe that situation as an ethical issue.

Taken together, these studies have advanced a view of ethical decision-making not as a fixed normative judgment, but as a process in which multiple elements—including individual factors, situational factors, and issue perception—interact with one another. Consequently, theory indicates that ethical judgments are not uniform and may vary substantially across individuals and situations.

2.2. Contributions and Limitations of Prior Research

To date, a substantial body of ethical decision-making research has focused on factors that explain ethical judgment and on decision outcomes (Craft, 2013). For example, many studies have examined differences by individual attributes and situational conditions using indicators such as whether a given action is judged ethically acceptable, whether misconduct is reported, or how highly the ethicality of an act is evaluated (Chiu, 2002, 2003; McMahan & Harvey, 2007; Barnett, 2004). This line of research has provided important insights by making ethical judgments quantitatively comparable and by identifying factors that influence ethical decision-making (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). However, this approach relies on a framework that treats ethical judgment primarily as a final choice outcome. In other words, ethical decision-making is often measured in terms of “which action is selected,” while the interpretive processes through which judgments are constructed have not been sufficiently examined (Heyler et al., 2016). In practice, even when individuals confront the same ethical dilemma, they do not necessarily understand the situation in the same way. Some may frame it as a matter of legal compliance, whereas others may interpret it in terms of role responsibility, organizational consequences, or interpersonal relationships. Accordingly, understanding ethical decision-making requires examining not only choice outcomes but also how people interpret situations and construct their judgments. In response to this concern, some studies have sought to capture ethical decision-making as a conceptual structure. For instance, Reed et al. (2021) asked engineering students to create concept maps of ethical decision-making and analyzed those structures to clarify how students understand the concept. By visualizing the structure of students' understanding of ethical concepts, this study provides an important contribution to identifying how students organize ethics as a conceptual system. Nevertheless, that study focuses on the structure of ethical-concept understanding, and does not fully clarify which lines of argument people use to interpret situations and construct judgments when

confronted with concrete ethical dilemmas. Moreover, although concept-map analysis is effective for capturing the content of ethical understanding, it does not necessarily provide a framework for comparing how the argumentative structure of judgment differs across disciplinary backgrounds or assumed roles. Therefore, to understand the diversity of ethical decision-making, it is necessary to analyze not only ethical-concept understanding but also the very structure of judgment arguments in specific ethical situations.

2.3. Rationale and Methodological Perspective for Decision-Frame Analysis

As discussed in the previous section, understanding ethical decision-making requires examining not only decision outcomes but also how people interpret ethical situations and construct judgments through specific lines of argument. To capture such decision frames, it is necessary to identify respondents' prioritized perspectives and justifications without reducing them to predefined response categories. From this perspective, the vignette method—which presents a hypothetical scenario under common conditions and asks respondents to report their decision and reasons—is an effective approach. By presenting an identical situation to all respondents, vignette studies standardize response conditions while eliciting justifications for ethical judgments and problem recognition in a form that is comparable across individuals (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). Particularly in ethics research, presenting dilemmas that approximate real decision contexts enables researchers to examine the perspectives through which respondents understand situations and form judgments. However, the focus of this study is not the vignette method itself, but the content of open-ended responses elicited by the vignette. Although open-ended responses allow participants to express prioritized points and reasons without constraint, their content is highly heterogeneous, and a single response often contains multiple coexisting points of argument. Consequently, manual reading of individual responses alone makes it difficult to systematically compare the overall argumentative structure of the corpus and how that structure varies across respondent attributes. To address this challenge, we employ the Structural Topic Model (STM) to extract latent argumentative structure embedded in open-ended responses. STM is a topic-modeling approach that estimates latent topic structure in a corpus and probabilistically represents the extent to which each document contains multiple topics. In addition, STM incorporates document-level covariates, making it possible to estimate which topics are relatively more prevalent in particular attribute groups. These features make STM a suitable analytical framework for this study's objective: extracting the argumentative structure of judgments from open-ended responses to an ethical dilemma and examining distributional

differences in that structure in relation to attributes such as disciplinary background and assumed role.

2.4. Research Questions

Based on the foregoing discussion, at least two challenges remain in ethical decision-making research. First, much of the existing literature tends to treat ethical judgment as a final choice outcome, and has not sufficiently clarified how people interpret the same ethical dilemma from different perspectives or how they construct judgments through particular lines of argument. Second, although some studies have addressed structural aspects of ethical decision-making, they have not necessarily provided a sufficient framework for systematically extracting the argumentative structure of judgments in concrete ethical situations and comparing its distribution across respondent attributes.

To address these gaps, this study analyzes open-ended responses to a vignette presenting the same ethical dilemma involving corporate misconduct, with the aim of identifying the decision frames respondents use to interpret the situation. Specifically, we seek to make visible an aspect that prior ethical decision-making research, with its emphasis on comparing choice outcomes, has struggled to capture: how judgments are formed through particular configurations of argumentative points. In particular, we use the Structural Topic Model to extract latent argumentative structure in open-ended responses and examine how its distribution differs by disciplinary background and assumed role.

Accordingly, this study addresses three research questions. Research Question 1: What decision frames do people use to interpret an ethical dilemma involving corporate misconduct? Research Question 2: How does the distribution of these decision frames differ by disciplinary background (business vs. engineering)? Research Question 3: Even under the same situation, how do differences in assumed role (accounting staff vs. board member) affect the distribution of decision frames? In short, rather than treating ethical judgment as a simple choice outcome, this study analyzes the composition and distributional differences of underlying decision frames in order to visualize variation in judgment-formation processes that has been difficult to capture in prior research.

Finally, this study makes three contributions. First, it offers a perspective for ethical decision-making research that emphasizes the diversity of decision frames rather than judgment outcomes alone. Second, by integrating vignette methodology with text analysis, it presents a methodological framework for extracting and comparing the argumentative structure of judgments from open-ended responses. Third, it demonstrates that even under the same misconduct-discovery scenario, what people

define as “the problem” is not uniform, and thereby provides insights that can inform future efforts to identify department and occupation-specific patterns of ethical perception and improve the design of ethics and compliance training.

3. Methods

3.1. Vignette Method

We collected data using an experimental vignette methodology, in which respondents were presented with an ethical dilemma and asked to report the action they would take as well as to provide an open-ended explanation for their choice (see Appendix 1 for details). The vignette method presents a standardized hypothetical scenario and is designed to elicit respondents’ salient considerations and justifications in a form that is comparable across individuals, making it well suited for describing the reasoning underlying ethical judgments (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014).

3.2. Structural Topic Model

In this study, we analyze open-ended responses to an ethical dilemma. While open-ended text allows respondents to articulate the considerations they prioritize without being constrained by predefined response options, such data are high-dimensional and heterogeneous, making it difficult to summarize the overall structure of reasoning in a systematic and replicable manner. Recent advances in text-as-data methods provide frameworks for extracting latent thematic structure from corpora and for incorporating such structure into empirical research with explicit assumptions and validation.

Accordingly, we employ the Structural Topic Model (STM), which extends foundational topic models such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) by allowing document-level metadata to be incorporated into topic prevalence (Roberts et al., 2014). Beyond identifying topics (latent considerations) from open-ended responses, STM enables statistical estimation of how attributes such as academic department and assumed role affect the extent to which particular topics are emphasized (Roberts et al., 2014; Roberts et al., 2019). Our goal is therefore not only to characterize ethical decision-making in terms of behavioral choices but also to extract the underlying decision-frame structure expressed in text and to estimate differences in topic distributions across departments (business vs. engineering) and roles (accounting staff vs. board member). For these purposes, STM is methodologically appropriate because it unifies the extraction of latent frames from text with hypothesis testing about group differences within a single modeling framework.

3.3. Data and Study Design

The data were collected from three universities in Japan: a private university (Business School A) in Tokyo, a national university (Engineering

School B) in the Tohoku region, and a national university (Engineering School C) in the Chugoku region. Data collection took place between April and August 2025. The number of valid respondents was $n = 203$. For a common ethical-dilemma vignette (Appendix 1.1), respondents provided open-ended responses describing (i) what action they would take and (ii) the reason(s) for that action, under two role conditions: (1) accounting staff and (2) board member.

The unit of analysis is the document; each open-ended response is treated as one document (i.e., responses under the two role conditions are not concatenated). Accordingly, the theoretical number of documents is 2×203 , but after preprocessing steps (e.g., excluding empty or missing responses), the final number of documents used for STM estimation was $n = 400$. The distribution of key variables after preprocessing is shown in Figure 1. Because the sample sizes differed substantially across departments, we combined all non-business respondents into a single engineering category to improve the stability of the analysis.

Figure 1: Cross-tabulation of department and year in school

Academic Unit / Year Level	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Master's Year 1	Total
Private University School of Commerce A	113	37	6	4	0	160
National University Faculty of Engineering B	52	20	2	0	0	74
National University Faculty of Engineering C	0	0	144	20	2	166
Total	165	57	152	24	2	400

(Source: internal material created by the authors. Metadata Covariates)

We included the following covariates in the STM prevalence component: religion (presence of a household Buddhist altar and/or Shinto shrine), year in school (Grade), academic department (Department), assumed role (accounting staff vs. board member), and a reporting-related judgment category (report).

The primary comparison in this paper is the departmental difference (business vs. engineering), which we operationalize as a binary indicator (Department2) for difference estimation. Because role (accounting staff vs. board member) may also affect decision frames due to differences in responsibility and decision authority even under the same scenario, we report role effects explicitly in the Results section. Religion, Grade, and report are treated as control variables or as providing supplementary insights; accordingly, our main conclusions focus on differences by department and role.

3.4. Text Preprocessing

First, we reshaped the response data into a long format so that the unit of analysis was consistent (one open-ended response per document). This step is necessary because STM estimates topic prevalence at the document

level, and a consistent document definition improves interpretability and comparability across observations.

Second, we tokenized the responses using morphological analysis. Because Japanese does not explicitly mark word boundaries, tokenization is required to convert the text into a bag-of-words representation that can be used as input for STM. We retained nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adjectival verbs, as these parts of speech typically carry the core semantic content of respondents' reasoning, whereas function words (e.g., particles and auxiliary verbs) are primarily grammatical and may reduce topic interpretability. We also removed empty or missing responses, because STM relies on within-document word occurrences and documents without substantive content can undermine estimation stability and validity.

Finally, we constructed the text field used for STM input and processed the corpus using `textProcessor` and `prepDocuments`. These procedures remove extremely rare or analytically uninformative terms and organize the vocabulary and document set, thereby improving estimation stability and the reproducibility of topic interpretation.

3.5. STM Estimation and Number of Topics

We prepared the vocabulary and document set using `textProcessor` and `prepDocuments` with `lower.thresh = 10`, and retained only documents with complete covariate information.

To select the number of topics K , we ran `searchK` over a range of $K = 3$ to 20 and compared model-fit diagnostics (e.g., held-out likelihood and residuals) together with interpretability-oriented metrics (semantic coherence and exclusivity) (Roberts et al., 2014; Roberts et al., 2019). Although increasing K can improve fit, it may also lead to overly fragmented or redundant topics, thereby reducing interpretability. Based on a holistic assessment of (1) the balance between semantic coherence and exclusivity, (2) the extent of excessive splitting among substantively similar topics, and (3) interpretability upon inspection of representative documents, we selected $K = 13$ as providing the most stable and interpretable solution. The `searchK` results used for this selection are reported in Appendix 1.2.

Departmental differences between business and engineering were estimated using `Department2` (business – engineering).

3.6. Estimating Covariate Effects

We estimated covariate effects on topic prevalence using `estimateEffect`. In this paper, we present (1) departmental differences (business – engineering) as the primary results and (2) role differences (accounting staff – board member) as supplementary results.

3.7. Topic Interpretation and Labeling (LLM-Assisted)

We interpreted each topic estimated by the STM based on both (i) the word distributions and

(ii) representative documents (open-ended responses with high topic proportions). Specifically, for each topic, we extracted (1) the top seven words under each of four word-scoring metrics and (2) six representative documents with high prevalence of the topic, and we checked whether these sources provided a coherent substantive interpretation. The four word-scoring metrics were as follows.

First, Highest Probability ranks words by their within-topic probability and indicates terms that appear frequently in the topic. While useful for identifying a topic's general theme, this metric can place common words near the top across multiple topics, which may reduce discriminability.

Second, FREX combines word frequency with exclusivity (i.e., the extent to which a word is specific to a given topic). FREX therefore tends to highlight words that are both reasonably frequent and relatively distinctive, and it is particularly helpful for differentiating topics and supporting naming and interpretation.

Third, Lift captures how much more likely a word is within a topic relative to its overall frequency in the corpus. Although high-lift words can provide strong topic-specific cues, they may also reflect extremely rare terms, proper nouns, or orthographic variation, which can introduce noise. We therefore used lift primarily as a supplementary diagnostic and based naming and substantive interpretation primarily on consistency with representative documents.

Fourth, Score is used to rank characteristic words by integrating multiple sources of information (e.g., within-topic strength and distinctiveness relative to the corpus and other topics). Compared with Highest Probability, which emphasizes frequent words, and Lift, which emphasizes topic specific words, Score often exhibits an intermediate property and can help avoid over-reliance on either ubiquitous terms or extremely rare terms.

To improve the coherence and readability of topic labels, we used a large language model (ChatGPT-5.2) as an assistive tool for generating candidate short Japanese topic titles, given the top words (7 words) and representative documents (six responses) for each topic. The final labels were determined by the researchers based on the following criteria: (a) consistency with both the top words and representative documents, (b) non-redundancy with other topics, and (c) avoidance of evaluative wording (e.g., moral judgments of right/wrong).

Notably, the LLM was not used for topic estimation or topic splitting. It was used only to assist with summarizing and proposing labels for topics already estimated by the STM; thus, the inferred topic structure and covariate effects are entirely based on the statistical STM framework.

4. Results

4.1. Topic Overview ($K = 13$)

Topic labels were interpreted based on the STM outputs, specifically the top words (7 words) and representative documents (six responses) for each topic. To improve readability, we used an LLM (ChatGPT-5.2) only to assist in generating candidate labels, after which the researchers finalized the labels according to the criteria described above. The $K = 13$ topics obtained from the STM were labeled as shown in Figure 2.

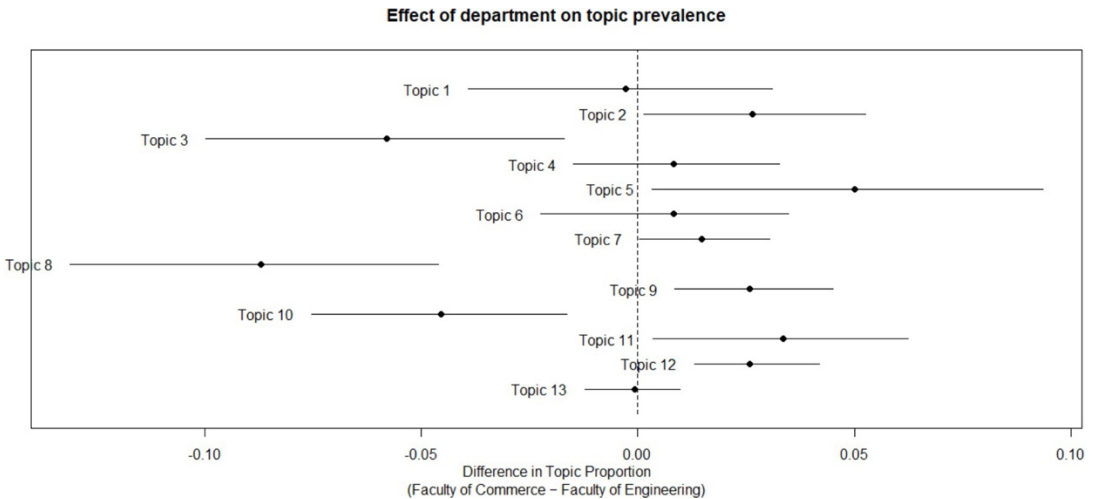
Figure 2: Topic labels

Topic 1	Risk Appraisal and Accountability Following Misconduct Detection
Topic2	Moral Principles vs. Interpersonal Loyalty: Role Conflict
Topic 3	Professional Ethics and Fiduciary Duty in Accounting Roles
Topic 4	Assessment of the Severity of Misappropriation
Topic 5	Concealment Prioritizing Corporate Reputation
Topic 6	Voluntary Disclosure Under the Assumption of Eventual Detection
Topic 7	Preserving Long-Term Relationships and Self-Protection
Topic 8	Directors' Accountability and Damage Control
Topic 9	Psychological Burden and Limits of Concealment
Topic 10	Disclosure to Preserve Trust
Topic 11	Complicity Risk and Conflict with Professional Ethics
Topic 12	Disclosure Strategy to Minimize Corporate Harm
Topic13	Minimizing Corporate Harm and Sustaining Long-Term Trust

(Source: internal material created by the authors)

4.2. Departmental Differences (Business vs. Engineering)

Figure 3 shows the estimated departmental differences using Department2 (business – engineering). For each topic, Figure 3 reports the estimated difference in topic prevalence between business and engineering students.

Figure 3: Estimated departmental differences in topic prevalence: business – engineering)

The horizontal axis indicates the difference in topic prevalence (business – engineering). Points denote point estimates and horizontal bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. Topics with positive estimates (to the right of zero) are relatively more prevalent among business students, whereas topics with negative estimates (to the left of zero) are relatively more prevalent among engineering students. Estimates farther from zero indicate larger departmental differences, while estimates close to zero indicate minimal differences. We interpret topics whose confidence intervals do not cross zero as those for which the estimated difference is likely to be non-zero; topics whose confidence intervals cross zero are treated as more uncertain and are discussed only as supplementary results. Note that these estimates represent differences in the proportion of each document attributed to a topic, not a binary difference in whether an individual “has” a topic.

Overall, we observed differences in which decision frames (topics) were relatively more salient across departments. Based on our topic labeling, business students more frequently emphasized Topic 2 (moral considerations and interpersonal conflict), Topic 5 (concealment decisions prioritizing corporate image), Topic 11 (complicity risk and ethical judgment), and Topic 12 (disclosure strategies aimed at minimizing organizational damage). These topics are broadly consistent with narratives that foreground interpersonal relationships, reputation, internal organizational dynamics, and the coordination of competing interests.

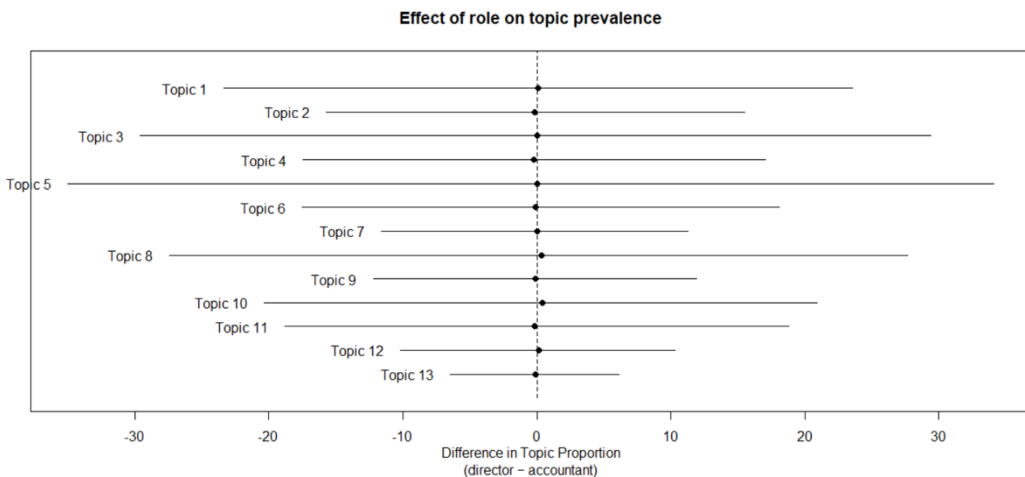
In contrast, engineering students more frequently emphasized Topic 3 (accounting responsibility and professional ethics), Topic 8 (directors’

responsibility and crisis response), and Topic 10 (disclosure decisions to maintain trust). These topics align more closely with narratives centered on role responsibility, accountability, crisis management, and procedural transparency.

4.3. Role Differences (Accounting staff vs. Board member)

We also estimated role differences (accounting staff vs. board member); however, the estimated differences in topic prevalence were small overall, and the confidence intervals crossed zero for all topics. Accordingly, we did not observe clear role differences in this sample (Figure 4). This analysis is exploratory and should be interpreted as indicating that role differences were not clearly detected under the present study design and sample, rather than as definitive evidence of no role effect.

Figure 4: Estimated role differences in topic prevalence: accounting staff – board member. Supplementary Results: Control Variables)



(Source: internal material created by the authors)

Although we also estimated covariate effects for religion, Grade, and report, these results are treated as supplementary. Religion is only a limited proxy for religiosity, and report may be endogenous to the content of respondents' judgments. In addition, the distribution of Grade is imbalanced in the present dataset. Accordingly, we restrict the main conclusions to departmental and role differences and treat the remaining covariate effects as auxiliary findings.

5. Discussion

5.1. Diversity of Ethical Decision-Making Frames

The STM results indicate that open-ended narratives about the same misconduct scenario can be decomposed into multiple decision frames. The 13 extracted topics capture diverse modes of justification and

considerations, such as the trade-off between early disclosure and concealment, moral concerns and interpersonal conflict, professional ethics, corporate image, complicity risk, crisis response, and psychological burden. These findings support the usefulness of conceptualizing ethical decision-making not merely as differences in approval or behavioral choice but as differences in which considerations are made salient and articulated in reasoning.

5.2. Interpreting Departmental Differences

As the primary results, we observed systematic differences in the considerations emphasized by business versus engineering students. Topics that were relatively more prevalent among business students tended to foreground interpersonal relationships, reputation, internal organizational dynamics, and the coordination of competing stakeholder interests.

In contrast, topics that were relatively more prevalent among engineering students were more closely connected to role responsibility, crisis response, and the maintenance of trust through procedural transparency and governance. This pattern suggests that frames related to institutional responsibility, safety, and the prevention of recurrence may be more readily mobilized as part of their ethical reasoning.

Overall, business students appeared more likely to focus on the “dynamics of governance” in coordinating complex relationships among stakeholders (e.g., shareholders, business partners, and colleagues), whereas engineering students appeared more likely to mobilize frames aligned with professional norms and the maintenance of system-wide reliability and safety, which are closer to engineering-ethics considerations.

Importantly, this study is an exploratory analysis based on observational data and does not provide a causal explanation for departmental differences. Multiple factors may contribute, including curricular content, perceived occupational roles, prior exposure to cases, between-university differences, and sample composition. Accordingly, the scope of this paper is limited to describing differences in the distribution of decision frames across groups.

5.3. Interpreting the Limited Role Differences

At least three factors may help explain why clear role differences (accounting staff vs. board member) were not observed. First, because the sample consisted primarily of students with limited practical experience, respondents may have found it difficult to concretely internalize the responsibilities and decision contexts associated with each role, leading to convergence in the considerations they expressed. Second, role differences may manifest less in the type of considerations (topics) and more in rhetorical features such as lexical choice, intensity of claims, and specificity, which may

not be well captured by differences in topic prevalence alone. Third, because each respondent provided responses under both roles, documents are not fully independent, which may have increased uncertainty in estimation. Future work should therefore examine role effects in more practice-relevant contexts (e.g., working adult samples) and/or employ designs and estimation strategies that more directly leverage within respondent comparisons.

6. Conclusion

Using open-ended responses to an ethical dilemma collected from Japanese university students ($n = 203$), this study applied an STM with $K = 13$ to demonstrate that ethical reasoning can be characterized as a mixture of multiple decision frames (topics). As the primary results, we quantified departmental differences (business vs. engineering) in the relative prevalence of these decision frames. This approach highlights the value of analyzing ethical decision-making not only in terms of behavioral choices (e.g., reporting vs. not reporting) but also in terms of the underlying structure of considerations articulated in respondents' narratives. In contrast, role differences (accounting staff vs. board member) were small overall, and clear differences in topic prevalence were not observed in this sample; thus, role framing may have had limited impact on topic distributions under the present study design. These findings indicate that variation in ethical decision-making emerges not only in choice outcomes but also in differences in decision frames through which respondents interpret the same situation, thereby helping to address limitations in prior research. The topics extracted in this study represent the considerations respondents prioritized when deciding how to act after discovering misconduct (e.g., role responsibility, interpersonal relationships, and organizational image). In future work, applying the same vignette-based text analysis within organizational settings could help identify department and occupation-specific distributions of decision frames and provide a basis for designing ethics training that is tailored to topics that may be underemphasized in particular groups. For example, if a unit's responses frequently foreground interpersonal relationships or organizational reputation, training could emphasize psychological barriers and protections related to reporting; if responses primarily emphasize duty and legal compliance, training could focus on concrete decision criteria and procedural guidance.

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Appendix

1. Ethical Dilemma Vignette

Please read the following scenario and answer the question at the end. Imagine that you are in the situation described below.

You have been working as the person in charge of accounting at your company for two years. The financial statements have just been completed, and you have recently finished reporting them to the board of directors. Despite the company's sustained efforts over many years of operating at a loss, the most recent fiscal year ended in a deficit. As the shareholders' meeting approaches, you discover an important issue.

You find evidence that a colleague has been misappropriating company funds. The scheme is carefully concealed, and it appears to have started before you assumed your current role. The amount misappropriated corresponds to 1% of sales—approximately the same amount as the reported deficit. You are the only person who has noticed this so far, and it seems possible that the misconduct could remain undiscovered if you stay silent.

However, you are responsible for the company's accounting. If you urgently report the issue to the board, it may still be possible to address it before the shareholders' meeting. At the same time, doing so could expose you to scrutiny regarding your own responsibility, and the colleagues involved may be dismissed.

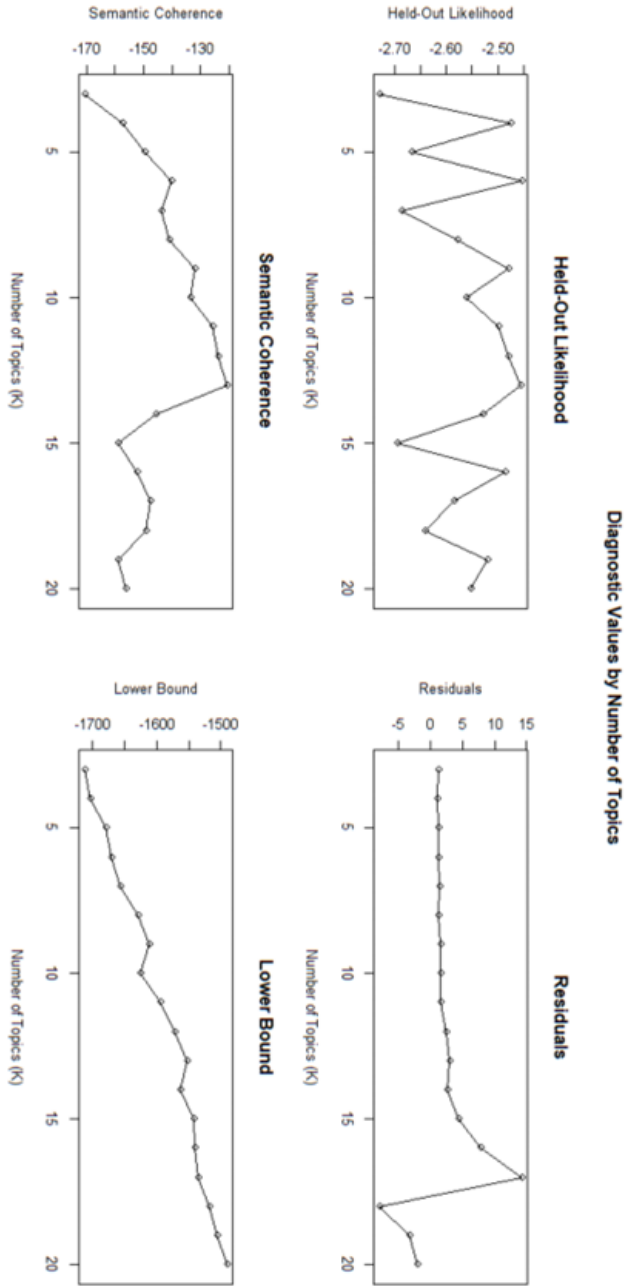
Your company provides socially necessary services, and about 20% of the residents of the city where the company operates are employed by the company or work with it through business relationships. To restructure the company, the prefectural government has purchased 51% of the company's shares, while the remaining 49% is held by private investors. In addition, the company has received property-tax exemptions from the city, which is itself facing fiscal deficits. The decision regarding this public investment and tax exemption has been controversial, creating substantial conflict within both the prefectural and city assemblies. As a result, there is a possibility that local newspapers and television stations will cover this case.

One of the colleagues who may have engaged in misappropriation is someone you have known since elementary school through high school. Although you attended different universities, you later rejoined the same company. This person lives near you, and your families are very close; your children attend the same school.

In this situation, what would you do? Please describe your decision and the reason(s) for it.

2. SearchK Results

Figure 5: searchK diagnostics: comparison across the number of topics K)



(Source: internal material created by the authors)

Post-conflict Reconciliation Initiatives in the Western Balkans in Light of the Rise of Right-wing Ideologies in Europe

Fatima Mahmutović¹

Abstract

This paper aims to explore post-conflict reconciliation initiatives in the Western Balkans, with a particular focus on their connection to regional cooperation efforts. While significant progress has been made in rebuilding trust through mechanisms such as truth commissions like RECOM, transitional justice, and dialogue, the rise of right-wing ideologies in Europe presents a growing threat to these reconciliation efforts. Nationalism and populism, often driven by historical grievances, continue to challenge the process of healing and regional cooperation. In light of geopolitical changes and the rise of the far right in Europe, which will impact the Western Balkans - geographically a part of Europe, it becomes increasingly important to examine this issue. The paper will examine post-conflict reconciliation initiatives, using the case study of RECOM, and analyze how regional initiatives such as the Berlin Process and the Regional Cooperation Council play a crucial role in addressing these challenges. Additionally, it will assess strategies for promoting lasting peace and stability in the face of increasing political division and the resurgence of nationalist ideologies in the region. The paper will also emphasize the need to view peace and security as vital for sustaining regional cooperation in the Western Balkans.

Keywords

peace, peacebuilding, regional cooperation, nationalism, populism

1. Introduction and Methodology

The Western Balkans experienced a series of brutal conflicts during the 1990s, following the disintegration of Yugoslavia. These wars left deep ethnic divisions, unresolved traumas, and significant challenges for rebuilding trust and fostering peace. Since then, numerous reconciliation initiatives have been implemented at both the domestic and international levels, aiming to rebuild relationships among formerly warring communities,

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address war crimes, and establish lasting peace. However, reconciliation remains fragile, uneven, and frequently politicized. Meanwhile, across Europe, we are witnessing the steady rise of right-wing ideologies, often marked by nationalism, historical revisionism, and a retreat from liberal democratic values. This ideological shift is not isolated from the Balkans. In fact, it interacts with local narratives and political dynamics, often undermining efforts toward reconciliation.

This paper explores the following research question: ***How does the rise of right-wing ideologies in Europe influence post-conflict reconciliation initiatives in the Western Balkans?*** In the context of ongoing transitional justice efforts and regional stabilization, understanding the external political forces that shape reconciliation processes is crucial. The resurgence of right-wing ideologies across Europe, often characterized by nationalism, Euroscepticism, and historical revisionism, raises important questions about their potential to hinder or reshape reconciliation narratives and policies in post-conflict societies.

To answer this research question, the paper adopts a **qualitative research methodology** combining:

- **Literature analysis** of academic research on reconciliation and transitional justice.
- **Policy analysis** of regional cooperation frameworks and European policy documents.
- **Case study analysis** focusing on the RECOM initiative as a regional truth-seeking mechanism.

The RECOM initiative is selected as a case study due to its regional scope, its civil society-driven character, and its unique attempt to establish a shared factual record across post-Yugoslav states. This makes it particularly suitable for analyzing the interaction between reconciliation processes and broader political and ideological trends. While the qualitative approach enables an in-depth understanding of political narratives and institutional dynamics, it also has limitations, particularly in terms of generalizability. The analysis therefore focuses on identifying patterns and relationships rather than producing universally applicable conclusions.

Primary sources include policy reports and institutional publications produced by organisations and initiatives such as the **The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY)**, **RECOM**, **Regional Cooperation Council**, **The Berlin Process**, as well as academic literature addressing transitional justice and right-wing populism. Secondary sources include journal articles and policy analyses focusing on political developments in Europe and the Western Balkans.

Through this mixed analytical approach, the paper examines how ideological shifts within Europe influence reconciliation dynamics in post-conflict societies in the Western Balkans. In order to effectively address the research question, the paper is structured into several key sections. The first section provides an overview of reconciliation initiatives in the Western Balkans, focusing on the historical context, institutional mechanisms, and current challenges facing the region.

The second section maps the rise and evolution of right-wing ideologies in contemporary Europe, analyzing their main features, political platforms, and influence on both national and European Union level policies. The third section investigates the impact of these ideologies on reconciliation processes in the Western Balkans, highlighting specific cases where right-wing discourse or policies have interfered with or influenced regional post-conflict dynamics.

The paper concludes by summarizing the main findings and reflecting on the broader implications for peacebuilding and transitional justice in the region. Through this structure, the analysis aims to offer a nuanced understanding of how ideological shifts in Europe intersect with the fragile processes of reconciliation in the Western Balkans.

2. Literature review

The academic literature on reconciliation in the Western Balkans has developed significantly since the early 2000s. Scholars have examined the role of transitional justice institutions, civil society initiatives, and international actors in facilitating post-conflict reconciliation (Petričušić & Blondel, 2012; Haider, 2021). Research highlights that transitional justice mechanisms such as war crimes tribunals and truth commissions play a critical role in establishing accountability and documenting wartime abuses (Haider, 2021). **The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY)** is frequently cited as a landmark institution that contributed to international criminal justice while also shaping public understanding of the conflicts.

At the same time, scholars argue that reconciliation in the Western Balkans remains fragile due to competing national narratives, political manipulation of historical memory, and limited societal acceptance of judicial findings (Zelenović, 2023). Recent scholarship has also begun to examine the influence of broader political trends on reconciliation. Studies highlight how the resurgence of right-wing populism across Europe has strengthened nationalist actors in the Balkans and undermined support for transitional justice initiatives (Džihić, 2023).

According to Džihčić (2023), far-right political movements increasingly promote narratives that question international justice institutions and glorify nationalist historical interpretations. Policy reports likewise emphasize that reconciliation cannot be achieved solely through institutional reforms but requires broader societal engagement, including educational reform and youth participation (Mildner & Bories, 2023). The Aspen Institute report on reconciliation in the Western Balkans argues that unresolved historical narratives continue to shape political discourse and interethnic relations across the region (Mildner & Bories, 2023).

Furthermore, several studies highlight the importance of regional cooperation initiatives, including the **Regional Cooperation Council** and the **Berlin Process**, which aim to foster economic integration and political dialogue among Western Balkan states (Mirel, 2018). *Together, this body of literature demonstrates that reconciliation in the Western Balkans is influenced not only by domestic political dynamics but also by broader European political developments.*

3. Overview of Reconciliation Initiatives in the Western Balkans

Since the end of the Yugoslav wars, a range of reconciliation initiatives have been pursued in the Western Balkans. These efforts have come from both domestic institutions and international actors, with varying degrees of success. The primary goal has been to deal with the legacy of war, ensure justice, and promote long-term peace and cooperation. In this paper, these initiatives will be elaborated through three main categories: judicial mechanisms, including international and domestic war crimes tribunals; truth-seeking initiatives, such as truth commissions and civil society led documentation efforts; and regional cooperation organisations, which aim to foster dialogue, mutual understanding, and collaborative approaches to dealing with the past.

3.1. Judicial mechanisms

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) played a central role in prosecuting war crimes and establishing facts about the conflicts. The tribunal was a United Nations court that dealt with war crimes committed during the conflicts in the Balkans in the 1990s (ICTY, n.d.). During its mandate from 1993 to 2017, the ICTY significantly influenced the development of international humanitarian law, provided victims with an opportunity to testify about the atrocities they experienced, and demonstrated that those suspected of bearing the greatest responsibility for crimes committed during armed conflicts can be held accountable (ICTY, n.d.). Some of the most well-known verdicts include the cases against Radovan Karadžić (IT-95-5/18), Ratko Mladić (IT-09-92), Dragan

Obrenović (IT-02-60/2), related to the Srebrenica genocide, as well as the case of Jadranko Prlić et al. (IT-04-74). Although the tribunal completed its work in 2017, its legacy continues through domestic judicial institutions in the region.

Domestic war crimes courts have also played an important role in addressing crimes committed during the conflicts, although they have sometimes been criticized for political bias or limited effectiveness (ICTY, n.d.).

3.2. Truth-seeking initiatives

The RECOM initiative represents one of the most significant regional efforts to establish the truth about war crimes and serious human rights violations committed during the conflicts following the breakup of Yugoslavia. Emerging from civil society, RECOM seeks to create a shared and factual account of the past through a regional, extra-judicial mechanism. Its inclusive and participatory approach aims to bridge national narratives and foster long-term reconciliation across post-Yugoslav states.

The RECOM Reconciliation Network initiative represents a regional effort to establish the facts about war crimes and other serious human rights violations committed in the former Yugoslavia between 1 January 1991 and 31 December 2001 (RECOM, n.d.). The RECOM process was launched through a debate on mechanisms for truth-telling and disclosure of facts about the past. The debate took place in May 2006 at the First Regional Forum for Transitional Justice, organized by the Humanitarian Law Center, the Research and Documentation Center and Documenta - Center for Dealing with the Past (RECOM, n.d.). Participants, representatives of non-governmental organisations and associations of families of missing persons and victims from post-Yugoslav countries, supported a regional approach to establishing the facts about war crimes, noting that the conflicts took place across several countries and that victims and perpetrators often do not live in the same state (RECOM, n.d.). The Coalition for RECOM was established at the Fourth Regional Forum for Transitional Justice held on 28 October 2008 in Pristina. Over the following three years, the coalition initiated one of the most comprehensive social debates in the region. The consultation process on the mandate of RECOM involved approximately 6,700 representatives of civil society, including human rights organisations, victims and families of victims and missing persons, refugees, veterans, lawyers, journalists, and other public figures (RECOM, n.d.). During numerous round tables, participants presented suggestions and views regarding the mandate of this proposed regional interstate body tasked with documenting facts about war crimes and other serious human rights violations, including information about victims and perpetrators (RECOM, n.d.). The views expressed during these consultations were incorporated into

the Draft Statute of RECOM. This document was later analyzed by an Expert Group composed of delegates from presidential offices and representatives of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina from participating countries in the region. After a year of work, on 28 October 2014 the Expert Group submitted proposed amendments to the Statute, which were adopted by the Coalition Assembly on 14 November 2014 (RECOM, n.d.).

According to the Draft Statute, RECOM is envisioned as an intergovernmental commission established by the successor states of the former Yugoslavia. This extra-judicial body would be responsible for investigating allegations of war crimes and other serious human rights violations, compiling a list of all war victims, and collecting information about detention facilities and other sites of deprivation of liberty connected with the conflicts (RECOM, n.d.). The commission would operate independently of the governments that establish it and would be financed through donations. The RECOM initiative calls upon all post-Yugoslav states to jointly establish this commission in order to determine facts that are essential for understanding the history of the region and for building a shared future based on acknowledgement of all victims, by the end of 2014, more than 580,000 people from across the former Yugoslavia had supported the initiative for establishing RECOM by signing the petition. The RECOM Reconciliation Network continues to document human losses and detention sites, emphasizing the responsibility of the successor states of the former Yugoslavia to jointly record the approximately 130,000 victims of the wars between 1991 and 2001, including those who lost their lives and those who remain missing (RECOM, n.d.). In recent years, the focus has been on documenting victims of the war in Croatia, cases of abductions and disappearances in Kosovo, and detention facilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina that were not fully addressed in proceedings before the ICTY or domestic courts, despite political challenges, the RECOM process has laid an important foundation for regional truth-seeking and documentation, by promoting a fact-based understanding of the conflicts and acknowledging all victims, the initiative contributes to the development of a broader culture of remembrance and accountability in the Western Balkans (RECOM, n.d.).

3.3. Regional cooperation organisation

Regional cooperation has played a central role in post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation in the Western Balkans. Recognizing that the legacy of the 1990s conflicts cannot be addressed solely within national frameworks, several multilateral platforms have emerged to foster dialogue, stability, and integration. Among the most prominent are the **Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)** and the Berlin Process, both of which support regional cooperation as a key mechanism for promoting socio-economic

development, strengthening good governance, and advancing the European integration agenda (RCC, n.d.). These initiatives serve not only to deepen political and economic ties but also to reinforce reconciliation and mutual trust among Western Balkan societies. The RCC is an all-inclusive, regionally owned and led cooperation framework that engages participants from South East Europe (SEE), members of the international community, and donors on topics of regional importance, with the aim of promoting European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

The organisation fosters prosperity and growth through regional action in SEE while advancing integration, envisioning the region as a prosperous space of dialogue, freedom, and mobility, rich in cultural heritage, where citizens feel safe and protected by the rule of law. Key priorities of the RCC include supporting sustainable and equitable economic growth policies to enhance regional economic integration, promoting green and digital transformation, and reducing poverty while narrowing social, economic, and environmental disparities with the European Union. The organisation currently has 46 participants and is headed by Secretary General **Amer Kapetanović**. It is financed by the European Union and its SEE and other Board participants. The RCC has a Secretariat based in Sarajevo and a Liaison Office in Brussels.

3.4. Berlin Process

The Berlin Process was set up in 2014 as a platform to increase cooperation between the Western Balkans Six and the Berlin Process host countries, as well as the EU (Berlin Process, n.d.). It is first and foremost a consistent and inclusive format for all six Western Balkan countries. High-level representatives of the Western Balkan Six (WB6) and their counterparts in Berlin Process host countries meet at least once a year at the Summit and preparatory Ministerial meetings. The Process also involves EU institutions, international financial institutions, and the region's civil society, youth, and business actors. It provides high-level political support, as well as broad outreach and visibility to regional cooperation initiatives and respective policies, including EU connectivity projects in the region (Berlin Process, n.d.).

Over the years, the Berlin Process has continuously evolved and currently consists of the Summit itself, Ministerial Meetings (Foreign, Interior, Economy, Roma), and multiple side events (Digital Summit, Business Forum, Youth Forum, Civil Society Forum, Gender Forum, Science Conference, Purchasing Initiative of German Business, and Agricultural Policy Forum). These events are usually spread throughout the months leading up to the main summit (Berlin Process, n.d.).

Key goals include (Berlin Process, n.d.):

- Economic development through enhanced regional economic cooperation, particularly by deepening the Common Regional Market;
- Strengthening energy security and supporting energy transition;
- Advancing the Green Agenda in alignment with the objectives of the European Green Deal;
- Supporting a Just and Green Transition through the Regional Climate Partnership;
- Development of food systems, agriculture, rural development, and forestry;
- Enhancing regional connectivity through infrastructure projects (road, rail, and digital);
- Improving cooperation in the field of cybersecurity;
- Increasing cooperation in combating organized crime and irregular migration;
- Contributing to reconciliation and fostering exchanges within and between societies in the region;
- Promoting social and economic inclusion of minorities, including Roma, as outlined in Poznań Declaration;
- Supporting business development through policy dialogue, investor engagement, and initiatives such as the annual Business Forum and the Purchasing Initiative.

Both the Regional Cooperation Council and the Berlin Process demonstrate how structured regional frameworks can support long-term peacebuilding and reconciliation through inclusive dialogue, economic integration, and shared strategic goals. While primarily focused on development and EU convergence, these platforms indirectly contribute to reconciliation by fostering interdependence, people-to-people connectivity, and cross-border cooperation. In doing so, they create a conducive environment for addressing historical grievances and building sustainable peace in the Western Balkans.

4. Mapping Right-Wing Ideologies in Europe

Over the past decade, Europe has witnessed a significant rise in right-wing populist movements, both within mainstream politics and on the political fringes. These ideologies frequently capitalize on fear, national identity, and widespread dissatisfaction with liberal democratic norms. Today, far-right populist parties enjoy strong parliamentary representation across much of Europe and currently participate in government in Croatia, Finland, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Serbia, Slovakia, and Switzerland. Even where they remain in opposition, such parties exert substantial

influence on the agendas of mainstream parties and on public discourse more broadly (Bortun, 2025).

4.1. Recent Electoral Gains

In 2025, right-wing populists made notable electoral advances in Austria, Germany, and France. At the European Union level, this political family achieved one of its most successful outcomes in the June elections for the European Parliament, securing nearly a quarter of all seats (Bortun, 2025). In the United Kingdom, Nigel Farage's Reform UK party received over four million votes in the July general election, further evidence of the growing reach of these movements across the continent.

4.2. Core Ideological Features

Despite differences in national context, far-right populist parties share a number of core ideological features. Central to their worldview is a Manichean dichotomy between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," with the "people" often defined in nativist, ethnocentric, and exclusionary terms. The so-called "elite," blamed for promoting pro-immigration policies, is accused of undermining national culture and the socio-economic well-being of "ordinary" (native) citizens (Bortun, 2025). The contemporary far right reflects some of the most troubling currents in European intellectual and political history, including nationalist essentialism, counter-Enlightenment dogmatism, and authoritarianism. Its message today is structured around three central ideological pillars:

- A chauvinistic and ethnically defined exaltation of the nation;
- Anti-immigrant xenophobia, and;
- Anti-establishment, anti-political populism.

These movements offer followers an exclusive identity, point to clear culprits (the establishment, immigrants), and propose simplistic, radical solutions - such as expelling foreigners or dismantling the existing political system (Rodríguez-Aguilera, 2014).

4.3. Defining Right-Wing Populism

Right-wing populism can be broadly characterized by the following elements:

- Nationalism over multiculturalism;
- Authoritarian tendencies and skepticism toward liberal democratic institutions;
- Anti-immigration rhetoric, often accompanied by Islamophobia;
- Historical revisionism, particularly related to World War II and 20th-century fascism;
- Opposition to core EU values, such as human rights, inclusivity, and transnational justice.

4.4. Notable European Examples

- **Hungary (Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance):** Under Viktor Orbán, Hungary has embraced the concept of “illiberal democracy,” rejected multiculturalism, and aligned itself with revisionist historical narratives. Founded in 1988 as a liberal party, Fidesz has gradually shifted to the far right, particularly after 2015 when Chancellor Angela Merkel introduced a “welcome culture” for refugees. The party now positions itself as the defender of a Christian Europe against foreign influence and seeks to limit the EU’s authority (Hasselbach, 2025).

- **Poland (Law and Justice Party - PiS):** Government efforts have focused on reshaping historical memory and downplaying past state violence, particularly related to World War II.

- **Italy (Brothers of Italy):** A party rooted in post-fascist tradition, advocating strong right-wing nationalism, Catholic identity, and traditional family values.

- **France (National Rally, led by Marine Le Pen):** Known for its strong anti-immigration and anti-EU positions, the party continues to gain traction among mainstream voters.

- **Austria (Freedom Party - FPÖ):** Frequently criticized for xenophobic discourse and references to Nazi-era ideology.

- **Germany (Alternative for Germany - AfD):** The party increasingly questions Germany’s historical responsibility for the Holocaust and strongly opposes immigration, especially from Muslim-majority countries.

Among these, Fidesz stands out as perhaps the most successful far-right party in Europe. With Viktor Orbán at the helm, the party governed Hungary from 1998 to 2002 and has been in power continuously since 2010. The transformation of Fidesz from a liberal youth movement into a dominant far-right force exemplifies the broader trend of ideological radicalization in European politics.

4.5. Common Discursive Strategies

Right-wing populist movements across Europe employ a set of recurring rhetorical and discursive strategies that reinforce their narratives and mobilize support:

- **Victimhood reversal:** Recasting majority populations as victims of multiculturalism, immigration, or political correctness;

- **“Europe for Europeans”:** Opposing EU enlargement, especially in relation to Muslim-majority countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania;

- **Cultural chauvinism:** Undermining minority rights, rejecting transnational reconciliation, and promoting a monocultural national identity.

4.6. Transnational Influence and Implications for the Western Balkans

These ideological currents do not remain confined within national borders. They influence foreign policy, shape media narratives, and affect public opinion across Europe. In particular, they often spill over into the Western Balkans - through political alliances, far-right media content, and diaspora networks, where they threaten to undermine fragile democratic institutions and post-conflict reconciliation processes.

5. Impact on Western Balkans Reconciliation

The rise of right-wing ideologies across Europe has direct and indirect implications for reconciliation processes in the Western Balkans. While these processes were already fragile and often incomplete, the external political climate now reinforces nationalist narratives, undermines trust in international justice, and emboldens denialist rhetoric.

5.1. External Influences

- **Political Support for Nationalist Leaders:** Right-wing political parties and governments within the European Union have at times expressed ideological alignment with nationalist actors in the Western Balkans. These affiliations are often rooted in shared conservative or ethno-nationalist values. A notable example is Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's support for Milorad Dodik, the leader of Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), who is known for challenging the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Bosnian and Herzegovinian state. Orbán has, for example, refused to recognize a BiH court's ruling against Dodik, blocked attempts by the EU to sanction him, and provided him public political backing (European Conservative, 2023).

- **Erosion of the European Union's Credibility:** The EU's normative power is undermined when member states tolerate or openly support nationalist rhetoric and actors who contradict the Union's foundational values, including democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. This inconsistency weakens the EU's credibility as a neutral mediator and its capacity to promote democratic transformation in the Western Balkans. For example, although the EU has invested substantial funds in rule of law reforms across the Western Balkans, audits, including by the European Court of Auditors, find that many of these interventions have had only marginal effect on fundamental reforms, especially regarding judicial independence, accountability, and political interference (Politico, 2024).

- **Legitimization of Revisionist Narratives:** The growing presence of far-right discourse in Europe, which often includes the relativization of fascism, the glorification of nationalist movements, and the rejection of

transitional justice, contributes to the normalization of similar narratives in the Western Balkans.

- These trends are manifested through historical revisionism, the denial of war crimes, the rehabilitation of convicted war criminals, and the rejection of collective responsibility for the conflicts of the 1990s. Such dynamics hinder reconciliation processes and the construction of a shared historical memory in the region.

5.2. Internal Consequences in the Western Balkans

- **Strengthening of Local Nationalisms:** Political leaders increasingly exploit the global resurgence of nationalism to bolster their legitimacy. In Serbia, Croatia, and Republika Srpska, identity politics and ethno-nationalist discourses are more frequently invoked as central features of political rhetoric. Commemoration of war crimes becomes politicized, while gestures of apology or reconciliation are often dismissed or condemned as “traitorous” by political actors and segments of the public.

- **Polarization and Denialism:** Denial - or at least significant minimization - of key events such as the Srebrenica genocide and other war crimes is becoming more socially acceptable. Institutional practices contribute to this normalization. Historical revisionism is being embedded into school curricula, media discourse, and official state rhetoric. Textbooks and public statements increasingly reflect contested or divergent narrations of wartime responsibility and victimhood.

- **Weakening of Regional Cooperation:** Political instability and mutual distrust hinder cross-border collaboration, diplomatic dialogue, and the resolution of bilateral issues (for example, Serbia-Kosovo relations). The ideal of a shared, peaceful European future - once a powerful unifying narrative - loses credibility as the European Union itself appears divided, inward-looking, or inconsistent in upholding its own declared values, diminishing its appeal and normative pull in the region.

In conclusion, reconciliation processes in the Western Balkans face mounting challenges driven by both internal dynamics and external influences. The resurgence of right-wing ideologies - regionally and globally - has strengthened nationalist actors, undermined initiatives aimed at confronting the legacy of past conflicts, and contributed to a declining international commitment to transitional justice and post-conflict accountability.

Conclusion

The Western Balkans remains a region in which the past is deeply present. More than two decades after the cessation of armed conflicts, efforts toward post-conflict reconciliation have produced mixed results.

Mechanisms such as the ICTY, domestic courts, civil society led, truth-seeking initiatives like RECOM, and regional cooperation frameworks such as the RCC and the Berlin Process have all played vital roles in promoting accountability, dialogue, and regional integration. Yet, reconciliation in the Western Balkans continues to be a contested and fragile process, shaped not only by local political realities but increasingly influenced by broader ideological trends across Europe.

This paper has examined the impact of the rising tide of right-wing populism and nationalism across Europe on post-conflict reconciliation efforts in the Western Balkans. It has demonstrated that the recent proliferation of far-right ideologies marked by historical revisionism, nativist nationalism, Euroscepticism, and anti-multiculturalism, has introduced new obstacles for reconciliation and peacebuilding in a region still grappling with the legacy of war. Far from being an isolated or regional phenomenon, this ideological shift reflects a broader crisis in liberal democratic values that resonates powerfully in post-conflict societies.

One of the central findings of this analysis is that the rise of right-wing populist parties across Europe has weakened the credibility and consistency of international actors, especially the European Union in supporting transitional justice and democratic reform in the Balkans. While the EU once held strong normative leverage in promoting human rights, reconciliation, and the rule of law, this influence has diminished as right-wing governments within the Union itself challenge these foundational values. This internal contradiction undermines the EU's role as a neutral broker and diminishes its soft power in the region. The perception of a divided and inward-looking EU reduces incentives for meaningful reform and weakens the appeal of the European integration project, which once functioned as a central narrative for post-conflict recovery in the Balkans.

Furthermore, the ideological proximity between far-right parties in Europe and nationalist actors in the Western Balkans has resulted in both direct and indirect support for revisionist and denialist agendas. Political figures such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary have openly supported leaders like Milorad Dodik, whose rhetoric and actions frequently challenge the integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina's state institutions and deny the genocide in Srebrenica. Such alliances provide both political cover and moral validation for nationalist actors, enabling them to resist accountability and to entrench ethno-nationalist narratives within public discourse and state institutions.

Internally, these dynamics have emboldened nationalist elites and further polarized public opinion. Political leaders in countries like Serbia, Croatia, and the entity of Republika Srpska increasingly rely on identity politics to mobilize support and deflect attention from governance failures

or economic stagnation. The instrumentalization of war memory, the glorification of convicted war criminals, and the systematic denial or relativization of war crimes, particularly in political and media narratives, erode the societal foundations necessary for reconciliation. In some cases, this has led to the re-emergence of openly hostile rhetoric between political actors and communities, reversing years of tentative progress in trust-building.

Of particular concern is the way historical revisionism is being institutionalized through educational curricula, official commemorations, and public discourse. This process not only impairs interethnic understanding but also deprives younger generations of the tools needed to critically engage with the past. The risk is the perpetuation of parallel and mutually exclusive historical narratives, which in turn reinforces social divisions and undermines any shared vision of the future. In this context, initiatives like RECOM, which aim to document the facts of the conflicts and create a regional culture of remembrance, are more important than ever-but also increasingly marginalized or ignored by political elites.

Despite these significant challenges, the Western Balkans is not without hope. The continued work of civil society actors, victim associations, journalists, and independent researchers reflects a resilience and commitment to truth, justice, and reconciliation that must not be overlooked. Initiatives such as the RECOM Reconciliation Network demonstrate the enduring potential of regional, victim-centered approaches to truth-telling and memory-building. Similarly, frameworks like the Regional Cooperation Council and the Berlin Process, though not explicitly reconciliation, focused-offer practical platforms for building regional trust through economic interdependence, mobility, and policy alignment.

It is essential, however, that these regional frameworks do not become purely technocratic exercises divorced from the political and emotional realities of post-conflict societies. Peace and reconciliation cannot be achieved solely through infrastructure projects or economic cooperation; they require a genuine engagement with the past, an acknowledgment of suffering, and a commitment to justice. The political climate in Europe, shaped increasingly by right-wing populism, poses a serious threat to these normative commitments. Without a renewed effort to reaffirm democratic values and human rights, both within the EU and in its external engagements - the prospects for meaningful reconciliation in the Balkans will remain constrained.

In light of these findings, several key recommendations emerge. First, international actors, particularly the European Union, must reassert their

normative leadership and confront internal contradictions that weaken their external influence.

This means actively challenging revisionist narratives and ensuring that support for transitional justice and reconciliation remains consistent, even in the face of political backlash. Second, regional initiatives must be empowered and sufficiently funded to carry out their mandates, with a greater focus on participatory dialogue and the inclusion of marginalized voices. Third, domestic political actors in the Western Balkans must be held accountable for inciting nationalist rhetoric and obstructing reconciliation processes. This requires both international pressure and domestic civic mobilization.

Although years have passed since the end of armed conflicts, reconciliation in the Western Balkans remains far from complete. Many old wounds are still open, and deeply entrenched divisive narratives, along with the spread of disinformation, continue to pose serious obstacles to meaningful reconciliation. Education and history teaching have the potential to serve as powerful tools for healing and understanding; however, they have thus far failed to fulfill this role. Youth play a particularly important role in reconciliation, as conflicts and unresolved tensions are often passed from one generation to the next. While the European Union emphasizes functional cooperation among Western Balkan countries, this approach alone is insufficient to foster genuine reconciliation and mutual trust. These insights were presented by Stormy-Annika Mildner and Tina Bories in the Aspen Institute's 2023 report *Reconciliation in the Western Balkans*.

Ultimately, peace and security in the Western Balkans cannot be sustained through political declarations alone. They require a collective and long-term commitment to truth, accountability, and justice-principles that are increasingly under threat in today's political climate. As Europe navigates its own ideological crises, it must not abandon the unfinished business of reconciliation in its immediate neighborhood. The Western Balkans, geographically and historically a part of Europe, deserves a future rooted not in fear and division, but in shared memory, mutual recognition, and lasting peace.

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The Impact of Christian Minority on Shaping Türkiye's Profile

Irina-Maria Cosma¹

Abstract

Given the fact that Türkiye is located in a culturally-diverse and multi-confessional area, interactions with alterities have been numerous. We analyse some relevant encounters with Christians and their impact on shaping Türkiye's profile, given that Christians have been present in Turks' history and development as a state. Our methodology is qualitative, with a focus on a SWOT analysis regarding "strengths", "weaknesses", "opportunities" and "threats" and the results focus on the impact of Christians in shaping the country's profile: Christians have been present in Turks' history. The results of the analysis reflect varied interactions between the two entities: military (coercive), social and political, today being shaped under the umbrella of cultural or public diplomacy practices. "Strengths" are mainly related to the inheritance of the Ottoman millet, "weaknesses" are related to perception as alterity; "opportunities" describe the state's actual public diplomacy, while "threats" might arise from nationalism and faith-based diplomacy.

Keywords

minority, Islam, Christianity, Türkiye, encounters, impact

1. Introduction

Our premise has its foundation on a paradox: a *humanist* and *dogmatic* approach, i.e. the fusion in one of humans and their beliefs. In other words, people humanise their religions and religions spiritualise people, merging the two entities under the umbrella of Schleiermacher's described "feeling of absolute dependence" (Schleiermacher, 1928: 14) and "reciprocity", explaining the interconnection between human and divine.

If we accept that there is an impact of humankind on religion and of religion on humankind, we can further address the matter of interactions between different peoples of different faiths and the impact they have on each other.

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Geographically, Türkiye is located in one of the most culturally-varied regions, which makes today's Türkiye spiritually infused, after many years of interactions with alterity. The inheritance of cultural interactions between Christianity and Islam is visible in the country's actual profile, combining elements both in rituals, but also in the political sphere.

1.1. Literature Review

Interactions between Christians and (Muslim) Turks are, in essence, interactions between two identities. If we accept that "identity is found as a form of *expression*" (Brie, 2025; 11), then we can further admit that both communities have their own manifestations, declarations of selves that interact with one another. Hence,

In the case of Turks, due to the above-mentioned significant location in terms of variety of peoples, confessions and cultures, we can state that its importance as a regional actor, its internal and external profiles, its historical development into a coherent state – they have been all studied and approached in niche literature in the field of international relations.

As scholars consider that the late Ottoman model of governance had not been suitable with that time's trends in political organisation, the Kemalist Revolution can be framed as "an adaptative reaction" of the Turkish society (Popescu, 2024: 263).

What we can further understand from this fitting is that in its modern-time-existence, the Turkish state started and continued to follow its own interests for its own boon.

The paradox of the current international system or community is that, on one hand, there is more profound discussion and theoretisation on the matter of minority groups and communities, *interactions* between different communities of one single country and the *impact* of ones on the others; and on the other hand, a rising support of scholars for the realist paradigm to be the one that best describes the (latest) developments in the field. Hence, concepts like "interest", "power", "hegemony", "conflict" or "(military) force" are more and more present.

If we attempt to corelate these concepts with the case of Türkiye as an actor of the international community, we can explain its acts and measures as an ambition to become or re-become a regional power, driven by a strong *feeling* of nationalism supporting the idea that Türkiye is "a Türkiye *of Turks* and *for Turks*".

In this manner, lately, Türkiye is more and more placed in the realist paradigm – "Türkiye, often seen as a pivotal player at the intersection of continents, is increasingly asserting itself as a regional power while straddling its traditional alliances and emerging ambitions" (Landry, 2024).

Some of the key concepts in the realist theory of international relations are: “power”, “national interest”, “competition”, “self-interest”, “security” etc. Starting from those, we can understand that according to this paradigm, states’ self-interests are primary to other aspects and “each state is always seeking to increase its wealth, power, and influence” (Biscontin).

Therefore, placing Türkiye in the realist paradigm is a defining step for the entire regional and international display as power and influence become more and more important for the existence of state entities, which are at *risk* because of the rise of numerous non-state actors, conflicts, and have to assure their own security.

Even though the realist theory is important in explaining (Ottoman) Turkish expansionism, today’s regional ambitions etc., our approach on analysing impact of Christians on Turks’ profile can be better understood by appealing to social-constructivism, which preaches that identities are *constructed* rather than given by nature (Wendt, 1999: 1).

Moreover, according to constructivists, there is a society not only within states, but also between states – explaining the importance of interaction between actors as crucial in shaping their existence by means of “*shared ideas*”, formed from *experience* (Mead, 1934: 2-5).

Therefore, ideas and implicitly, perceptions are crucial for determining how alterity contributes to the construction of self – in other words, how different actors perceive each other and implicitly, how they perceive themselves, for self-perception is modelled by others’ perceptions on them and contributes to the construction of the “looking-glass self” (Griffin, 2012, pp. 58-59) i.e. the way in which people imagine they look to others.

Literature in the field presents significant presence of Christians in the history of Turks, but in very many cases, significant literature is focused on the impact of Turks on Christians, given their expansionist policy in the Ottoman period and focusing on conflicts between Christians and Muslims in history. To provide a concrete case, we can appeal to Paul Wittek’s *Ghazi Thesis*, explaining that “the (Ottoman) Turkish military elite were fighting in the name of religion, at the very basis against the Byzantines, the Christian alterity” (Cosma, Ottoman Inheritance in the Republic of Türkiye. Impact on the Interactions with the West, 2025: 217).

Therefore, we find our proposed paper significant for the field of international relations and able to bring relevant contribution.

1.2. Concept Analysis

Etymologically, Christianity comes from Christ, referring to the figure of the Son of God. The word Christ originates from Greek (Christos), a noun which is derivate from the verb *chrío*, literally meaning “to anoint”. Therefore,

Christos is the anointed, and Christians are His followers. We can, thence, state that the creed behind faith is the predominance of the idea of anointment (blessing). This has a dual character: the chosen God (the divine) and the chosen people (the earthly).

“Muslim” comes from the “*s-l-m*” root, meaning peace and submission. “*Aslama*” is the verb standing for “*to submit*”, therefore Muslims are *the ones who submit* (to God).

Commonalities between Christianity and Islam can be deduced in general terms by exploring their names, for “name” represents “identity”, “reputation” i.e. a symbol of self. In both cases, there is a similar interaction between God and the people, between the divine and the earthly.

In Christianity, God (the son of God and God, implicitly) sacrifices for the people (generally representing the earthly element), while in Islam, the people sacrifice (i.e. submit) for and to God.

Our case study takes the shape of a SWOT analysis, where we shall analyse some relevant aspects in terms of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The aspects to be tackled represent measures, policies of the Turkish state regarding the relation with Christian minority and cover different profiles: the internal profile (strengths and weaknesses) – more specifically, the register of the action inside the state – and the external profile (opportunities and threats) – regarding aspects that reflect into the foreign spectrum, outside the borders of the country. This analysis is not exhaustive, representing a compression of some of the most relevant aspects regarding the research theme.

2. Methodology: Objectives. Research Question

The main objective of this paper is to analyse the main interaction between Christianity and Islam in Türkiye, following the historical path. In other words, we aim to describe the most relevant moments of interaction and the way in which these shape today’s profile of the country.

Our methodology is qualitative, more specifically a historical-interpretative analysis of the historical development of the ideological and cultural interactions between Islam and Christianity in the region of Anatolia. Our case study is focused on today’s Türkiye, representing a strategic analysis by means of a SWOT analysis: a descriptive-evaluative perspective aiming to tackle the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats resulting from the interactions between Christianity and Islam in Türkiye – the way in which the actual framework looks like.

Our research question is: “What are the most relevant aspects that could be framed into <<strengths>>, <<weaknesses>>, <<opportunities>>”

and <<threats>> regarding the interaction and rapports between (Muslim) Turks and Christians?"

3. Early Encounters and Historical Developments

3.1. Coercive Encounters

Given the tribal existence of early Turkic people, they have always encountered other peoples whom they had to resist (i.e. fight against) for the perpetuation of the pre-state and then state apparatus. One of the most relevant encounters with Christians was the Battle of Manzikert – between Seljuk Turks and the Byzantines (Mehmed, 1976: 76-83). This moment is relevant for the rapports between the two, given that Seljuks' victory against the Christians meant access for Turks in deeper Anatolia, conquering Caesarea. Ideologically, for the Turkish collective mind, that very moment set a precedent for their future and eventual actions towards Christians.

3.1.1. Ideological and Military Interactions

Afterwards, following the establishment of the Ottoman State, the fall of Constantinople represented another stalemate in the interaction with Christians, shaped under the form of conflict – both military and ideological – culminating with the transformation of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, under Fatih Sultan Mehmet (Mehmet II) (Clot, 1990, p. 45). After 1453, Fatih Sultan Mehmet “allowed the election of a new patriarch as the head of the entire Christian millet, with the right to administer, tax and exercise justice over all the Christians of the Ottoman Empire” (Meyendorff, 2025). As a continuous environment of interaction, the Ottoman state took advantage of the rather numerous presence of Christians and starting the XIVth century, the *Yeniçeri reform* takes place in the Ottoman military system, regarding the recruitment of Christian young males to serve the Ottoman state. (Mehmed, 1976: 137-138). *Yeniçeri* means “*the new army*” – symbolically, the new element is represented by the Christian element, being the first time in the Ottoman history when Christians were recruited to serve the Ottoman army. One of the most relevant aspects is that Christians who had already learnt Turkish or had already been circumcised were not accepted (Mehmed, 1976: 138-139).

After the recruitment, the young Christian males were given to Ottoman Turkish families, converted to Islam and socialised within Turkish families – all these prior to their military service (Stone, 2021: 41). This acculturation process meant the construction of new identities for the Christian males – giving up their old ones so that no other ties would impede them from being loyal to the *Bâb-ı Âli* (Sublime Porte) and ensuring “strict discipline and prevalent order” (The Force that Forged an Empire: Janissary Corps and their Role in Ottoman).

3.1.2. Social Encounters

Not only militarily, but also socially, Christians were involved in the governance of the Ottoman Porte. One of the most relevant elements in this sense is that many of the *hatun*'s² in the Ottoman harem were Christians. Given that Muslim women were free (therefore could not have been treated as slaves in the harem), Christian women were brought to the *saray* (palace) in the Ottoman harem were Christians. Given that Muslim women were free (therefore could not have been treated as slaves in the harem), Christian women were brought to the *saray* (palace). Even if they were later on converted to Islam and given Ottoman names, the Christian influence was still present. Therefore, numerous descendants of the Ottoman sultans were, actually, of Christian origins (Peirce, 1993: 17).

3.2. Significance of These Encounters

All these cases indicate that even though through conversion to Islam and Ottoman Turkish education, Turks have attempted to give Christians new identities, the Christian cultural baggage was still present there in the "background".

Therefore, what we can deduce is that numerous encounters with Christians were not necessarily against Christians, but rather in favour of Turks – i.e. meant to preserve their continuity as a people. Nevertheless, Turks' efforts to *turkify* Christians meant interacting with Christians, i.e. subconsciously borrowing certain aspects and being influenced by the Christian culture to some extent – under the premise that no interaction is possible in the absence of an exchange.

What we can see is that in numerous relevant cases throughout history, Turks' interactions with Christians were meant to turn Christian into "artificial" Turks, or, in other words, to *turkify* and islamise them. These practices were built on a form of early Turkish nationalism and prevalence, even if paradoxically, the Ottoman state was multinational, multi-confessional and minorities were tolerated. This form of ideology was strongly based on Islam, where foreigners (like *yeniçeri*, women in harem etc.) were converted and given new names i.e. new identities. Therefore, this means that Islam represented a great part of the Turkish identity throughout their history. We can, therefore, state that Christianity – through its Christian minority in the Turkish (Ottoman) state represented a solid part of its *aspect*, both politically and socially.

A complete upset was brought by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who turned secularism into one of the new state's support pillars, in the process of

² Old Turkish term used for concubines in the Ottoman harem

constructing a new collective identity, where faith was no longer placed at the foundation of the state, but rather at the foundation of each individual.

In the newly founded Turkish Republic, Christians were considered “recognised groups” and given rights, under Article 38 of Treaty of Lausanne (1923): “All the people of Türkiye shall have the right to freely practise any religion that does not intervene with public order. Non-Muslim minorities will have freedom of movement and migration (...)” (Lozan Barış Antlaşması Tam Metni, n.d.).

4. Case Study. SWOT Analysis

4.1. Strengths (internal)

Strengths are considered internally – in other words, we refer to the aspects that tighten the interaction between Islam and Christianity in the internal spectrum.

One of the most important characteristics of the Ottoman governance regarding the matter of minorities was the millet system, under which the different minority groups were placed (Ortaylı, 2019: 23). Coming from Arabic, the term “millet” means “community” or “religion” and it represents the system in which minority communities were allowed by the Ottoman rulers to govern themselves (self-governing), given its multinational and multi-confessional profile. (Ortaylı, 2019). Moreover, it is to be noted that before the 16th century, non-Muslims were more numerous than Muslims in the Ottoman Empire (Howard, 2021: 138).

This represents a strength due to the fact that it has had benefits for both Ottomans and the Christian minority: on one hand, the Christian minority was given the right to self-govern, on the other hand, the Ottoman state governance was assured and conflicts starting from minority issues were avoided.

Even though, paradoxically, the millet system does not tighten, but rather appears to loosen interaction between Muslims and Christians – in other words, create distance between the two – it was really an effective measure in order to avoid coercive interactions. Moreover, Christians were considered dhimmi or muahid under the millet system. The word “dhimmi” comes from the Arabic “dhimma”, meaning “protection” or “custody” and “muahid” represents a “covenant”; in other words, Christians were “protected people” under the Ottoman Islamic rule (Al-Qattan, 1999) and considered “people of the Book”.

4.2. Weaknesses (internal)

One of the most important aspects to be mentioned in terms of weaknesses lies at the matter of subconscious or unobservable: i.e. the matter of perception. Therefore, it is not sufficient to mention that there have

been numerous conflictual interactions between Turks and Christians, but rather we attempt to analyse what is there at the foundation of those coercive decisions. If decisions and actions are guided by thought (or, in other words, if thought is primary to action), then we admit that Turks' several attempts to fight against Christians (must) have been guided by a negative perception attributed to Christians.

This negative frame or lens through which Turks perceived Christians is related to the idea of alterity – Christians being associated the West, intruders (otherness) in the way of Turks' accomplishing their fate. Christians were always there, on the lands Turks wanted for themselves. Therefore, the matter of conflict is not primarily rooted in the differences of religions or cultures, but rather in framing of perceptions.

To exemplify, we can provide the example of Hagia Sophia, which Ottomans turned into a mosque after the fall of Constantinople. In several sources of hadith³, there is a prophecy related to the fall of Constantinople under Muslims: “*Konstantiniyye mutlaka fethedilecektir. Onu fetheden komutan ne güzel komutan, fetheden ordu ne güzel ordudur*” (İstanbul'un Fethinin 572.Yılı Kutlu Olsun...!), meaning “It is certain that Constantinople will be conquered. What a great commander, the commander who conquers it; what a great army, the army which conquers it.” Turks have, therefore, fought for the ultimate ideal and prophecy, assuming the role of its fulfillers.

4.3. Opportunities (external)

The field of opportunities in this case is related to the external dimension i.e. expanding over the boundaries of the Turkish state. We shall consider the following aspects as “opportunities” because by means of Turkish public diplomacy, they represent and support dialogue between communities. One of the most relevant parts of the national brand of Türkiye is the “Turkish hospitality”. It is described as a souvenir from the tribal and migratory lifestyle and described in Turkish under the term of “*konukseverlik*”, literally meaning “love of guests”: “*konuk gelince kut gelir*”, meaning “a guest coming to a house brings good fortune” (Tezcan, 2000: 202) and appears in the Turkish folklore as the essential part of a household: “*misafiri gelmeyen kara evler yıkılsa daha iyi*” (Tezcan, 2000: 202), meaning: “the dark houses having no guests would better be demolished” – therefore, a household which has no guests has no purpose. This is strongly related to the Islamic teachings, where guests symbolise bereket (prosperity) for whoever accepts them.

³ Sayings, actions, teachings of Prophet Muhammad, considered source of law in Islam, after the Qur'an.

Following this path, Turks' economy is massively based on the idea that everyone is welcome and promoting numerous types of touristic spots included in the brand "Go Türkiye", the official travel guide of the country.

For Türkiye, this represents a benefit, both literally and metaphorically: economically, the country's Christian heritage sites welcome "over 1.5 million visitors from all over the world every year" (The intersection point of faith); politically and diplomatically, the country's image towards the international community (international organisations and other state actors) is emerged by showing interest in investing, developing and promoting Christian heritage sites.

These aspects are strongly related to the rules imposed by the European Union to candidate countries, taking into consideration that Türkiye is the state with the longest candidature to the European Union, having a vast history of encounters with the organisation. Following the statement that "a united Europe is necessarily a <<union of minorities>>" (Tsilevich, 2010), where "diversity is not only ethno-religious, it is also cultural and mental" (Brie, 2011).

Therefore, protection of minorities is a very important criterion composing the Copenhagen Criteria (1993). In the case of Türkiye, giving more rights to minorities (here, Christians) represents a central aspect, because even though some prohibitions have been lifted, "some cultural rights are still considerably restricted" (Hochleitner). Therefore, the initiatives to promote cultural heritage sites might be understood as an opportunity for Türkiye to develop a tight rapport with (its) Christian minority.

4.4. Threats (*external*)

Threats represent situations or events, political measures which lead to discrepancies between Islam and Christianity.

Many of the relevant aspects presented as "threats" have their origins in a matter of perceptions and cognitive distortions. Even though they might affect other groups, they are actually primarily related to Turks' diachronic self-perception. More precisely, Turks perceived the coming of Atatürk with all the reforms as alterity, as foreign to their authentic self, therefore developed an "adaptive response" under the form of Neo-Ottomanism and faith-based diplomacy (Cosma, Faith-based Diplomacy and Neo-Ottomanism, 2025: 171).

In other words, the Neo-Ottomanist doctrine and faith-based diplomacy practices are "nothing else but an attempt to solve and end an identity crisis" (Cosma, Faith-based Diplomacy and Neo-Ottomanism, 2025: 171).

The perception of Christians as alterity (otherness) and representatives of the West, as well as Turkish nationalism and the Neo-Ottomanist practices led to some changes in the former Kemalist architecture of the country: in 2020 Hagia Sophia was reopened as a mosque, ending the period in which it was a neutral entity (museum) since 1934, under the rule of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Moreover, it is considered a UNESCO World Heritage site, for it was built 1500 years ago (Hagia Sophia: Turkey turns iconic Istanbul museum into mosque, 2020). Since the motif of the circle is very present in the Turkish cultural identity, we can analyse this measure as a form of going back to roots, fulfilling the prophecies. In the Islamic cult, there is the hadith regarding the conquest of Constantinople, when Prophet Muhammad prophesied its fall and Ottoman Turks have fulfilled it in 1453. Symbolically, the shift from museum to mosque represents a comeback to the sacred ideal. It signifies the comeback to a traditional identity, considered “forgotten” by the majority of Turks, possibly inspired subconsciously by the necessity to return to the *Deus Otiosus* whom people forgot, according to Prophet Muhammad – representing the core idea in Islam.

Therefore, these practices lead to a discrepancy in the equilibrium Mustafa Kemal attempted to maintain between the two entities by turning Hagia Sophia into a museum – at the moment, the balance is rather inclined, for the framing or the messages sent are related to an act of re-conquering of Constantinople, an actualised superiority of Islam towards Christianity (which has been latent).

5. Conclusions

Interactions with Christians are due to the mosaic of the Anatolian region in terms of cultures and peoples. There have been numerous notable types of interactions between Turks and Christians, from which we have mentioned the coercive but also the cooperative ones, or the ones in which the two have merged. Therefore, even though Christians have been perceived as intruders, alterity or inferior whom Turks wanted to defy, there have been numerous cases in which Christians contributed to the governance of the Turkish state in its history.

Regardless of Turks' intentions to Turkify or Islamise Christians, they have been present in Turks' history as a strong and different ideological element. The question which occurs is whether the expansionism of (Ottoman) Turks would have been possible in their absence, since if they had perceived Christians as familiar (rather than intruders or alterity), they would probably not have fought them or conquered them. In other words, Christians symbolise a necessary bad or alterity for their perpetuation and expansion as a people.

Christians' contribution is, to some extent, paradoxical: the fact that they (Christians) have been there was of use to Turks' accomplishing their holy calling to conquer and expand in the name of religion.

The main objective of this paper is to analyse the main interaction between Christianity and Islam in Türkiye, following the historical path. In other words, we aim to describe the most relevant moments of interaction and the way in which these shape today's profile of the country.

Our *objective* to analyse the most relevant aspects in the interaction between the two, following the historical path showed (us) that Christianity (and, implicitly, Christians) have been very present in Turks' history, contributing directly and indirectly to the state governance and shaping today's profile. In other words, the country's current profile is, to some extent, the result of these encounters and their developments. We can state the *results* of our analysis by appealing to our proposed *research question* ("What are the most relevant aspects that could be framed into <<strengths>>, <<weaknesses>>, <<opportunities>> and <<threats>> regarding the interaction and rapports between (Muslim) Turks and Christians?"), we can state that some of the most relevant aspects which could be framed into "strengths" are related to the inheritance of the multinational and multi-confessional profile of the Ottoman state, where the millet system permitted / represented a way of constructing non-coercive bonds between Christians and Turks; "weaknesses" are framed by the matter of perception, representing, thence, one of the aspects which are most difficult to be altered: as Turks formed their perception of Christians as alterity, otherness etc. due to dogmatic/ideological?? Differences, perceptions set limits in interactions.

In terms of "*opportunities*", Türkiye's cultural and public diplomacy represents a useful tool in enhancing dialogue with Christian communities not only within Türkiye, but also from around the world by promoting its Christian cultural heritage through tourism and national branding. Nevertheless, there are also "*threats*", such as doctrinal adjustments of Atatürk's secular model of governance, by adding elements of religion closer to the state apparatus.

When it comes to limits, we can state that this analysis is not an exhaustive one; in other words, there are plenty of moments of interactions between the two that have not been presented in this paper.

We can further state some challenges of possible future research, mainly related to rapid developments in the field of international relations, mainly due to the strategic positioning of Türkiye and its will to become / re-become a regional actor.

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Ecumenism in the Context of European Secularization

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Abstract

This paper analyzes ecumenism in the context of contemporary European secularization, identifying the relationship between religious culture and the influence of secular European thought on Christian mission. The study examines secularization as a major challenge for Christianity and evaluates ecumenism as a possible theological and ecclesial response. An analysis of recent theological perspectives is conducted, with particular contributions from Orthodox and Romanian theology. The paper highlights the tensions and risks of ecumenism, as well as the benefits of interfaith dialogue. It concludes by emphasizing the necessity of theological discernment in the European secularized context.

Keywords

ecumenism, European secularization, Church unity, interfaith dialogue, ecclesiology, patristic tradition, religious pluralism, theological discernment.

Introduction

Contemporary Europe is undergoing a profound process of cultural and religious transformation, marked by secularization. European secularization cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between the “religious” and the “secular.” As Lucian Hölscher points out, the terms religion, secularity, and secularization have undergone complex semantic developments, often being used in contradictory ways by both supporters and critics of modernity (Hölscher, 2011: 66). In this sense, secularization must be understood as a historical process specific to Western modernity, which has reshaped the role of religion without completely eliminating it from social life. This phenomenon does not exclusively denote a withdrawal of religion from the public sphere, but rather a redefinition of the relationship between faith, society, and state institutions within a pluralistic and post-Christian context.

In this context of secularization, ecumenism emerges as a theological and ecclesial response to the fragmentation of Christianity and its progressive marginalization in a secularized Europe. At the core of the

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ecumenical movement lies dialogue. This ecumenical dialogue represents an initiative aimed at sharing the common elements of the Christian faith within an interconfessional framework. This endeavor does not pursue proselytism, but rather aims at promoting the promotion of an authentic mutual understanding, deepened through the practice of open and responsible dialogue.

The motivation for choosing the topic *Ecumenism in the Context of European Secularization* arises from the convergence of two major processes that define contemporary ecclesial reality: the intensification of secularization in the European space and the reconfiguration of ecumenical discourse within Christianity. On the one hand, secularization has led to a decrease in the visibility and public authority of the Churches; on the other hand, ecumenism has become one of the main strategies through which Christianity seeks to articulate a common presence within a pluralistic society. Thus, the necessity of a responsible theological analysis can be emphasized—one that takes into account both the challenges of European secularization and the complexity of contemporary ecumenical discourse. The present study aims to provide a balanced framework for reflection, capable of avoiding both doctrinal relativism and confessional isolation, thereby contributing to a mature understanding of ecumenism in today's Europe.

Purpose and Methodology of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to analyze ecumenism in the context of European secularization, highlighting both its theological and missional potential, as well as the limits and risks that arise when inter-Christian dialogue is detached from clear ecclesiological criteria. The study seeks to clarify how ecumenism can function as a responsible response to the marginalization of Christianity in Europe, without leading to the relativization of the truth of faith or to the dilution of confessional identity. This work aims to bring into dialogue Western perspectives on ecumenism with Orthodox and Romanian theological reflections, in order to highlight both convergences and significant tensions, with the goal of critically evaluating the different models of ecumenism promoted in contemporary European contexts.

Methodologically, the research adopts an interdisciplinary theological approach that combines ecclesiological analysis with elements from the history of ideas and perspectives on the relationship between religion and secularity. The primary method employed is the critical analysis of theological texts and representative documents of contemporary ecumenical discourse, examining both their doctrinal content and the context in which they were formulated.

In addition, the study employs a comparative method to relate different theological positions concerning the unity of the Church and ecumenical dialogue. This approach allows for the highlighting of differences in emphasis between Western ecumenism—often oriented toward consensus and institutional cooperation—and ecumenism inspired by Orthodox theology, which emphasizes the continuity of Tradition and the centrality of dogmatic truth.

Furthermore, the research is guided by a fundamental ecclesiological criterion: fidelity to the apostolic tradition of the Church. Therefore, the methodology seeks to avoid both the reduction of ecumenism to a pragmatic instrument and a confessional isolation devoid of dialogue. Within this methodological framework, the study adopts a balanced approach, aiming to provide a rigorous and nuanced analysis of ecumenism in contemporary Europe, contributing to a responsible theological reflection on Christian unity in a society marked by secularization.

Literature Review and the Contemporary Relevance of Ecumenism in a Secularized Europe

The modern ecumenical movement emerged from the awareness that division among the Churches constitutes a scandal for Christian witness and weakens its capacity to engage coherently with the contemporary world (Nelson and Raith, 2010: 15). The foundation of this movement is multidimensional, encompassing theological, secular, spiritual, and cultural dimensions (Brie, 2009: 21). Ecumenism does not merely aim at pragmatic cooperation among denominations but seeks the restoration of the visible unity of the Church in fidelity to the apostolic tradition. Moreover, the desire for Christian unity has never been more intensely felt than in the twentieth century (Attwater, 1961: 977).

In a narrow sense, the term ecumenism may refer only to the tendency, aspiration, and action directed toward restoring the unity of Christians within a single Church (Stoian, 1994: 89). However, in a broader sense, it denotes the totality of initiatives that promote dialogue, rapprochement, cooperation, and convergence among Christians and among different confessions, aiming to build a framework of communion without abolishing confessional diversity (Hooft, 1954: 735). According to Nelson and Raith, ecumenism refers to the ensemble of activities, initiatives, and theological reflections through which Christians and Christian Churches, starting from the common confession of Jesus Christ, seek to overcome historical divisions and achieve deeper and more visible forms of unity in faith and Christian life. In this sense, ecumenism includes both practical efforts toward rapprochement between Churches and the theological study of their relationships, with the aim of manifesting Christian unity in faith, practice,

and common witness (Nelson and Raith, 2017: 4–5, 10–11). In other words, ecumenism is grounded in dialogue, which seeks to overcome prejudices generated by a superficial understanding of the various nuances of the Christian faith, offering an open space in which substantial theological arguments can be presented and examined.

Within this dialogical context, Father Dumitru Stăniloae emphasizes the relational dimension of knowledge, affirming that “I cannot know myself unless I know you and a third” (Stăniloae, 1995: 17). In the same line of reflection on the relationship between confrontation and dialogue, Father André Scrima observes that opposition to the other does not always constitute the surest path to discovering and affirming one’s own identity, stating that “to oppose the other is not always the surest way to discover and sustain oneself” (Scrima, 2004: 214). This perspective is also supported by research in the field of communication, which highlights the existence, within the structure of human personality, of a zone accessible to conscious control and a “shadow zone” that is not directly accessible to the individual but can be partially revealed through relationships with others, insofar as communication is effective (Dinu, 2007: 69). Thus, dialogue becomes an essential instrument for self-knowledge, even though it involves the risk of confronting a less favorable self-image. Dialogue therefore constitutes an authentic alternative to polemics. As it has been emphasized, “knowledge of the one next to me and of the one among us does not imply compromise or tension, but transparency, appreciation, and acceptance” (Coman, 1999: 15).

However, as Jeffery notes, ecumenical dialogue must be grounded in a series of fundamental principles in order to be effective, namely: the honesty of both dialogue partners, which entails recognizing the integrity of the other’s position; the existence of a common basis, indispensable for dialogue; a profound knowledge of one’s own position; a sincere willingness to understand the perspective of the other; the willingness to listen mutually; the critical acknowledgment of one’s own failures through an attitude of repentance; openness to change, without which dialogue loses its effectiveness; and the personal character of the encounter, since authentic dialogue cannot be impersonal (Jeffery, 1969: 106).

Despite these dialogical efforts, the modern ecumenical movement is marked by internal tensions (Brie and Brie, 2008: 104). These tensions become particularly evident in the Orthodox context, where ecumenism is perceived either as a missionary necessity or as a threat to dogmatic identity. Doru Nastașă emphasizes that the lack of a common and coherent position on ecumenism risks deepening theological confusion and internal divisions within the Orthodox space (Nastașă, 2017: 3). This ambivalence makes reflection on ecumenism not only relevant but indispensable.

At the same time, recent perspectives on ecumenism highlight the possibility of a renewed dialogue centered on lived ecclesial experience and the work of the Holy Spirit. Emilio Alvarez proposes the concept of an “ecumenism of the Spirit,” which goes beyond mere institutional agreements and emphasizes the spiritual communion among historical Christian traditions (Alvarez, 2016: 144). This approach opens new directions for reflection in a Europe marked by religious pluralism and the relativization of truth.

The contemporary relevance of ecumenism in Europe is closely linked to the deeply secularized context in which the Churches carry out their mission. Secularization has produced not only a decline in religious practice but also a structural shift in the way faith is perceived in the public sphere. Christianity is no longer regarded as a common normative reference, but rather as one among multiple religious or cultural options available to the modern individual. In this framework, the lack of unity among the Churches becomes more visible and more problematic, as it weakens Christianity’s ability to offer a coherent response to the challenges of contemporary society. Thus, in a secularized Europe, according to Zucca, ecumenism can no longer be understood exclusively as an internal project of the Churches, but as a necessity related to the public witness of faith (Zucca, 2012: vii–viii).

In this context, ecumenism becomes an instrument through which the Churches can overcome confessional isolation and formulate common positions in response to ethical, social, and cultural issues. However, the relevance of ecumenism cannot be evaluated solely in pragmatic terms. From a theological perspective, the unity of the Church is not determined by the social effectiveness of the Christian message, but by fidelity to revealed truth. Georges Florovsky warns that ecumenism risks becoming sterile if it is detached from the patristic tradition and from the ecclesial consciousness of the Church. “The ecumenical problem is not a matter of negotiations between Churches, but a matter of reunion in truth” (Florovsky, 1989: 67). Florovsky’s warning is that ecumenism becomes sterile if it is reduced to compromises or institutional arrangements without a return to the truth of the undivided Church. For Florovsky, ecumenical dialogue is legitimate only insofar as it remains anchored in the living experience of the Church and in the continuity of Tradition (Florovsky, 1989: 67).

The relevance of ecumenism is further intensified by the context of globalization, which has increased contacts among different Christian traditions and generated both new forms of cooperation and new tensions. Recent studies on ecumenism in a global context show that Christian unity can no longer be approached exclusively from a European or Western perspective, but must be understood within the dynamics of a global, plural, and diverse Church (Cavanaugh and Avis, 2004: 19). This reality calls for a

reevaluation of classical models of ecumenism and a heightened attentiveness to local and confessional experiences.

Within this complex framework, ecumenism emerges as a topic of utmost relevance, but also as a field that requires theological discernment. The major challenge lies in articulating a unity that does not sacrifice the truth of faith in favor of cultural consensus, but rather offers an authentic and responsible witness in a Europe marked by secularization and pluralism.

Chapter I

European Secularization: A Challenge for Christianity

European secularization represents one of the most complex processes that have shaped the modern history of the continent, with profound implications for religious life, ecclesial structures, and the relationship between Church and society. In contemporary literature, secularization is no longer understood as the mere disappearance of religion, but as a structural transformation in the way faith is integrated into the public sphere and individual consciousness (Hölscher, 2011: 55–56). This transformation directly affects Christianity, which loses its position as a dominant cultural reference and is compelled to redefine itself within a pluralistic context.

A first defining element of European secularization is the progressive separation between religion and state institutions. The modern European state, grounded in the principles of neutrality and freedom of conscience, has limited the normative role of religion in public life, transferring it into the sphere of personal choice. According to Zucca, European secularism does not imply the exclusion of religion from the public sphere, but rather the delimitation of its normative authority. In this sense, secularism “does not refer to the relationship between the state and religion, but to the way in which political organizations manage diversity,” and religion remains a legitimate actor in public life, without being able to claim a privileged status or a moral or political monopoly over the state (Zucca, 2012: 94–95).

At the same time, secularization has led to a fragmentation of religious experience, fostering the emergence of an individualized religiosity detached from communal traditions. Lucian Hölscher emphasizes that modernity has transformed religion from an integrative social reality into a subjective option shaped by individual preferences (Hölscher, 2011: 63). Within this framework, the Church is no longer perceived as the necessary space of salvation, but as one among many institutions offering meaning and identity.

This reconfiguration of religion particularly affects Christianity, which is a profoundly communal and ecclesial faith. In a secularized context, the absence of a common Christian framework amplifies the visibility of confessional differences, which come to be perceived not as expressions of ecclesial diversity, but as signs of fragmentation within the Christian message. This difficulty is further accentuated by the fact that, as Nelson and Raith note, Christian unity presupposes a gradual process in which confessional differences diminish as the Churches advance toward full visible communion (Nelson and Raith, 2010: 16–17).

The process of European secularization is not uniform, but marked by significant historical, cultural, and political differences. This contextual diversity complicates any unified analysis of European secularization. While in Western Europe secularization has manifested through a deep institutionalization of the separation between religion and the public sphere, in Central and Eastern Europe the trajectory has been distinct, being strongly influenced by the experience of communist regimes. Analyses presented in the volume *Religion and Secularity* show that, after 1989, the visible return of religion in these societies did not automatically lead to a coherent and stable reintegration into the public sphere, but rather to ambiguous and tension-filled forms of coexistence between religious tradition, the memory of ideological repression, and the demands of pluralist modernity. In this context, religion continues to play an important symbolic and identity-forming role, without fully regaining the integrative and normative function it had held in premodern societies (Hölscher and Eggert, 2011: 35–38, 77–108).

From a theological perspective, secularization does not represent only an external pressure exerted upon the Church, through which the public influence of religion is weakened, but also brings to light internal tensions related to the understanding of ecclesial identity and ministry, as well as the inability of the Churches to offer a unified witness. In the face of religion's withdrawal from the public sphere, the Church may be tempted either to adapt uncritically to the dominant values of secular society or to retreat into a defensive confessional isolation. However, in response to the challenges posed by secularization, Van der Borght observes that "faithfulness to Christ's calling requires historical and ecclesial discernment, without abandoning one's own identity and without reducing mission to a self-referential exercise" (Van der Borght, 2007: 59).

In conclusion, European secularization constitutes an ambivalent framework for Christianity. While it limits the public role of the Churches, it also compels a clarification of theological identity and a rethinking of the forms of ecclesial presence in society. This challenge creates the premises

for the emergence of ecumenism as a theological response—a theme that will be analyzed in the following chapter.

Chapter II

Ecumenism: A Theological Response to the Secular Context

In the context of European modernity, marked by pluralism and the weakening of a common Christian framework, ecumenism emerges as a theological and ecclesial response to confessional fragmentation. In fact, the modern ecumenical movement arose from the awareness of the scandalous nature of Christian division, and ecumenical initiatives developed out of the need for a common public witness, since the division of the Churches affects the visibility and coherence of Christian proclamation within a shared social space (Nelson and Raith, 2010: 14–15). According to Nelson and Raith, ecumenism begins from the theological premise of the unity of the Church in Christ, a unity that precedes and judges the historical separations among confessions, which are perceived as an ecclesial anomaly requiring resolution (Nelson and Raith, 2010: 16).

From an Orthodox perspective, ecumenism is inseparable from the problem of truth and Tradition. Georges Florovsky insists that ecumenical dialogue cannot be reduced to an exchange of opinions or to institutional compromise, but must be a process of common return to the sources of the faith, especially to the patristic experience of the early Church. “The path to Christian unity does not pass through negotiations or compromises, but through a common return to the faith of the Fathers” (Florovsky, 1989: 39). For Florovsky, Christian unity cannot be constructed through doctrinal negotiation, but through the rediscovery of apostolic continuity.

This perspective is further developed in contemporary theological reflections on Nicene ecclesiology. The Nicene Creed expresses a fundamental dogmatic consensus of the undivided Church, particularly regarding the confession of the one God and Christological identity, thus providing a common theological reference point for ecumenical reflection (Seitz, 2011: 27). “*Nicene Christianity suggests, in short, that the future of a renewed ecumenism cannot focus solely on the grammar of Christian faith and practice, excluding a form of order that ensures that the Church’s ordinary language does not slip into a kind of Christian pidgin—or worse, become an entirely different language*” (Seitz, 2011: 17).

In a secularized Europe, the appeal to the Nicene heritage becomes a theological strategy for recovering unity without relativizing truth. In a highly significant essay, *Orthodox Ecumenism in the Nineteenth Century*, Florovsky recalls that the Great Council of the Russian Orthodox Church (1917–1918), in its final session (20 September 1918), adopted the following

resolution, upon the proposal of the Section for the Union of Christian Churches (Chair: Archbishop Eudokim of North America): *“The Holy Council of the Russian Orthodox Church, observing with joy the efforts of the Old Catholics and Anglicans toward union with the Orthodox Churches on the basis of the doctrines and traditions of the ancient (Old Catholic) Church, blesses the labors and efforts of those who seek the path toward union with the aforementioned friendly Churches. The Council authorizes the Holy Synod to organize a Permanent Commission, with sections in Russia and abroad, for the removal of obstacles to union and for promoting, as far as possible, the rapid attainment of the final goal”* (Williams, 1996: 147).

At the same time, Western ecumenism has been strongly influenced by the cultural context of modernity and pluralism. In his analysis of contemporary ecumenism, William T. Cavanaugh shows that, in many current contexts, relationships among Churches are shaped more by political, cultural, and social factors than by deep ecclesiological convergences. His case studies demonstrate that forms of ecumenical cooperation often emerge as pragmatic responses to crises, tensions, or shared interests, thus configuring a contextual and functional ecumenism rather than a unity grounded sacramentally or dogmatically (Cavanaugh, 2020: 21). This type of ecumenism risks transforming Christian unity into an administrative project adapted to the demands of secular society.

An alternative direction is proposed by the pneumatological theology of ecumenism. From a pneumatological perspective, Emilio Álvarez argues that Christian unity cannot be reduced to formal institutional agreements, but must be understood as a dynamic process led by the Holy Spirit, manifested at the level of the spiritual, liturgical, and ecclesial life of communities, thereby preparing a deeper communion within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church (Álvarez, 2016: 9–13). In this view, ecumenism is not merely a project of theological commissions, but a living reality expressed in prayer, liturgy, and shared ecclesial experience. This approach offers an important corrective to excessively institutionalized ecumenism.

Nevertheless, ecumenism as a theological response to secularization remains ambivalent. On the one hand, it offers the possibility of a common witness within a pluralistic society; on the other hand, it risks being diverted by the cultural pressures of modernity. Van der Borgh emphasizes that any form of ecclesial cooperation must be supported by a clear ecclesiology and a proper understanding of ministry within the Church; otherwise, ecumenism becomes purely functional (Van der Borgh, 2007: 63).

Therefore, ecumenism can be understood as a necessary theological response to the European secular context, but only insofar as it remains faithful to revealed truth and ecclesial tradition. This tension between

necessity and risk will be analyzed in the following chapter, dedicated to the problems and limits of contemporary European ecumenism.

Chapter III

Tensions and Risks in European Ecumenism

Although ecumenism presents itself as a necessary response to the fragmentation of Christianity in a secularized Europe, it is accompanied by numerous theological tensions and risks. These become particularly evident when inter-Christian dialogue is detached from clear ecclesiological criteria and becomes subject to the cultural pressures of modernity. In the context of modernity-generated pluralism, ecumenism risks being perceived more in terms of social efficiency and cultural adaptation than as an endeavor to rediscover unity in ecclesial truth, with unity being evaluated by its capacity to produce social transformation and communal cohesion. As William T. Cavanaugh notes, “David Martin has argued that Pentecostalism best prepares Latin Americans to confront and adapt to modernity” (Cavanaugh, 2004: 33).

A first major risk of European ecumenism is the theological ambiguity of its language. Recent ecumenical documents often employ terms such as “unity,” “reconciled diversity,” or “partial communion” without providing sufficient dogmatic clarification. Doru Nastașă observes that this ambiguity creates ecclesiological confusion, especially within the Orthodox context, where the unity of the Church is understood as a full and indivisible reality (Nastașă, 2023: 12). The lack of theological precision risks turning ecumenism into a vague discourse devoid of normative force.

An emblematic case of these tensions is the Synod of Crete (2016) and the way its documents were received in different local Orthodox Churches. Critical reactions highlighted concerns regarding the implicit recognition of the ecclesial character of heterodox communities and the use of language that does not clearly reflect patristic ecclesiology (Nastașă, 2023: 18). Nastașă emphasizes that the problem is not dialogue itself, but the lack of a firm distinction between confession and dialogue, between truth and ecclesial diplomacy (Nastașă, 2023: 27).

A much more radical theological critique is articulated by Saint Justin Popović, who considers modern ecumenism to be one of the manifestations of secularized “European humanism.” From this perspective, the unity of the Church is not the result of institutional agreement or doctrinal compromise, but an ontological and pneumatological reality, since “the entire life of the Church takes place in the Holy Spirit,” and any ecumenical endeavor that relativizes this truth risks departing from the very ecclesial consciousness of the Church (Popović, 2011: 45). For Popović, unity can be achieved only

in the fullness of the truth of Christ, and any form of unity constructed outside of it is illusory.

Another significant risk of European ecumenism is the functionalization of unity. In many Western contexts, ecumenism is justified by the need for social cooperation, the defense of common values, or the strengthening of Christianity's influence in the public sphere. Aurel Pavel and Ciprian Iulian Toroczcai warn that such an approach risks transforming unity into a pragmatic means subordinated to criteria of social efficiency, rather than an ecclesiological reality grounded in dogmatic truth. *"The realization of unity among Christians is, in fact, the search for the Tradition of the early Church; it is a 'vertical' union, as the living of life in the Spirit and the correct confession of its teaching, not a 'horizontal' one, at a purely human level"* (Pavel and Toroczcai, 2015: 62).

In conclusion, the tensions and risks of European ecumenism cannot be ignored or minimized. Theological ambiguity, the relativization of truth, the pressures of secularization, and the functionalization of unity constitute real challenges that call for theological discernment and fidelity to the Tradition of the Church. These risks do not invalidate ecumenism as an endeavor, but they require a critical reflection on its forms and limits, opening the way for a more responsible approach, which will be analyzed in the following chapter.

Chapter IV

Perspectives and Directions for a Responsible Ecumenism

Following the identification of the tensions and risks of European ecumenism, it becomes necessary to outline responsible theological perspectives that allow for inter-Christian dialogue without doctrinal compromise and without uncritical adaptation to the demands of secular culture. A responsible ecumenism cannot be conceived as a mere instrument of social cooperation, but must be grounded in a clear ecclesiology and in fidelity to revealed truth. As Nelson and Raith state, "in short, ecumenism and mission are closely intertwined in the history of the modern ecumenical movement" (Nelson and Raith, 2010: 24).

A first essential direction is the re-anchoring of ecumenism in the Tradition of the Church. Georges Florovsky emphasizes that Christian unity cannot be achieved through the negotiation of confessional differences: "the true path to Christian unity is not through negotiations and compromises, but through a common return to the Fathers, that is, to the experience of the undivided Church" (Florovsky, 1989: 67). This patristic orientation provides a normative criterion for ecumenical dialogue and limits the risk of dogmatic relativization in a secularized context.

At the same time, recent reflections on Nicene ecclesiology indicate that the Nicene Creed represents a common foundation for ecumenism. The volume *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism* argues that Christian unity can be articulated around the dogmatic consensus of the early Church without ignoring subsequent historical differences. The authors maintain that authentic ecumenism cannot be built on minimal compromises, but on the fundamental doctrinal consensus of the early Church, paradigmatically expressed in the Nicene Creed. This common doctrinal core offers a “theological grammar” capable of sustaining inter-Christian dialogue without denying or homogenizing later historical differences. In this sense, Nicaea is not viewed merely as a historical reference, but as a normative criterion for articulating unity in truth. “Christian unity can be articulated around the dogmatic consensus of the early Church, as expressed in the Nicene Creed, without ignoring the historical differences that later emerged” (Seitz, 2011: 41). In a secularized Europe, the appeal to the Nicene heritage enables the formulation of an ecumenism centered on truth rather than compromise.

Another important direction is the clarification of the relationship between ecumenism and mission. Van der Borght shows that the unity of the Church is not an end in itself but is inseparable from the missionary vocation of Christianity (Van der Borght, 2007: 74). In this sense, responsible ecumenism must avoid both aggressive proselytism and purely functional cooperation, orienting itself toward a common witness that respects the identity of each tradition.

A significant contribution to the reconfiguration of contemporary ecumenism is offered by pneumatological approaches. Emilio Álvarez proposes a perspective centered on the work of the Holy Spirit as the foundation of the Church’s unity. According to Álvarez, communion among Christians already exists at the pneumatological level, even if it is not yet fully expressed institutionally (Álvarez, 2016: 148). This perspective offers an important corrective to excessively bureaucratic ecumenism and emphasizes the spiritual dimension of unity.

At the same time, the experience of Romanian ecumenism highlights the necessity of contextual discernment. Octavian Bârlea shows that interconfessional dialogue in Romania has been shaped by specific historical and cultural factors, which require an approach different from Western models (Bârlea, 2010: 53). A responsible ecumenism must take these differences into account and avoid the uniform application of models foreign to the local context.

In conclusion, the perspectives for a responsible ecumenism in a secularized Europe require a synthesis between fidelity to Tradition,

openness to dialogue, and engagement with the contemporary context. Ecumenism can neither be abandoned nor absolutized. It must be practiced as an act of theological discernment, oriented toward unity in truth and toward the common witness of the Christian faith in a society marked by secularization.

Conclusions

The analysis of ecumenism in the context of European secularization has shown that Christian unity is not merely an abstract ideal, but a theological and missional necessity in a society marked by pluralism, relativism, and the marginalization of religion. European secularization has created an ambivalent framework: on the one hand, it has limited the public influence of the Churches; on the other hand, it has highlighted the fragility of a confessionally fragmented Christian witness.

Ecumenism thus emerges as an inevitable response to the crisis of Christianity's credibility in contemporary Europe. However, the analysis has also shown that ecumenism is not without risks. Theological ambiguity, the relativization of dogmatic truth, and the functionalization of unity constitute real dangers, especially within a secular context that favors cultural consensus at the expense of revealed truth (Pavel and Toroczkai, 2015: 79).

Therefore, ecumenism cannot be evaluated solely in terms of its social effectiveness, but must be judged in light of fidelity to the Tradition of the Church and ecclesial consciousness. Only a theologically grounded ecumenism can avoid turning inter-Christian dialogue into a form of uncritical adaptation to secularization.

From a theological perspective, ecumenism lies at the intersection of ecclesiology, missiology, and pneumatology. The present study has shown that the unity of the Church is an ontological reality grounded in Christ, not merely a historical or institutional project. Georges Florovsky emphasizes that the Church is one by its very nature, and that historical divisions cannot annul this reality, but rather wound it (Florovsky, 1989: 82).

The proposed theological synthesis highlights the need for a balance between two extreme tendencies: on the one hand, the absolutization of ecumenism as a universal solution to the crisis of Christianity; on the other hand, the rejection of inter-Christian dialogue in the name of confessional self-isolation. Responsible ecumenism emerges as an act of theological discernment that seeks unity in truth rather than doctrinal compromise.

Within this framework, pneumatological perspectives on ecumenism, such as that proposed by Emilio Álvarez, make a significant contribution by

emphasizing that unity is effected by the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church, even beyond visible institutional boundaries (Álvarez, 2016: 151). This approach complements, without contradicting, traditional ecclesiology, offering a dynamic vision of Christian unity.

For the contemporary European Church, ecumenism represents both a challenge and an opportunity. In a secularized society in which Christianity no longer holds a privileged position, the common witness of believers becomes essential. However, this witness cannot be built on fragile or ambiguous foundations.

At the same time, the European Church is called to assume a prophetic role within a secularized culture, without diluting its message. Ecumenism can support this mission only if it is practiced as an expression of fidelity to Christ rather than as a strategy of institutional survival.

Future directions for reflection on European ecumenism must take into account the complexity of the contemporary context. A first direction involves deepening the dialogue between patristic ecclesiology and emerging forms of pneumatological ecumenism, in order to evaluate their compatibility and limits. A second line of research concerns the relationship between ecumenism and the globalization of Christianity. Recent studies show that the dynamics of Christian unity can no longer be analyzed exclusively from a European perspective, but must be integrated into a global framework that includes experiences from Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Chow and Wood, 2016: 213).

Finally, an essential direction is the evaluation of the impact of secularization on ecumenical theological discourse. As Europe becomes increasingly pluralistic, the risk of excessive adaptation of theological language grows. Future research must examine how ecumenism can remain faithful to revealed truth while offering an intelligible and relevant response to contemporary society.

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Populism in Power? Romania 2035: Scenario Analysis of Coalition Governance, Minority Rights, and European Values

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Abstract

Leaving behind the last decades of intensive European integration, Romania currently faces many challenges stemming from populist nationalist movements. Movements like these have the capacity to mobilise civil society in a way that brings forth anti-EU sentiment. Research indicates that in some regions of Europe, there is a regression with respect to democracy, the rule of law, and the rights of minorities. This present study concerning the subject of populism in 2026 is structured on three forward-looking scenarios. The time horizon sought under this analysis is by the year 2035. The methodological design is based on the following distinct scenarios: a radical-right populist party enters government through a coalition with a populist presidential candidate. The analysis also includes important junctures between electoral processes, political parties' alliances within the process of coalition bargaining, as well as media narrative/media control implications. The scope of this exploration is to examine and debate upon far-right political shifts that come after major fiscal/judiciary policy changes that affect reform capacity and institutional trust. The three scenarios' outcomes are meant to show how early-warning indicators for democratic backsliding can be considered for Romanian policy makers alongside civil society and their EU partners.

Keywords

Romania, populism, scenario analysis, minority rights, rule of law, democratic backsliding.

1. Introduction

Romania maintains a competitive multiparty democracy with regular transfers of power. However, civil liberties face increasing pressure from long-established political interests resisting anti-corruption efforts (Freedom House, 2025). Romania has three simultaneous crises to consider for the period following the mid-2020s. First, the political environment is shaped by a long disturbance of distrust in most parties and institutions. Second, a polarised society and media that often

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rewards anti-establishment mobilisers. Third, intensifying distributional conflict under fiscal tightening (that was meant to lower the persistently high budget deficit), which lowers its overall capacity for long-term reform or focus on other systemic issues. The period surrounding the 2024 electoral cycle accelerated these trends (Całus, 2024a). According to Antonia Colibășanu (2025), geopolitical analyst at the Elcano Royal Institute, Romania's 2025 presidential elections reflect a shift toward populist nationalism combined with institutional distrust (with further implications for democratic stability). Parliamentary elections in December 2024 ended in surprising results for both the voter base and candidates. Radical and Eurosceptic-right groups achieved higher vote counts than was ever projected. The presidential race was then annulled after the Constitutional Court cited serious irregularities. They were linked to suspect digital campaigning practices and opaque financing from Russian and other ill-intended sources. Competent authorities failed to notice these irregularities or intervene before the results of the first round of elections, thus creating a wave of suspicion and mistrust in their capabilities and intentions. In the months that followed, Romania's climate was increasingly shaped by disputes. This was happening while the international press and state allies were watching with concern. Critics said the decision to annul was over the meaning of democratic legitimacy and the boundaries of acceptable contestation (Całus, 2024b). The critics included representatives of the US administration and the MAGA movement (Całus, 2025a). By June 2025, a pro-European governing coalition was installed with a large parliamentary majority. They were tasked with restoring institutional credibility by addressing deteriorating public finances (as well as attempting to increase trust in state representatives). Ilie Bolojan served as interim (acting) president after Klaus Iohannis resigned in February 2025 (as he faced an impeachment vote). He was subsequently nominated and confirmed as prime minister in June 2025 (Plate, 2025).

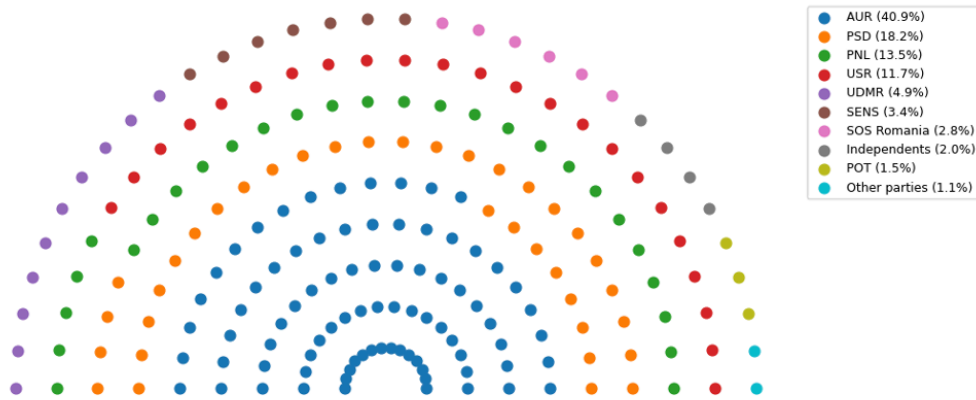
Yet, the same new coalition faced a fundamental dilemma: many of the required fiscal measures expected were unpopular, therefore risked feeding the very opposition forces it sought to contain (as the far-right discourse is based on previous failures of governance). An OSW assessment (Centre for Eastern Studies) for the new cabinet emphasised the scale of the economic adjustment agenda (including tax increases and expenditure restraint), in a context of weak growth and high deficits. Political stability, in other words, reached a compromise through intensively negotiated coalition cohesion, but governance performance depended on the possibility of real reform in these detrimental circumstances. The delivery of these reforms had to be made under conditions of low societal patience (Całus, 2025c). Romanians were

expecting politicians to make amends to compensate for the election. Unfortunately, the coalition efforts did not manage to raise the feeling of trust to promising levels for pro-European parties, which currently have the majority. Polling data from June 2025 shows that, in their sample, approximately 74% of respondents distrust the state's capacity for efficient revenue allocation (MKOR, Romania's Fiscal Radiography, 2025). This finding is consistent with broader trends in institutional trust documented across post-communist Europe (MKOR, 2025; Hooghe and Triga, 2022: 367-382).

This brings the conversation towards the problems regarding the Romanian judicial system. Expert Forum's think tank analysis of Romania's justice system identifies a persistent issue of judicial independence and transparency (Expert Forum, 2025). They argue that recent justice laws were adopted through non-transparent procedures and have therefore concentrated power. This inevitably weakened public trust in the judiciary. It is a trend with significant implications for the rule of law and democratic resilience (Expert Forum, 2025). The ascension of the party Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) is central to the study's argument. Scholarly work links AUR's rapid observable expansion to a combination of anti-system grievances. This includes organisational entrepreneurship and ideological resonance with national-conservative and sovereigntist frames (Pop-Eleches, 2025). Empirical studies show how the pandemic period acted as a background for populist-nationalist mobilisation. In Romania, general skepticism stemming from pandemic mismanagement was never addressed by the ruling parties' politicians accordingly (Armeanu, 2025: 582-598; Burean and Pálffy, 2024: 82-123).

In Romania, social media campaigning and influencer networks reshape electoral competitions, particularly when institutional trust is already deemed fragile (Burean and Pálffy, 2024). At the same time, research on the Romanian diaspora behavior demonstrates that radical right support can be amplified abroad (Gherghina and Giugal, 2025). This happens with voting patterns structured by the institutional context of host countries rather than by simple economic hardship explanations (Armeanu, 2025: 582-598).

Figure 1: Romania, voting intention for parliamentary elections (INSCOP Research, January 2026).



(Source: author's visualisation based on INSCOP Barometer-data)

These dynamics matter for minority rights and for Romania's relationship to the normative commitments often condensed under the label of "European values" (European Union, 2012b: Article 2). The concept refers not only to constitutional liberalism and democratic competition, but also to equality and non-discrimination, including protections for ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities (European Union, 2012a, Article 21). In Romania, debates over national identity have recurrently intersected with questions concerning the Hungarian minority, Roma inclusion, and the position of newer migrant communities (Ukrainian refugees and economic migrants from Asia and the Middle East). On the day of its adoption, Romania was one of the first nations to join the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (Council of Europe, 1995). The EU's focus on inclusivity should aim to go beyond multiculturalism, promoting a deeper level of integration that fosters interculturality through open dialogue between different cultural communities (Brie, 2025: 7-14). Social resilience, particularly through cultural diplomacy at EU borders and within, has been critical for fostering minority inclusion in Romania. Cross-border collaboration is seen as a method to ensure minority protections and governance reforms (Stoica, 2025: 33-43).

However, according to Christina Harward at the Institute for the Study of War, the May 2025 far-right first-round win in Romania's presidential election could "advance Kremlin objectives". These were promoting narratives and policies that diminish Romanian support for Ukraine and mirror pro-Moscow discourses to minorities (Harward, 2025). The increased presence of populist nationalism within governing coalitions may constrain the effective representation of minorities. This is not necessarily through formal exclusion, but through the reshaping of institutional practices as well as political

incentives that weaken minority inclusion mechanisms (Protsyk, Matichescu, and Chatre, 2008). In such settings, even when populists do not command a majority, their entry into coalition bargaining can shift policy agendas, rhetorical boundaries, and enforcement patterns (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, ECRI, 2025).

The following projection uses scenario analysis (Junio and Mahnken, 2013: 374-395) to clarify which plausible pathways exist, through which Romania could reach 2035 under a stress-tested political assumption: a future in which a populist actor attains executive influence through coalition participation and the presidency (UK Government Office for Science, 2024). The question is: under what conditions would coalition-based populist power translate into moderation, incremental erosion, or deeper institutional transformation, and what would each pathway mean for minority protections and Romania's anchoring in EU norms (European Commission, 2024b)?

This paper addresses a main topic in the political economy of backsliding: how do coalition constraints interact with EU conditionality to shape minority rights trajectories when populist actors enter government (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2020: 814-833)? This scenario-based approach generates plausible pathways found in Romania's specific institutional configuration. Scenarios were assessed for plausibility using three criteria: (1) institutional consistency; adherence to Romania's constitutional framework and EU legal constraints; (2) behavioral realism; alignment with documented realities of coalition behavior in CEE democracies; and (3) historical precedent - analogies to trajectories in comparable cases (Hungary 2010-2024, Poland 2015-2023). Scenarios that violated constitutional "hard constraints" (e.g., hypothetical exit from EU or NATO) were excluded as implausible within the 2035 frame.

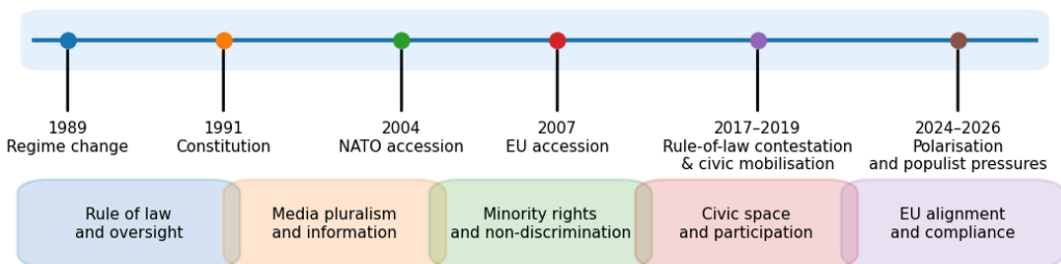
2. Concepts and Normative Framework

Populism is commonly understood as a "thin-centered ideology" that places a morally pure "people" against a corrupt "elite". They claim that politics should express the general will. In European politics, populism often becomes politically salient when it fuses with a host ideology. This is true for nativism and authoritarian preferences, producing what Mudde describes as the populist radical right. This fusion links anti-elite rhetoric to exclusionary identity claims, making minorities and "outsiders" convenient targets of blame in periods of social stress (Mudde, 2004: 541-563). The complex narratives of ethno-political identity in Eastern Europe often lead historically to friction between nationalism and European integration, as highlighted by Vintilă (2025: 141-158).

From a democratic-theory perspective, the distinctive risk posed by populists in power moves along polarised speech. We will have a governing logic that treats opposition and independent institutions as illegitimate obstacles. Müller argues that populists' anti-pluralism can become operationalised through practices such as politicising oversight bodies, narrowing the space for civic contestation, and rewriting informal norms of restraint. These moves often occur gradually, through ordinary legal instruments. They are therefore easily misread as routine politics until cumulative effects become visible (Müller, 2016, p. 41-73). Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) identify three key behavioral warnings of rejection of democratic rules: denial of opponents' legitimacy, toleration of violence, and curtailment of civil liberties that can diagnose democratic erosion even within legal frameworks.

EU membership places Romania within overlapping normative frameworks: Treaty obligations (TEU, Article 2), fundamental rights protections (Charter Article 21), and minority-specific instruments (Council of Europe Framework Convention). It is expressed in the EU's constitutional architecture and in Council of Europe instruments to which Romania is bound by membership. Article 2 (European Union, 2012b, Article 2) of the Treaty on European Union anchors the purpose of the Union in human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. In this paper, the focus falls on the rights of persons belonging to minorities. The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights prohibits discrimination. This includes grounds of all ethnic origin, religion, language, political opinion, or membership of a national minority (European Union, 2012a: Article 21). Parallel commitments exist in the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. The convention establishes standards for: equality, cultural expression, and participation (Council of Europe, 1995). As an ex-communist country, Romania has come a long way in implementing minority rights policy (Ghimisi, 2020: 151-156), as well as further alignment with all EU laws and regulations.

Figure 2: Romania's gradual alignment with EU-relevant governance domains (conceptual milestones).



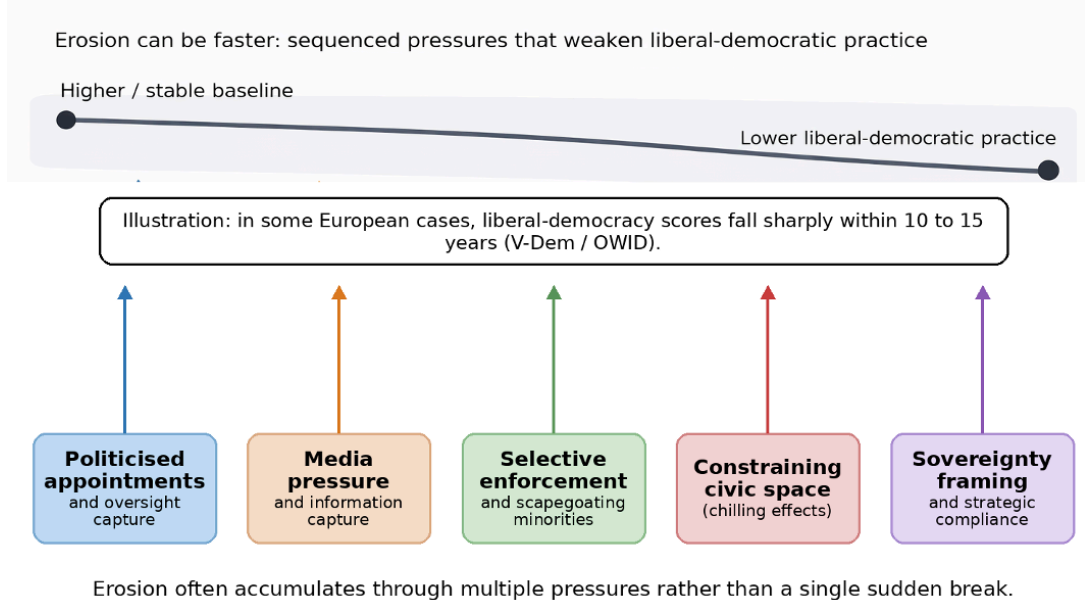
Interpretation: alignment is usually gradual. Reforms, capacity-building and learning accumulate over many years.

(Source: author's compilation based on the reforms timeline)

The figure above illustrates Romania's long-term, incremental alignment with European Union governance norms across key domains following the 1989 regime change. Rather than a linear or uniform process, alignment is shown as cumulative and uneven, shaped by constitutional reforms, accession processes (NATO in 2004; EU in 2007), and subsequent phases of consolidation and contestation. The lower band highlights governance area-rule of law, media pluralism, minority rights, civic space, and EU compliance, which developed over time through institutional reform, capacity-building, and social learning. The 2017/2019 period shows that Europeanisation is not irreversible and may involve periods of political conflict and public resistance before re-stabilisation.

The common norms of the EU are enforced by layered mechanisms. The Rule of Law Report is issued each year to monitor three specific areas: justice, anti-corruption frameworks, and media freedom. The use of conditionality in the budget and infringement proceedings can impose a financial cost over time for continued rule-of-law backsliding (European Commission, 2024a). At the level of the Council of Europe, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance is among the monitoring bodies that determine the evolving nature of discrimination and analyze the effectiveness of anti-racism policies (ECRI, 2025). The combination of these mechanisms determines the negotiating environment for Romanian governments, including coalition governments (European Union, 2020).

Figure 3: Factors Contributing to the Erosion of Liberal-Democratic Practices in Europe.



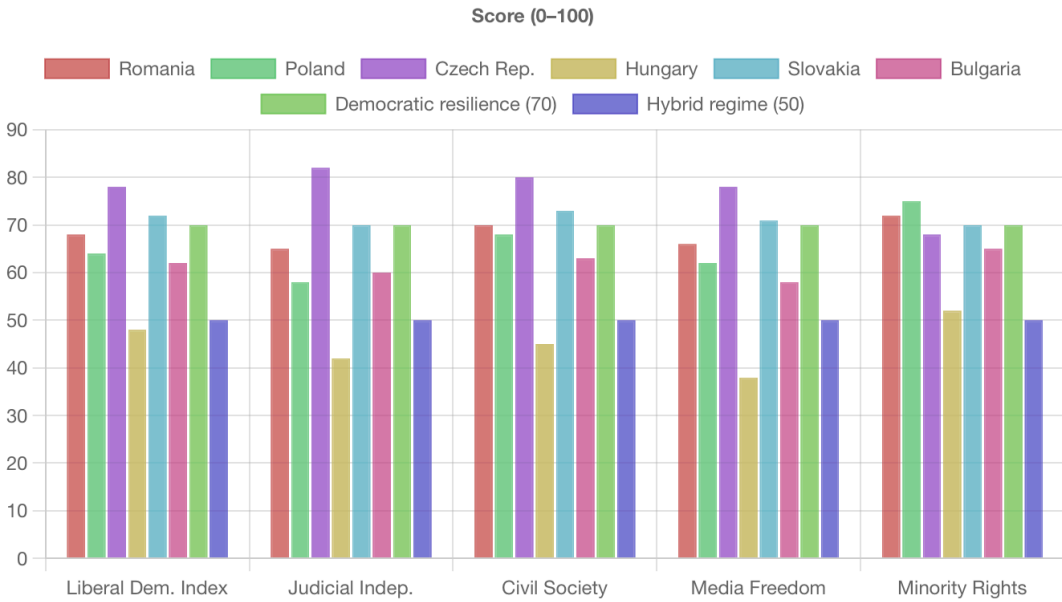
(Source: author's own elaboration based on Democracy Index, LDI)

The above is a synthesis of the principal structural factors that comparative research identifies as driving the erosion of liberal-democratic norms across European polities. Democracy Index (LDI), also shown on Our World in Data, is an illustrative benchmark. The LDI is a 0-1 index (higher = more liberal-democratic) summarizing expert-coded assessments of: free and fair elections and voting rights, freedoms of association and expression, civil liberties, and constraints on the executive (Coppedge et al., 2024). During the period from 2017 to 2019, Romania experienced a “critical juncture” in which there was an open struggle over the direction of post-accession institutional trends. Specifically, the disturbance over the rule of law took the form of an ongoing politicised battle for the independence of the judiciary and the operational capacity of anticorruption institutions. This includes the government’s use of its parliamentary majority by the PSD-led governing coalition to change substantive criminal laws and procedures. They were criticised for attempting to reconfigure the authority of prosecutors (specifically, regarding the role of the National Anticorruption Directorate, DNA) and gain additional political influence over key judicial mechanisms. The most visible of these initiatives, alongside issues with the European Union through its oversight instruments (especially the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism, CVM), were the continuation of the controversy regarding Emergency Ordinance OUG 13/2017 and subsequent changes to the justice system. In this sense, these initiatives have resulted in significant external criticisms from legal and institutional entities regarding their impact on judicial independence and the constraints on executive power (Venice Commission, 2019). There was an unprecedented level of civic mobilization during this period, with very large sustained numbers of demonstrators (among the largest since 1989) and large engagement of urban constituencies, civil society, and the diaspora (Crăciun, 2017; Mitu et al., 2017), and their explicit expression of support (V-Dem Institute) through the frame of European and rule-of-law norms (constitutionalism, anticorruption, and Romania’s place in Europe). The simultaneous events surrounding institutional review and social protest reveal two important aspects of how European integration occurs (European Parliament, 2025). Firstly, it indicates that European integration is not a direct path or automatic process of success. Secondly, the process of aligning institutions may create expectations of how institutions are to behave which may lead to a more significant political conflict if institutions are perceived by government actors to veer off course. In addition, while there are instances of strong democratic resilience, institutions still possess actual vulnerabilities. Therefore, we should call this “Contestation of the Rule of Law and the Mobilisation of Civics” rather than classify this experience as only-backsliding.

The use of ethnopopulism is one way to undermine liberal democracy by using advanced techniques to build a coalition and gain power. In part, this effort is legitimised and supported through the use of a “handbook” that contains both majoritarian and ethnopopulist principles to support one another (Vachudova, 2020: 318-340). Ethnopopulists regularly change the meaning of truth and the definition of the enemies and friends of “the People.” Moreover, ethnopopulists often use violence through the use of racial stereotypes of immigrants, and the use of the public’s fear of globalisation to use state-sponsored economic systems that are neo-liberal in nature and are used against the interests of the working class. In addition, the establishment of liberal institutions has historically been met with the sudden emergence of democratic regression in Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic (Vachudova, 2020: 318-340).

Populist entry into coalitions creates their own agenda-setting opportunities (Strøm and Müller, 1999:1-35). This can reshape policy priorities and enforcement discretion aligned with EU conditionality (budgetary, reputational, legal). This context raises the cost of overt rights violations, channeling backsliding toward less visible administrative mechanisms (Strøm and Müller, 1999: 1-35). Coalition participation can moderate radical actors through portfolio allocation and inter-party vetoes. Conversely, coalition inclusion can normalise exclusionary narratives (Caľus, 2025c), redirect administrative attention (incentivise mainstream partners to adopt harder identity frames to prevent electoral loss). In Romania’s case, where the Hungarian minority (Council of Europe, 1995) has been politically represented through UDMR participation in government, coalition dynamics are relevant for understanding how minority rights are translated from legal commitments into daily governance practice. The entry of populist parties into coalition government creates distinctive pathways. Albertazzi and McDonnell (2015) identify three of these patterns: (1) policy dilution through compromise, (2) organizational mainstreaming, and (3) selective radicalization on identity issues while moderating on economics. Evidence from European cases found in the literature suggests coalition participation can either ‘tame’ populists through responsibility or normalize their positions through legitimation, the mechanism at stake in distinguishing Romania’s scenario pathways.

Figure 4: Romania in Comparative CEE Context: Governance Indicators (2024-2025).



(Source: author's own comparative chart based on Democracy Index, LDI)

Romania's Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) experienced significant fluctuations between 2016 and 2023. Romania occupies a middle position, vulnerable, yet not backsliding like Hungary. It initially declined sharply from 0.62 (2016) to 0.49 (2018) during a rule-of-law crisis marked by sustained strains on judicial independence and media freedom. Following a change of government in late 2019, the index showed a strong recovery to 0.66 (2020). However, it fell again to approximately 0.50 (2023) amid renewed democratic backsliding, growing political instability, as well as rising populist mobilisation. This pattern doesn't reflect a consistent decline, like what we saw in Hungary (V-Dem considers Hungary to be an "electoral autocracy"), nor a stable consolidation as in the Czech Republic. Instead, it represents a more cyclical back-and-forth, where Romania's democracy faces moments of contestation as well as fragility. In the present chart, the threshold of 50 represents what Carothers (2002: 5-21) identifies as the "gray zone". Regimes that combine autocratic features with democratic ones. These regimes maintain formal democratic institutions, such as elections, parliaments, and constitutions, but often restrict media freedom, weaken judicial independence, and constrain civic space. Carothers argued that most transitional countries do not fully conform to either democratic or authoritarian models. Instead, it exists in a persistent gray zone. Within this zone, regimes engage in regular elections while simultaneously maintaining practices that limit genuine political competition and civic freedoms.

3. Methodology, time Horizon, and Baseline Conditions

Junio and Mahnken (2013) explain that scenarios help explore how combinations of drivers produce qualitatively different futures (forcing explicit choices about assumptions, causal mechanisms, and early warning indicators). Public-sector foresight guidance similarly emphasises that scenarios are useful when they are anchored in observable trends but deliberately vary key uncertainties. Thus, enabling decision-makers to stress-test strategies across futures (UK Government Office for Science, 2024; Daniel and Ditych, 2024; ACAPS, 2022).

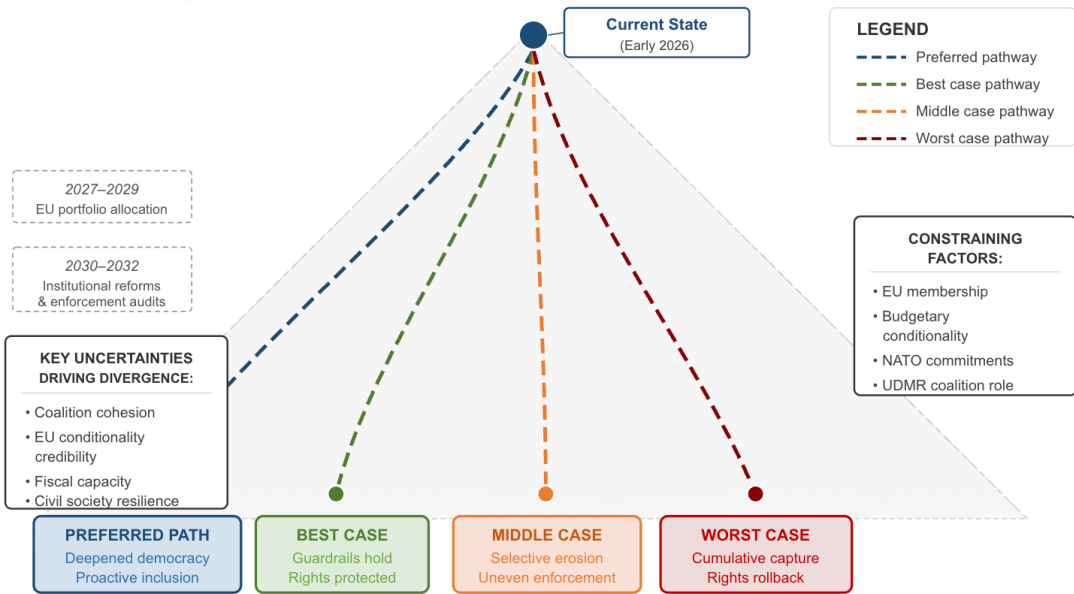
Table 1: Scenario Construction Framework.

Key Driver	Preferred Path	Best Case	Middle Case	Worst Case	Observable Indicators
Coalition Cohesion	Strong discipline, clear EU commitment, no AUR normalization	Moderate tension, sustained cooperation, cordon sanitaire maintained	Periodic crises, tactical AUR inclusion in local/regional coalitions	Breakdown, AUR permanent national coalition partner	Coalition agreement content; mid-term renegotiations; parliamentary voting discipline; ministerial stability
EU Conditionality Credibility	Consistent enforcement, budget leverage actively used, reforms accelerate	Selective enforcement, threats credible, mostly compliant behavior	Threatened but not activated, declining credibility, partial compliance	Not credible, budget released despite violations, enforcement collapsed	European Commission decisions; Council voting patterns; timing of CVM/RoL reviews; budget suspension threats vs. actions
Fiscal Capacity	Deficit reduced below 3%, sustainable reform momentum, NRRP fully absorbed	Deficit stabilized at 3-4%, limited reform space, partial NRRP implementation	Deficit persistent at 4-5%, reform stalled, NRRP renegotiated downward	Deficit exceeds 5%, sanctions triggered, NRRP suspended or terminated	Eurostat deficit/debt data; NRRP milestone completion rates; sovereign bond spreads; credit rating changes
Civil Society Resilience	Active monitoring, mass mobilization capacity, sustained watchdog effectiveness	Sustained watchdog activity, episodic mobilization, independent funding maintained	Weakened but present, reduced funding, selective intimidation tolerated	Marginalized, intimidation systematic, foreign funding criminalized	Protest frequency and scale; NGO operating environment; civic organization funding levels; media access for CSOs
Information Ecosystem	Media independence protected, fact-checking robust, diverse ownership	Mixed ownership, some partisan capture, pluralism mostly preserved	Increasing concentration, reduced plurality, rising disinformation	State/oligarch control, propaganda dominance, opposition media eliminated	Media freedom indices (RSF, FH); ownership concentration data; disinformation reach metrics; journalist harassment incidents

4. Romania 2035: Three Scenarios

The scenarios below share the same point of departure: a Romania in which the political centre is under pressure from a radical right opposition that has already demonstrated electoral competitiveness, and in which fiscal constraints continue to restrict distributive politics. Each scenario differs in how coalition bargaining, EU conditionality, and institutional veto points interact with mobilisation strategies around identity and “sovereignty”. The focal outcomes are the quality of democratic pluralism, the protection of minority rights, and Romania’s alignment with EU norms by 2035.

Figure 5: Cone of plausibility (futures cone) for Romania to 2035.



Range of Future Possibilities for Democratic Quality & Minority Rights

(Source: author’s illustration based on futures cone methodology)

The figure visualizes a widening range of future pathways from today’s conditions, distinguishing between probable, plausible, and possible trajectories, and highlighting a preferred trajectory point as a normative target (Dhami, Wicke, and Önkäl, 2022). The 'preferred' designation reflects a normative position, aligned with the EU's stated democratic commitments, and it is not part of a prediction pathway. The democratic system in Eastern Europe shows signs of decline at many levels. Romania's current political developments make it susceptible to negative consequences. Common use of emergency ordinances permits the government to avoid public debate, which in the past decade brought heavy criticism from the population (Apostolache, 2019).

The negative routes of this situation proceed through three main actions, which include the increased control of public media by political forces and the establishment of administrative pressure to restrict independent regulatory bodies. Sensationalism and populism are criticized for having increasingly “infiltrated” established media outlets, contributing to the growing suspicion of influence groups attempting to spread false or misleading narratives. For example, in the case of “România TV” news channel with high national viewership, the National Audiovisual Council (CNA) imposed in February 2026 the maximum fine for broadcasting sensationalist headlines that mischaracterized peaceful protests for justice reform (Consiliul Național al Audiovizualului-CNA, 2026)

The Romanian political establishment uses minority rights in their discourse positively or negatively as a platform for their symbolic political activities. They display their position on the matter through their public statements and their legislative initiatives. Scapegoating becomes more intense during election periods and fiscal cutbacks because enforcement agencies stop investigating hate crimes, anti-discrimination cases, and desegregation mandates. One example that made international headlines: In August 2025, Dan Tănasă, a deputy leader of the far-right party AUR, posted on his social media. He was urging Romanians to “refuse deliveries if they are not made by a Romanian” and to “stop encouraging the import of unskilled workers from Asia and Africa.” A few days later, a Nepalese food courier in Bucharest was punched in the face and told to “go back to your country” by an assailant supportive of these views (Digi24, Romanian News Outlet, 2025). This incident started a national debate about rising xenophobia and AUR’s racist speech.

The national government uses Roma communities as a rhetorical subject of protection or symbolic beneficiaries, while local authorities cut off their access to essential services. This issue becomes a main topic of discussion because far-right and populist groups restrict minority rights according to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2023).

Figure 6: Scenario Split Timeline: Elections, Coalition Formation, and EU Leverage.

Critical Junctures Timeline: Romania 2026–2035

Part 1: Divergence Phase (2026–2030) — Where scenarios split					
2026	2027	2028	2029	2030	Key Variable
BASELINE	JUNCTURE 1: Presidential Election	JUNCTURE 2: Coalition Reshuffling	Mid-term adjustment	JUNCTURE 3: Parliamentary Election	
Pro-EU coalition formed (June 2025). Fiscal consolidation. Iohannis resigns; Bolojan interim president. AUR at ~21% polling.	Populist president elected? Coalition re-negotiation. First budget under new govt. → Portfolio allocation decision.	Mid-term govt crisis. AUR enters coalition OR remains opposition. First EU RoL Report. → Institutional appointment cycle begins.	Policy implementation. EU portfolio allocation. Public opinion shifts.	Radical right gains or losses? Coalition stability test. EU conditionality triggered? → Trajectory clearer.	
Current state	CRITICAL DIVERGENCE	CRITICAL DIVERGENCE		CRITICAL DIVERGENCE	

Scenario pathways at each juncture:

BEST CASE	Constrained portfolios	Mainstream veto holds	AUR remains opposition	Populist losses	<i>Coalition cohesion; EU credibility</i>
MIDDLE CASE	Symbolic concessions	Populist president elected	AUR enters coalition	Populist stable	<i>Fiscal capacity; EU leverage</i>
WORST CASE	Presidential alignment w/ AUR	Justice capture begins	Institutional appointments begin	Rights rollback starts	<i>Civil society resilience</i>

(Source: author’s illustration for Scenario Split Timeline)

The figure illustrates a timeline of critical junctures for Romania from 2026 to 2035, focusing on divergence points influenced by coalition decisions and EU responses. It includes key events like elections, coalition reshuffling, and institutional changes, with three scenarios (best, middle, and worst case) that describe potential political outcomes. Each scenario is structured around three causal stages: (1) Coalition formation & portfolio allocation (2027-2029), (2) Institutional adaptation & enforcement shifts (2029-2032), and (3) Consolidated governance pattern & minority rights outcomes (2032-2035). The divergence points are coalition cohesion and EU leverage credibility.

Figure 7: Romania 2030-2035: Democratic Consolidation Dynamics and Scenario Endpoints (Pluralism, Grey-Zone, or Illiberal Consolidation).

CONSOLIDATION PHASE (2030–2032)					
Institutional changes accumulate · Minority rights enforcement patterns set · EU leverage effectiveness visible · Path despite key stressors					
2030–2031	2032	2033	2034	2035	ENDPOINT
Post-election settlement	Reforms & enforcement audits	Trajectory consolidating	Pattern entrenched	Final outcome	
Institutional changes accumulate. Minority rights enforcement patterns set. EU leverage effectiveness visible.	Reform audits by EU. Judicial independence assessed. Civil society space evaluated.	Path dependencies solidify. Reversals become harder. International perception crystallises.	Democratic quality trajectory clear. Rights & values status established.	Scenarios reach final form. Rights & values status clear.	
How each scenario consolidates:					
BEST CASE	Rights protected	EU reforms reinforced	Civic space expanded	Institutions resilient	PLURALISM SUSTAINED
MIDDLE CASE	Selective erosion	Uneven enforcement	Formal compliance only	Grey-zone patterns	GREY-ZONE DEMOCRACY
WORST CASE	Rights rollback	Judiciary captured	Media & civic space constrained	EU leverage exhausted	ILLIBERAL CONSOLIDATION
ENDPOINT: SCENARIO OUTCOMES (2035)					
BEST: Pluralism sustained		MIDDLE: Grey-zone democracy		WORST: Illiberal consolidation	
Minority rights protected. Democratic guardrails hold. Proactive EU compliance.		Selective erosion persists. Uneven enforcement. Formal but not substantive compliance.		Cumulative capture complete. Rights rolled back. Illiberal governance entrenched.	
→ Rights & values status clear by 2035					
<i>KEY INSIGHT: Scenarios diverge at critical junctures (2027, 2028, 2030) based on coalition bargaining outcomes and EU response credibility. Early decisions (portfolio allocation, judicial appointments) have cumulative effects that become harder to reverse over time.</i>					

(Source: author’s illustration for Democratic Consolidation Dynamics and Scenario Endpoints)

The following three scenarios all assume a coalition government including AUR and a populist president elected in 2026. They differ in the degree of ideological commitment, institutional resistance, and EU response. This analysis does not include European Union “Ro-exit” scenarios, which, for this study, are considered implausible given Romania's economic integration and security dependencies.

Figure 8: Scenario pathways for populism in power and democratic outcomes in Romania.

Scenario 1: Best Case		Scenario 2: Middle Case		Scenario 3: Worst Case	
<i>Democratic Resilience and Managed Pluralism</i>		<i>Competitive Illiberal Drift</i>		<i>Accelerated Illiberal Consolidation</i>	
Step	Development	Step	Development	Step	Development
1	Populists enter coalition with limited leverage	2	Selective institutional pressure via administrative discretion	3	Populist presidency with legislative predominance
2	Institutional checks remain functional	3	Media polarisation and gradual civic chilling	4	Incremental judicial and oversight capture
3	EU conditionality reinforces guardrails	4	Minority rights politicised and uneven in practice	5	Intensified information control and civil society pressure
4	Stabilisation and policy moderation	5	EU friction and strategic compliance	6	Structural democratic backsliding
<i>Populism is absorbed by institutional constraints producing limited disruption and gradual adaptation.</i>		<i>Democratic structures persist formally, while practices shift gradually toward illiberal governance.</i>		<i>A sequence of legal and institutional capture leads to entrenched illiberal governance within one decade.</i>	

(Source: author’s illustration for scenario pathways)

4.1. Best case: Guardrails and negotiated moderation

This scenario works under the assumption that democracies have proven more resilient to populism than feared (Weyland, 2021). The early 2030s will witness a populist party entering government as a coalition junior partner after it successfully uses public frustration with budget cuts and elite negotiations. A populist president uses sovereigntist themes for his campaign, but coalition members stop him from executing his plans. The mainstream partners maintain control over important economic and justice positions, while the coalition agreement requires policy execution to follow EU funding schedule requirements. The governing system operates through exchange: radical groups receive symbolic concessions for their public statements, but all changes to judicial systems and governmental monitoring organizations and constitutional frameworks are forbidden by partners who want to maintain market trust and avoid EU sanctions (Regulation EU- Euratom 2020/2092, 2020).

The protection of minority rights exists in formal terms, but enforcement agencies maintain their rights to operate independently. The UDMR coalition presence establishes a permanent veto power against any exclusionary policies (Protsyk, Maticescu, and Chatre, 2008) because EU-funded programs (e.g., Roma inclusion, Hungarian-language education) serve the material interests of coalition partners who need structural funds. The Hungarian minority continues to be represented through coalition bargaining, and policies focus on administrative delivery rather than symbolic conflict (Council of Europe, 1995). The coalition group maintains

its material benefits from EU-funded programs, which support Roma inclusion while the programs operate through targeted funding.

External monitoring reinforces these guardrails. Romanian elites consider the annual Rule of Law cycle and Council of Europe assessments to be essential for establishing their strategic reputation which exists because European Union resource access determines their ability to build infrastructure and provide social services (European Commission, Rule of Law Report, 2024a). The information ecosystem remains contentious yet counter-mobilisation and regulation gradually decrease the effectiveness of coordinated manipulation. Influencer networks and digital insurgency continue to shape campaigns but civil society and independent media develop stronger skills for quick fact-checking and for creating trustworthy explanations of complex policy trade-offs. The populist president develops a governance approach which uses performance-based conflicts to establish his agenda as standard practice throughout his term. The result is a Romania in 2035 that is “noisier” and more polarised but still broadly compatible with European rights commitments and coalition-based democratic pluralism.

4.2. Middle case: Managed erosion and selective enforcement

The populist movement achieves better coalition strength, which enables it to demand control over internal matters, educational systems, and certain parts of media policy (Müller, 2016, p. 41-73). Mainstream partners, fearing electoral collapse, accept "symbolic sovereignty" policies to obtain stability. The interior ministries grant portfolio control rights, which permit officials to enforce regulations against NGOs through increased audits and postponement of anti-discrimination decisions. This happens while the education ministry redefines curricula content by creating a new focus on national identity and alternative minority history teaching materials.

The president's office, together with radical ministers create a narrative that depicts minorities and foreign influence as threats to national rejuvenation (Calus, 2025b). Government agencies use administrative discretion to implement policy changes that follow constitutional checks through changes in funding priorities and increased inspections of specific NGOs. Local authorities receive informal government protection signals about which groups are protected (Kyriacou and Trivín, 2025). Protections for minorities exist through separate geographic areas and different administrative systems. Hungarian minority institutions encounter ongoing battles about decentralization (Protsyk et al., 2008), while Roma communities face increasing discriminatory police practices because local authorities operate under the belief that they can choose when to enforce laws (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023).

Some rights exist in the form of being “on the paper only”. Different areas implement rights protection according to their existing governance system, which depends on the political orientation of their prefects and inspectorates. Hungarian minority institutions encounter more frequent politically charged conflicts about their language rights and their right to operate independently. The Roma communities begin to observe a growing acceptance of police/other authorities’ discriminatory practices, together with their limited efforts to achieve social integration. The government exercises caution when it comes to actual legal violations because it increasingly uses legal procedures as a means to postpone implementation and weaken its execution. ECRI monitoring identifies persistent difficulties that exist in preventing discrimination and in controlling public statements. The Rule of Law Report identifies growing pressure on media pluralism and on checks and balances. The latest developments do not result in immediate regime transformation because they restrict equal citizenship rights (ECRI, 2025), which now exist as the major democratic safeguard in modern societies. EU leverage operates, but it becomes a bargaining tool rather than a firm constraint.

Romanian leaders learn to deliver just enough compliance to avoid major financial penalties while domestically presenting EU criticism as proof of “standing up for Romania”. Political communication reframes conditionality as external coercion, which serves to strengthen the radical right's assertion that democratic legitimacy originates solely from national elections. The country will occupy a grey area by 2035 because it will remain within the EU legal framework while facing increased political oppression against minorities and diminished European value dedication (European Union, 2012b: Article 2).

4.3 Worst case: Cumulative capture and rights rollback by stealth

The worst case arises from incremental legal changes that lead to complete control of institutions through institutional capture, according to Kyriacou and Trivín (2025). The process of reforming appointment rules for anti-corruption agencies and Constitutional Court procedures, together with media oversight bodies, develops through multiple reforms. The evidence from Hungary between 2010 and 2020 shows that ordinary legislative processes enable these developments without needing constitutional changes, according to Kelemen in "The European Union's Authoritarian Equilibrium" (2020: 481-499). The radical right presses its electoral success while mainstream parties collapse to create a coalition that allows populists to control critical government positions with ongoing presidential backing. Coalition partners use concessions to explain their need to protect against early elections.

The Hague Journal on the Rule of Law shows that gradual legal changes create new appointment procedures for oversight bodies while they transform public media management systems and create political biases in police enforcement activities. The research about Central and Eastern Europe shows that legal incrementalism can lead to institutional changes that allow executive power to increase when institutions have existing executive control (Kyriacou and Trivín, 2025). The radical right's principal agenda-setter, a role currently occupied by figures such as AUR leader George Simion becomes the central agenda setter for “sovereigntist renewal”, while the S.O.S. Romania milieu associated with Diana Șoșoacă continues to push boundary-breaking rhetoric that normalises exclusion. Political entrepreneurs linked to Călin Georgescu’s earlier campaign supporters (European Court of Human Rights, 2025) remain active as mobilisers and litigants. They contribute to the efforts of sustaining narratives that delegitimise courts and electoral administrators. The state starts handling this ecosystem through partisan methods (to advance the interests of a specific political party or faction over others). This leads to improper investigations and regulatory actions into other political voices. The government establishes its position through enforcement actions against journalists and the media.

The state’s response to this ecosystem becomes increasingly partisan: investigations and regulatory interventions are deployed asymmetrically, and independent watchdogs face budgetary and procedural harassment. The combination of policy reversal and intimidation methods leads to the deterioration of minority rights. The government uses typical legislative methods to limit minority organizations and civil society groups that work against discrimination instead of officially ending their European Union obligations.

The administrative barriers for funding cultural activities and providing education in minority languages have become more difficult to manage. Public figures receive greater acceptance to express hate speech, while Roma communities face increasing security measures. International monitoring detects ongoing patterns of discrimination, yet domestic enforcement bodies are becoming more political or facing resource shortages (ECRI, 2025). The anti-discrimination agencies experience budget reductions and staff members face political pressure, while hate speech prosecution numbers decrease and desegregation processes face administrative hold-ups. The CEE states that ECRI monitors face backsliding problems, which match these patterns. EU responses become sharper but also more contested. The government depends on EU funding, which exposes it to EU budget conditions, yet political leaders try to present budget limits as foreign punishment, which strengthens their sovereigntist position.

New EU-level legal protections for media and for public participation create tools for resistance. However, domestic implementation is delayed and selectively enforced (European Union, Regulation 2024/1083, 2024b). By 2035, Romania will remain formally democratic and within the EU, but its institutional “equilibrium” has shifted toward majoritarian control, reduced pluralism, and a materially weakened environment for minority equality (European Union, Directive 2024/1069, 2024).

5. Discussion: Comparative Lessons and Indicators

5.1. Comparative Positioning and Romanian Specificities

The future pathways that Romania will pursue until 2035 show similarities to European patterns but lack any automatic link to those patterns. The study of populism together with the rule of law in Central and Eastern Europe demonstrates that backsliding occurs through gradual legal and administrative changes, which lead to complete institutional control (Bodnár, Webber, and Schmidtke, 2024: 219-223). Successful operations in this dynamic require three components, which include appointment authority and media restrictions and civil society limitations, and a moral framework that describes opponents as threats to national security and foreign intelligence agents (Kyriacou and Trivín, 2025). The Romanian cases map onto this template, but they also highlight that coalition politics and EU dependence can keep such dynamics partial or reversible (European Union, 2020).

Figure 8: *European values and populist radical-right governance pressures in Europe.*

European values (normative baseline)		Populist radical-right pressures (typical risks)
Rule of law and checks on power		
Independent judiciary, legality, predictable rules, accountability through oversight bodies	→	Politicised appointments, delegitimising courts/regulators, governing by exceptional procedures
Pluralism and media freedom		
Free and plural media ecosystem; transparency; protection of journalism	→	Pressure on public broadcasters, hostile rhetoric toward journalists, information capture and disinformation
Minority rights and non-discrimination		
Equal protection in law and practice; enforcement against hate speech and hate-motivated violence	→	Scapegoating and moral-panics; selective enforcement; framing minorities as outsiders to "the people"
Civic space and public participation		
Space for NGOs, watchdogs, protest and advocacy without intimidation	→	Regulatory pressure and legal threats; chilling effects (self-censorship); delegitimising civil society as "foreign agents"
EU alignment and shared standards		
Commitment to EU fundamentals and cooperative compliance with monitoring	→	Conflict framing ("sovereignty vs Brussels"); strategic compliance, weakening of EU leverage through narrative politics

(Source: author’s synthesis and visualization for European-values and Populism)

The conceptual structuring of governance domains and pressure mechanisms is informed by comparative findings on populist radical-right representation and democratic satisfaction in Europe (Haugsgjerd, Linde, and Mathisen, 2025). This figure presents a conceptual flow across five governance domains commonly assessed in EU rule-of-law monitoring and comparative democracy research: rule of law and checks on power; pluralism and media freedom; minority rights and non-discrimination; civic space and public participation; and EU alignment and shared standards. As seen in countries such as Hungary and Poland (among others), these pressures can accumulate through sequenced institutional moves rather than sudden regime rupture.

A distinctive Romanian feature is the routinised presence of minority representation within governing coalitions, particularly through UDMR. The Hungarian minority party has historically served as both a policy advocate for the Hungarian minority and a coalition stabiliser. This creates a structural veto against the most overtly exclusionary measures. Yet, it also makes minority issues a key political conversation in how coalitions are made, as well as symbolic conflict when populists seek to demonstrate strength to their voter base (Căluș, 2025b).

Patterns seen in voting constitute a distinctive Romanian variable. Gherghina and Giugal (2025) demonstrate that the latest radical-right support among emigrants is structured by host-country institutional contexts rather than economic grievance (as per the last presidential election results). This situation suggests that mobilisation operates through identity frames amplified by transnational networks. Evidence that radical right support can be substantial among emigrant voters in highly democratic host countries complicates simple explanations based on economic frustration. For early warning, changes in diaspora mobilisation infrastructure, campaign messaging targeted at emigrant communities, and shifts in voting patterns across host-country contexts should be treated as leading indicators of broader domestic realignment as proven in statistics of vote intentions (Gherghina and Giugal, 2025).

Digital campaigning interacts with the other identified analysis variables. The 2024 presidential cycle illustrated very well how contestation over digital manipulation can become a legitimacy crisis for institutions. This is regardless of the ultimate legal outcome. Research emphasises the role of influencers and platform dynamics in elections. Researchers suggest that governance responses focused only on formal legality may fail to address deeper vulnerabilities in trust and information integrity (Pop-Eleches, 2025). In the best case scenario presented, these vulnerabilities are mitigated through stronger media safeguards, transparency, or civil-society capacity; in the middle and worst cases, they are exploited to delegitimise

oversight and to justify more majoritarian governing practices (Cațus, 2024a).

The contribution of the church's influence on politics is also an important variable worth mentioning in shaping the political ideals, which is not taken into account in the present study analysis. Similar to neighboring Moldova and many other post-Soviet states in the region, the relationship between religion and state governance in Romania is noteworthy (Putină, 2025: 97-114). This factor will yet influence both cultural identity and political policies to come.

5.2. Early Warning Indicators and Signposts

Across all scenarios, the focus falls on the identification of signposts (Junio and Mahnken, 2013: 374-395). Indicators with high “diagnostic” value include: (1)the degree of portfolio control granted to radical partners; (2)repeated attempts to change appointment rules for courts or watchdogs; (3)budgetary and procedural pressure on NGOs working on discrimination; (4)politicised disputes over minority-language education; and (5)the rhetorical normalisation of exclusion by senior officials (UK Government Office for Science, 2024). A complementary set of external indicators includes the tone and content of EU Rule of Law recommendations and the intensity of Council of Europe monitoring findings, as well as any movement toward using EU budgetary conditionality (European Union, Regulation 2020/2092, 2020).

This paper addressed the minority rights in a populist governance scenario as Romania adds to its foreign population yearly. In recent years, Romania has increasingly relied on foreign workers, especially from countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, and India. This is an attempt to fill labour shortages, which are most likely to worsen domestically (Romanian Centre for Comparative Migration Studies, 2025). This trend has also been facilitated by recruitment agreements (European Commission, 2026) and the existing legal framework for labour migration in the EU (such as the EU-India Trade Agreement). Attitudes towards migrants are overall tolerant in Romania at present; however, the nationalist political discourse is based on “Romanians first and us versus them narratives”. Romania's growing reliance on labor migration from South Asia (Romanian Centre for Comparative Migration Studies, 2025) will test whether inclusive governance extends to new minorities or remains bounded by historical identity politics (Pogan, 2021: 303-312). Romania's refugee policy has evolved positively in response to European Union mandates and the growing socio-political framework reforms (Balsam, 2025: 81-95).

EU-funded programs have been essential in supporting Roma inclusion. These programs facilitate integration to pave the way for both

economic and social inclusion. However, the long-term success of these efforts so far is often undermined by challenges in local governance (Bergmann, 2026: 91-112). Romania must maintain the European route to receive the aid necessary to support sustainable policies for all minority groups alike. Romania's approach to governance is similar to trends seen in neighboring Hungary. Here, minority integration remains a key political issue. Ethnic identity continues to play a central role in shaping how national integration strategies are developed (Villányi, 2026: 131-151).

6. Limitations

This study relies on scenario logic. It uses secondary sources rather than original fieldwork as well as single-country depth, which limits cross-national generalisability. Future similar research should, for example, triangulate scenarios with quantitative enforcement data and extend the comparative analysis to other CEE states facing similar populist pressures nationwide. This is an exploration of potential scenarios within the particular variables considered. Other scenario exploration cases may use a more diverse range of variables in relation to other political and governance aspects to reach different conclusions within the same time horizon.

7. Conclusion

How Romania will be by 2035 will depend on how EU oversight, fiscal realities, institutional trust, and coalition politics will interact with one another. While anti-populist engagement may not lead to the reversal of democratic progress, there is still a heightened risk that there will be instability regarding policies, tension regarding issues of identity, and inconsistent application of law if populism is involved in governing. The above-mentioned frame allows for a chance to mitigate against these risks. But this is only if the mainstream political parties treat human rights and pluralism as fundamental rather than as a negotiable issue. When EU levers have a clear and well-established rationale, EU influence has the best chance to impact Romania. Romania's best-case scenario will involve preserving an independent judiciary; protecting anti-discrimination legislation, and reconceptualising EU performance measures as tools of progressive improvements. The largest threat to Romania is not abrupt constitutional violations. But rather, the gradual acceptance of the ability to use procedural shortcuts, which is more difficult to reverse. Democracy and minority rights will be safeguarded through the monitoring of the actual implementation of policies.

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How Teachers' Backgrounds Shape their Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education

Karla Barth¹ • Marius Țepelea² • Raluca Răcășan³

Abstract

*This study examines the attitudes of preschool and primary school teachers in Romania toward the implementation of inclusive education in mainstream educational settings. Drawing on a sample of 50 educators from both urban and rural environments, the research explores how teachers understand, perceive, and apply the principles of inclusive education, with particular attention to the influence of their socio educational background. A 21 item questionnaire was developed to assess teachers' familiarity with inclusive practices, their willingness to implement them, and the perceived challenges associated with inclusion. Descriptive analyses were conducted for the first set of items, while inferential statistics—specifically the Student's *t* test—were used to compare attitudes across urban and rural groups. The findings aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors shaping teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education and to support the development of more effective educational policies and practices that promote equity, participation, and meaningful learning opportunities for all children.*

Keywords

Inclusive education, teachers' attitudes, urban–rural differences, mainstream schooling, educational inclusion practices.

Introduction

In contemporary Romania, inclusive education remains a topic marked by persistent questions and significant challenges (Gherguț, 2010, p. 712). Despite a supportive legislative framework and international commitments that uphold every child's right to quality education, school-level realities reveal that the concept is still poorly understood and inconsistently implemented. Children with special educational needs continue to face

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labeling, marginalization, and even exclusion, often being perceived by educational stakeholders as an added burden (Demetriou, 2022).

The implementation of inclusive education in schools is deeply connected to the broader societal attitudes toward diversity and social change. An inclusive school goes beyond merely placing students with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms; it requires a genuine transformation of the educational environment to meet their needs (Barth, Marușca & Țepelea, 2025). This includes individualized learning plans, specialized support services, curricular flexibility, and a substantial reorganization of instructional practices (Barth & Florescu, 2016).

The Salamanca Statement (1994) asserts that the core principle of inclusive schooling is that all children should learn together whenever possible, regardless of their difficulties or differences (Florin, 2019). In this perspective, inclusive education is defined by several key dimensions: acknowledging that all children are capable of learning, identifying and reducing barriers to participation, adapting curricula and teaching strategies to student diversity, and continuously refining educational practices in response to cultural and social contexts (Barth, Florescu & Ciobanu, 2019).

In the academic literature, inclusion is understood as a process through which every individual—regardless of their difficulties—is recognized as a full member of society and provided with appropriate educational, social, and medical support (Popovici, 1999). Within this perspective, inclusive education emerges as a cornerstone of a democratic society committed to equity and active participation. In the current national context, inclusive education carries the responsibility of safeguarding every child's right to quality education, free from discrimination (deBeco, 2022). Fulfilling this mandate requires the consistent application of key principles such as equal opportunities, non-discrimination, early intervention, and child-centered approaches. It also entails the development of an inclusive pedagogy marked by diversity, flexibility, and a focus on each learner's progress. Equally important is the existence of a coherent system of support services—psychological, social, medical, and educational—which plays a crucial role in ensuring the effectiveness of inclusion (Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2002).

At its core, inclusive education seeks to remove the barriers that hinder school and social participation, with particular attention to children who are vulnerable or at risk of marginalization. Its overarching goal is to reframe diversity as a valuable resource rather than an impediment, fostering an environment in which both teachers and students view differences as opportunities for learning and growth (Tanasijvic,

Škorić&Nijemčević Popovski, 2025). Against this backdrop, the present study aims to examine Romanian teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education—an essential factor in the success of any inclusion effort. Teachers' beliefs and perceptions play a decisive role in how inclusion principles are enacted in everyday practice, and understanding these attitudes is a crucial step toward enhancing educational policies and improving classroom practices.

Research Purpose

This study seeks to examine the attitudes of teachers working in mainstream schools and kindergartens in Romania toward inclusive education. Addressing a timely and highly relevant issue within the national educational landscape, the research explores how teachers understand and implement inclusive education principles, taking into account their socio-educational background (urban vs. rural) and their professional teaching rank. A key aim of the study is to evaluate teachers' familiarity with the concept of inclusive/integrated education and its practical implications for classroom practice.

Research Objectives

General Objective: To investigate teachers' perceptions and attitudes regarding the implementation of inclusive education in Romania.

Specific Objectives:

- To analyze the attitudes of teachers working in urban settings toward the implementation of inclusive education in schools and kindergartens.
- To analyze the attitudes of teachers working in rural settings toward the implementation of inclusive education in schools and kindergartens.
- To conduct a comparative analysis of urban and rural teachers' perceptions and their willingness to apply inclusive education principles in Romania.

Participants

The study involved a total of 50 participants, consisting of preschool and primary school teachers working in mainstream educational settings. The sample included educators from both urban and rural environments. The distribution of participants by educational level and background is presented in the table below.

Table 1: Distribution of participants.

<i>Educational level</i>	<i>URBAN</i>	<i>RURAL</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
<i>Primary education</i>	14	13	27
<i>Preschool education</i>	11	12	23
<i>TOTAL</i>	25	25	50

(Source: INSCOP Research, January 2026)

Instruments

The primary research instrument used in this study was a structured questionnaire. To assess teachers' attitudes toward the implementation of inclusive education in mainstream schools and kindergartens, a 21-item questionnaire with predefined response options was developed. The instrument comprised two categories of items:

- the first 11 items were examined using descriptive statistical methods, based on graphical representations and comparative analyses;
- the remaining 10 items were analyzed through inferential statistics, employing the Student's t-test to compare mean scores between groups. Items were rated on a five-point scale (a=1, b=2, c=3, d=4, e=5). The scores of the 10 attitude-related items were summed to generate a composite score, with higher values indicating a more positive attitude toward inclusive education.

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered to all 50 participants, consisting of preschool and primary school teachers. Respondents were instructed to answer the items honestly, and confidentiality of their responses was ensured. The instrument was distributed in both printed and electronic formats.

Research Hypothesis

H₁: It is hypothesized that teachers' attitudes toward the implementation of inclusive education in Romania differ according to their socio-educational background (urban vs. rural).

- Independent Variable (IV): background
 - Urban
 - Rural
- Dependent Variable (DV): teachers' attitudes toward the implementation of inclusive education in Romania.

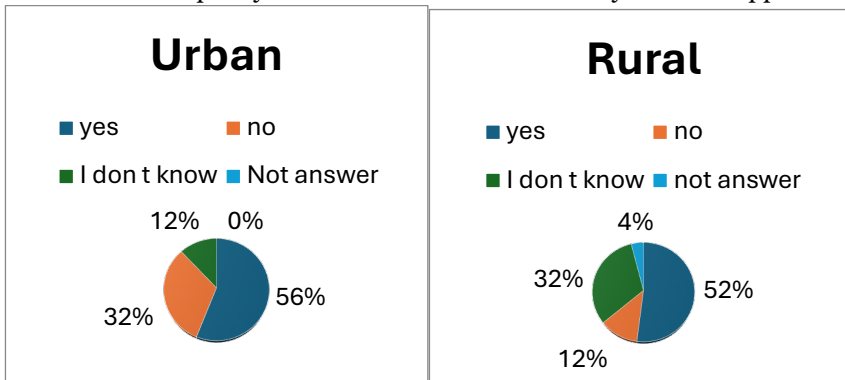
The study employs a one-factor experimental design, incorporating a single independent variable.

Results analysis and interpretation

In the second stage of the analysis, each item was examined using graphical statistics, allowing us to explore the data in relation to the research hypothesis.

The analysis of responses to the first item shows that teachers generally perceive the current structure of the Romanian education system as supportive of inclusive education. A slight difference emerged between the two groups: 56% of urban teachers and 54% of rural teachers believe that the system allows for the implementation of inclusive practices. However, urban respondents expressed more reservations, with 32% indicating that the system does not support inclusion, compared to 12% in rural areas. Uncertainty was considerably higher among rural teachers, where 33% reported not knowing whether the system enables inclusive education, in contrast to 12% in urban settings. This suggests lower conceptual familiarity with inclusion in rural environments. Overall, the data indicate that most teachers consider the current educational framework conducive to inclusive education, although levels of confidence and understanding vary by background.

Figure 1: Perceived capacity of the Romanian education system to support inclusion.

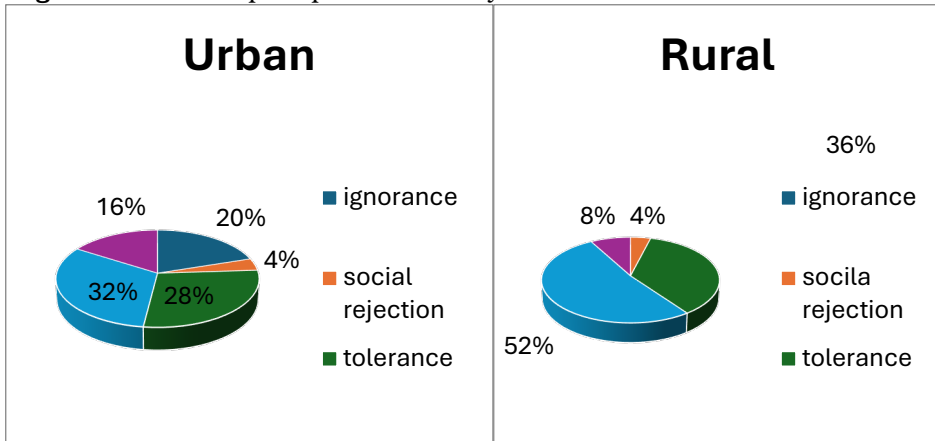


(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

The second item explored teachers' perceptions of society's general attitude toward children with special educational needs (SEN). The results reveal a clear tendency toward acceptance, though with notable differences between urban and rural respondents. Teachers from rural areas were more likely to perceive society as accepting, with 48% selecting this option, compared to 35% of urban teachers. Perceptions of societal tolerance were relatively similar across groups (33% rural; 30% urban). Supportive attitudes were also acknowledged, though at lower levels (16% urban; 15%

rural). A small proportion of respondents (4%) identified social rejection as a prevailing attitude, while 20% of urban teachers perceived societal indifference toward children with SEN. Overall, the findings suggest that teachers generally view society’s stance toward children with SEN as predominantly accepting or tolerant, indicating a gradual shift toward openness and social inclusion.

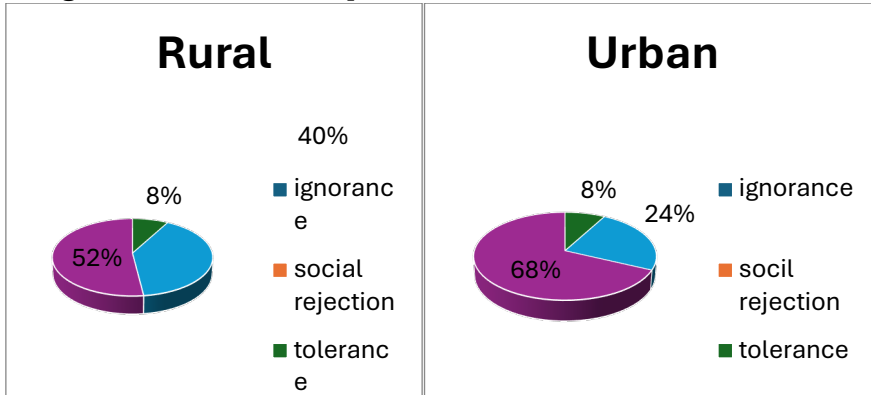
Figure 2: Teachers’ perceptions of society’s attitude toward children with SEN.



(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

The third item examined teachers’ personal attitudes toward children with special educational needs (SEN), allowing for comparison with their previously reported perceptions of societal attitudes. The results reveal notable differences between the two groups. Teachers from rural areas reported predominantly supportive attitudes, with 68% indicating a supportive stance and 63% expressing acceptance. In contrast, urban teachers reported higher levels of acceptance (24%) but lower levels of support (25%), suggesting a more reserved but still positive orientation. Tolerance was reported at relatively low levels in both groups (12% urban; 8% rural), and no respondents indicated negative attitudes. Overall, the findings show that teachers tend to express more positive personal attitudes toward children with SEN than those they attribute to society, indicating a higher level of professional openness and willingness to engage with inclusive practices.

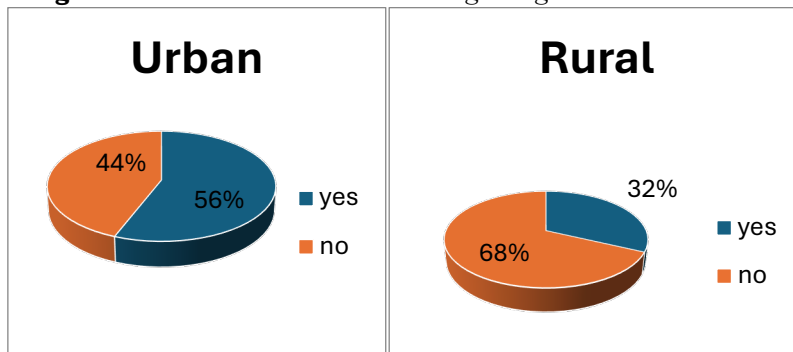
Figure 3: Teachers' self-reported attitudes toward children with SEN.



(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

The fourth item examined whether teachers currently work with students with special educational needs (SEN). The results show a clear contrast between the two environments. In urban settings, 56% of teachers reported having SEN students in their classrooms, indicating more frequent exposure to inclusive practices. In rural areas, however, the situation is reversed: 65% of teachers reported not having SEN students, while only 35% work with such students. These findings suggest that urban teachers are more familiar with inclusive education, likely due to greater exposure to diverse student populations and more frequent integration of SEN students in mainstream settings.

Figure 4: Distribution of classes integrating students with SEN.

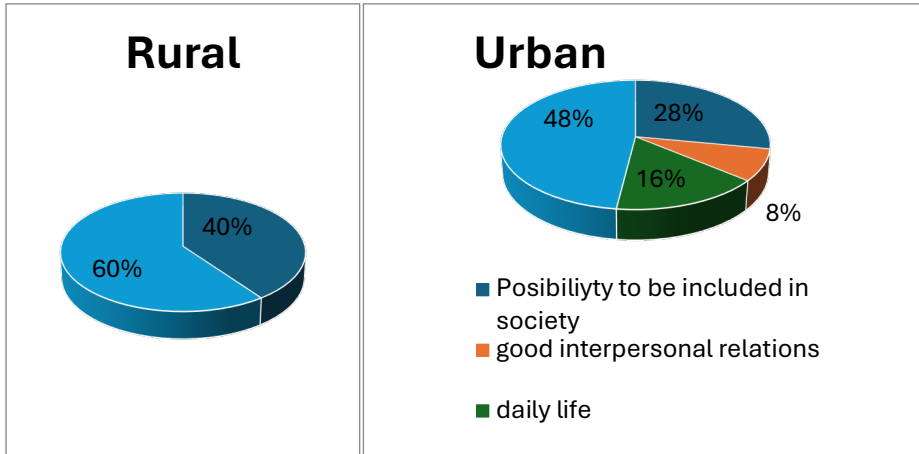


(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

The fifth item explored teachers' perceptions of why families choose mainstream schools for children with SEN. Across both groups, the dominant reason identified was the right to equal opportunities, followed by the possibility of social integration. Urban teachers selected only these two options, with 68% citing equal opportunities and 32% social integration. Rural teachers offered a more diverse set of responses: 48% equal opportunities, 28% social integration, 16% assimilation of everyday life

routines, and 8% the development of appropriate interpersonal relationships. Overall, the results indicate that teachers recognize multiple valid motivations for mainstream placement, reflecting an understanding of inclusion as both a rights-based and socially beneficial approach.

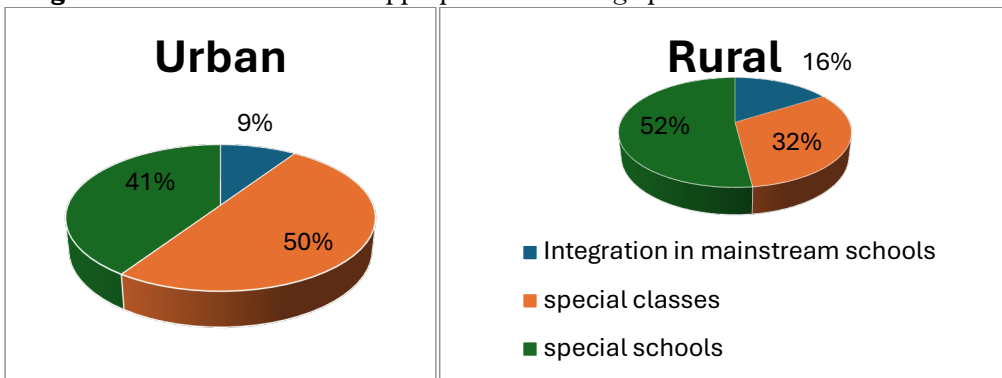
Figure 5. Teachers’ perceptions of the reasons parents choose mainstream schooling for children with SEN.



(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

The sixth item assessed teachers’ views on the most appropriate schooling arrangements for children with SEN. Responses varied considerably between the two groups. Urban teachers most frequently supported special classes within mainstream schools (50%), followed by special schools depending on the case (41%), and only 9% favored full integration in regular classes. In rural areas, the preferred option was special schools depending on the case (52%), followed by special classes in mainstream schools (32%), and 16% supported full integration. These results suggest that teachers tend to favor partial or conditional inclusion, with full mainstream integration receiving limited support, particularly in rural settings.

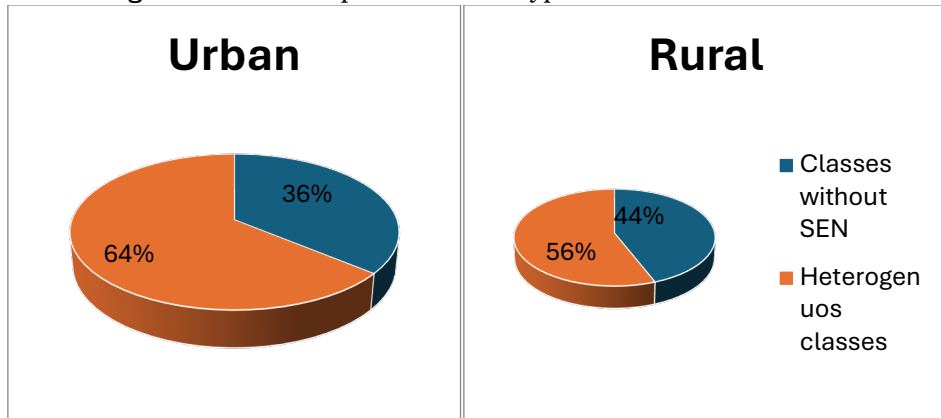
Figure 6. Teachers’ views on appropriate schooling options for children with SEN.



(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

The seventh item explored teachers' willingness to work in heterogeneous (inclusive) classrooms. The majority of respondents from both environments expressed openness to working with diverse groups. In urban areas, 64% preferred heterogeneous classes, while 34% preferred classes without SEN students. In rural areas, 56% opted for heterogeneous groups, whereas 44% preferred non-inclusive classes. These findings indicate that urban teachers show slightly greater openness toward inclusive teaching, possibly reflecting higher levels of experience and familiarity with SEN students.

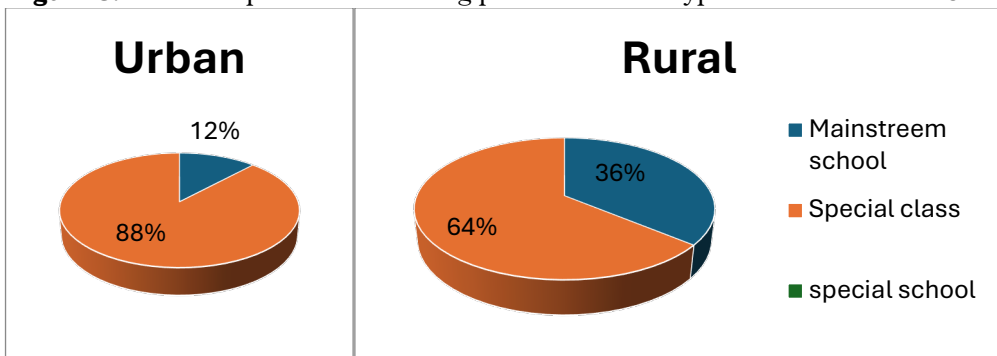
Figure 7. Teachers' preferred class types for instructional work.



(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

The eighth item investigated teachers' personal preferences regarding the schooling of a hypothetical child with SEN. Most respondents from both environments indicated that they would choose a special class within a mainstream school. This option was selected by 88% of urban teachers and 64% of rural teachers. Only 12% of urban and 36% of rural respondents would choose a regular mainstream class. These results highlight a preference for partial inclusion supported by specialized staff, suggesting that teachers value the combination of mainstream integration and targeted support.

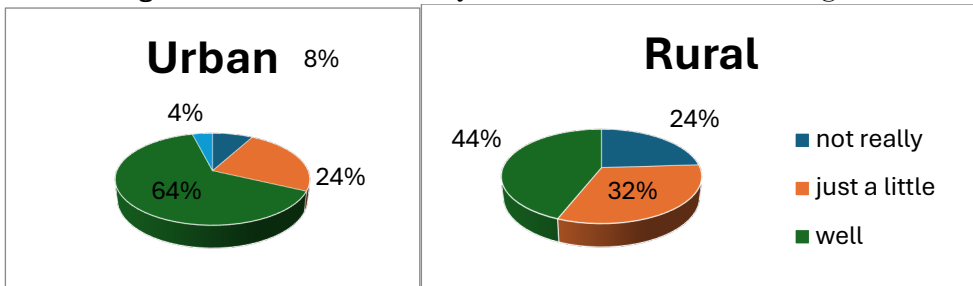
Figure 8. Teachers' preferred schooling placement for a hypothetical child with SEN.



(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

The ninth item assessed teachers’ self-reported familiarity with instructional strategies for working with SEN students. Urban teachers reported higher levels of familiarity, with 64% indicating a high level and 4% a very high level. However, 24% reported low familiarity, and 8% very low familiarity. In rural areas, only 44% reported high familiarity, while 32% indicated low familiarity and 24% very low familiarity. These results point to a clear need for additional professional development, particularly among rural teachers, who report significantly lower levels of preparedness for inclusive instruction.

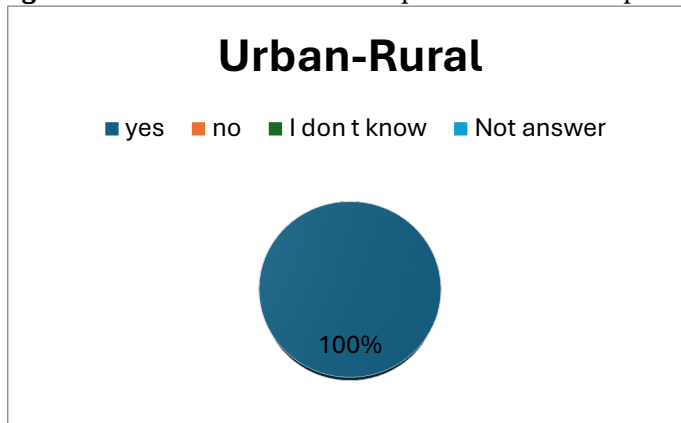
Figure 9. Teachers’ familiarity with SEN instructional strategies.



(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

The tenth item examined teachers’ views on the importance of continuous professional development in the context of upcoming educational reforms. All respondents—100% in both urban and rural areas—considered ongoing training essential. This unanimous agreement underscores teachers’ recognition of the need for continuous learning to adapt to evolving educational demands and to effectively support inclusive practices.

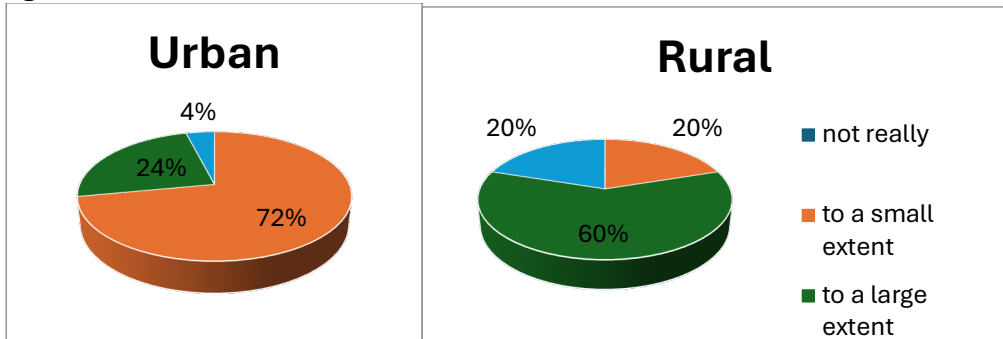
Figure 10. Interest in continuous professional development.



(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

The final item explored the extent to which teachers perceive inclusive education as a source of additional stress. Urban teachers generally reported lower stress levels: 72% indicated low stress, 24% high stress, and 4% very high stress. In contrast, rural teachers reported higher stress levels: 60% high stress, 20% very high stress, and 20% low stress. These findings suggest that rural teachers experience greater strain related to inclusive education, likely due to limited training, fewer resources, and lower familiarity with SEN instructional strategies.

Figure 11. Perceived stress associated with inclusive education for students with SEN.



(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

Subsequently, an independent samples t-test was conducted to determine whether there were significant differences in teachers' attitudes based on their area of residence, and the descriptive statistics are presented in the table below.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics.

Descriptive Statistics

	attitudine cadre didactice	
	rural	urban
Valid	25	25
Missing	0	0
Mean	36.520	37.240
Std. Deviation	2.756	2.570
Minimum	31.000	33.000
Maximum	41.000	42.000

In the table above, we can observe that there is no major difference between the attitudes of teachers from urban areas and those from rural areas. The mean score for rural respondents is 36.520, while the mean score for urban respondents is 37.240. The table also shows that the lowest score recorded among rural participants is 31 points, compared to 33 points

among urban participants. Similarly, the maximum scores are close: 41 points for rural respondents and 42 points for those from urban areas.

Tabel nr. 3: T Test

Independent Samples T-Test

	t	df	P
atitudine cadre didactice	-0.955	48.000	0.344

Note. Student's t-test.

Following the comparison of teachers' attitudes from rural and urban areas, the calculated t-value was -0.955 , with a corresponding significance level of $p = 0.344$, which is higher than the critical threshold of $p = 0.05$. Under these conditions, we can conclude that there are no significant differences between the attitudes of teachers from urban and rural environments included in the study. Therefore, based on the t-test results, the hypothesis is not confirmed, indicating that the area of residence does not influence respondents' attitudes toward the implementation of inclusive education in their classes or groups.

Conclusions and Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into teachers' attitudes toward the inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream educational settings. Overall, the descriptive results indicate that teachers, regardless of their area of residence, tend to hold relatively similar views regarding inclusive education. The mean scores for rural (36.520) and urban teachers (37.240) differ only slightly, and the minimum and maximum values recorded in both groups also show a high degree of overlap. These descriptive patterns already suggest a broadly comparable attitude profile across the two environments.

The inferential analysis further supports this observation. The independent samples t-test yielded a value of $t = -0.955$ with a significance level of $p = 0.344$, which exceeds the conventional threshold of $p = 0.05$. Consequently, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected, indicating that there are no statistically significant differences between rural and urban teachers in terms of their attitudes toward the implementation of inclusive education. This result suggests that the area of residence does not play a determining role in shaping teachers' perceptions of the challenges or benefits associated with integrating students with SEN.

These findings align with recent literature emphasizing that teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are influenced more strongly by factors such as training, experience, and institutional support rather than geographical context. The relatively uniform attitudes observed in this study may also reflect broader national efforts to promote inclusive practices across all educational environments.

In conclusion, the results highlight the need for continued professional development opportunities that address inclusive methodologies for all teachers, irrespective of their school setting. Strengthening teachers' competencies and confidence in working with students with SEN remains essential for ensuring the successful implementation of inclusive education at a systemic level.

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BOOK REVIEWS

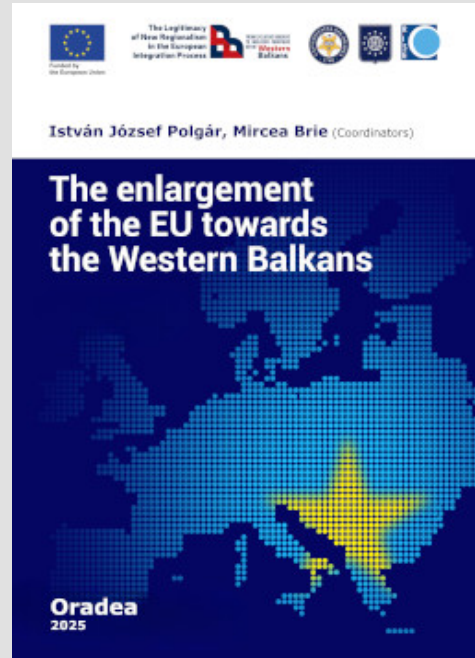
Book Review of: Istvan József Polgar and Mircea Brie (Coordinators)

The Enlargement of the EU Towards the Western Balkan

Editura Universității din Oradea, 2025, p. 279

ISBN 978-606-10-2484-1

Review by *Larisa Bianca Gaidoș*¹



The volume edited by Istvan József Polgar and Mircea Brie, “The enlargement of the EU towards the Western Balkans”, explores a range of topics that invite a deeper analysis of the future and the nature of the European integration process in the Western Balkans. The importance of this field must be viewed within the current geopolitical context, as seen through the lens of European studies and international relations, where the major challenges are represented by enlargement fatigue, democratic resilience, and regional stability. Drawing on the existing academic literature, which examines how the European Union can extend its political and institutional framework to the Western Balkans, one observes hesitation regarding the limits of Europeanization as well as the weight of the conditions imposed by the European Union (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020: 1–20).

In this context, the volume contributes to a broader academic debate centered on the legitimacy of regional cooperation and the mechanisms through which the European Union promotes integration, setting aside current borders. The strategic and geographical positioning of the Western Balkans contributes to gradual institutional convergence which is a

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necessary element for European Union accession, shaped by both historical fragmentation and post-conflict reconstruction.

Moreover, the authors emphasize that the Western Balkans have long been perceived as an area where competing political influences intersect, making the region particularly vulnerable to both internal fragmentation and external pressures.

Meanwhile, researchers have highlighted that European integration in the Western Balkans is not merely a geopolitical strategy, but a project grounded in the stabilization of democratic institutions and regional promotion (Vachudova, 2019: 63–76). In this regard, this volume also aligns with Liridon Lika's (Lika, 2023: 1–16) argument that the term "Western Balkans" is not strictly geographical, rather, it represents a political-strategic construct of the EU capable of producing both inclusion and exclusion.

Thus, the contributions to this volume address essential questions in the academic field through an effort to analyze the relationship between European integration, regionalism, and the transformation of political and social structures in the candidate states.

Structured into thematic sections that address the key stages and obstacles in the European integration process, the book places the legitimacy of the new regionalism and the concept of inclusive borders at the center of its analysis, thereby combining studies of identity, public policy, security, and legal-political analysis, it brings to the forefront a fundamental dimension of the discussions regarding the dynamics of the European Union's enlargement process.

The first section of the volume, titled "Challenges and Milestones in the European Integration Process", focuses on the stages and challenges encountered in the European integration process. The authors' contributions focus on important aspects such as identity formation, social cohesion, and policy alignment in candidate countries.

The analysis by researchers Mircea Brie and Angela Solcan on North Macedonia, which convincingly presents the path of Euro-Atlantic integration, strongly influenced by internal and external tensions, particularly those associated with Macedonian-Albanian relations, the conflict with Greece over the country's name, and the persistent conflict with Bulgaria regarding language, history, and the constitutional status of minorities (Brie & Solcan, 2025: 8–20). The authors' emphasis on public perceptions illustrates how EU accession is shaped by factors such as social fatigue, resentment, and divergent ethnic perspectives, including a more favorable attitude toward European integration among the Albanian

population compared to the Macedonian one. This interpretation aligns with that of Jelena Subotic, according to whom the process of Europeanization progresses where “Europe” is viewed as a shared societal value capable of offsetting immediate domestic costs; however, in the absence of such a convergent identity, Europeanization tends to stagnate (Subotić, 2011: 309–330).

The second section of the book “Cooperation and Public Policies Towards the EU” analyzes the role of cooperation and public policy frameworks in supporting enlargement. The included contributions highlight the importance of regional collaboration, arguing that the experiences of Central and Eastern European countries can serve as a useful model for the Western Balkans. Countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Romania underwent sweeping political, institutional, and socio-economic transformations during the accession process, characterized by institutional reforms, economic restructuring, and the consolidation of democracy. Such comparative analyses offer valuable lessons for countries currently engaged in accession negotiations (Vachudova, 2014: 122–138).

The final section of the book, “Security versus Openness of Borders: Socio-Economic Features and Differences,” addresses EU enlargement by highlighting the border both as a space of vulnerability and as a space of opportunity. In studies on borders, researchers have long argued that borders should not be understood as lines separating state jurisdictions but as a social framework in which security practices, economic imbalances, and identity narratives of local populations and European actors are shared (Milicevic, 2025: 87–105). A significant strength of this volume lies in the fact that it does not limit the process of expansion solely to the dimension of identity. By examining topics such as human trafficking, the use of European funds, and territorial cooperation, the volume expands the research perspective and demonstrates that concrete forms of cooperation can serve as engines of European integration.

This approach is also consistent with the view expressed by Milica Uvalic, according to whom, beyond the pace of formal accession between the European Union and the Western Balkans, there is already a considerable degree of economic interconnection, evidenced by trade, investment, financial flows, and legislative alignment, while acknowledging the existence of structural vulnerabilities that hinder the convergence process (Uvalic, 2019: 207–235). Thus, this section situates the Western Balkans within a broader debate centered on the transformation of borders in the context of integration, security, and regional fragmentation.

Overall, the book successfully demonstrates that the enlargement process should not be understood solely in terms of institutional and legal

frameworks, but also involves political reforms and changes in administrative capacity. The success of the European project in the Western Balkans depends on stability, democratic governance, and the development of efficient state structures, which the EU seeks to foster through Europeanization (Keil, 2013: 1–18). At the same time, regional cooperation initiatives can serve as a catalyst for the political, social, and economic progress essential to European integration.

In conclusion, this publication stands out for its rigorous approach, presenting the challenges and opportunities that define the next phase of the European Union's enlargement. By bringing together diverse academic perspectives, it captures the complex dynamics between domestic reforms, regional cooperation mechanisms, and European institutional constraints.

As Karl Aiginger points out in a comprehensive analysis of populism in Europe, contexts characterized by insecurity, inequality, rapid change, and the shortcomings of public policy foster the emergence of radicalization and liberal tendencies (Aiginger, 2020: 38–42). This observation is central to the volume presented, whose case studies find that when European integration loses credibility, populist dynamics begin to fill this void.

At the same time, the book demonstrates a coherent approach capable of connecting theoretical reflection on European integration with concrete analysis of policies and regional realities. An important analytical contribution of the work lies in its exploration of the relationship between institutional reforms and societal transformation. Several chapters argue that successful European integration depends not only on the adoption of EU legislation but also on the strengthening of administrative capacity and democratic institutions. Weak governance structures, corruption, and political polarization continue to pose significant obstacles to the integration process. As such, the volume represents a valuable contribution to the literature on European integration and serves as an important reference for researchers interested in the future of the Western Balkans within the European project.

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