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7-9, Regina Elisabeta Blvd., Bucharest, Code 030016, Romania

Tel: (+4021) 314 26 96, 314 26 97

E-mail: rjea@ier.gov.ro, Web: <http://rjea.ier.gov.ro>

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Serbia through the Lens of Small States' Foreign Policy. Balancing between the European Union and the Russian Federation

Jan Graf, Martin Solik¹

Abstract: *The small states' foreign policy has long been a neglected topic in academic circles because the very definition of "small state" was discussed only after World War II. However, in the accelerated dynamics of global security, foreign policy of small states is gradually gaining importance. This study aims to clarify Serbia's foreign policy orientation in the context of the security developments related to the Russian aggression in Ukraine, which has forced many states to reassess their security policy. Using a case study approach, the authors seek to highlight if Serbia's foreign policy is built on the general premises of the small states' foreign policy, and how its specific features enable Serbia's balancing act. For this purpose, three characteristics of the small states' foreign policy have been selected: military neutrality, efforts to join international organisations, and the commitment to fully respect international law. Based on expert interviews and the analysis carried out, the authors conclude that Serbia contradicts two theoretical assumptions about the foreign policy of these states, a fact that paradoxically helps Belgrade maintain close relations with both Brussels and Moscow. However, due to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, an easier path to the EU opens for Belgrade, and this type of foreign policy could therefore come to an end.*

Keywords: Serbia, European integration, Russia, foreign policy, small states.

Introduction

The Western Balkan countries have become a geopolitical flashpoint for powerful countries and organisations. On the one hand, the Russian Federation is seeking closer cooperation with them and, on the other hand, the European Union (EU) supports their European integration.

The EU has already signed several agreements with individual states in the region to ensure multi-level cooperation in the political, economic, security, and social spheres (De Munter, 2024). Moreover, since 2009–2010 the citizens of these countries (except Kosovo) have been exempted from visa requirements.

¹Jan Graf is a PhD candidate at the Department of Human Geography and Regional Development at the University of Ostrava in Czechia.

E-mail: jan.graf@osu.cz.

Martin Solik PhD, MPA, is an assistant professor at the Department of Human Geography and Regional Development at the University of Ostrava in Czechia.

E-mail: martin.solik@osu.cz.

In turn, Russia opposes these efforts to integrate the Western Balkans into the EU, because it perceives the West as a staunch adversary. Hence, to better serve its geopolitical interests, the Kremlin has decided to get a firm foothold in the Balkans, and its ambition to increase its political and economic influence in this area begins to materialise. For example, in 2014, a Russian representative at the UN did not endorse the continuation of the EUFOR mission, which had long been operating in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Previously, the Kremlin had used the financial crisis of the eurozone to gain political and economic influence in the Balkan Peninsula (Petrillo, 2013). However, Russia is not the EU's only competitor in this region. China is also a key player; see for example Bjeloš (2019), Vladisavljev (2022), or Dimitrijević (2020).

Serbia's foreign policy is characterised by the endeavour to establish correct relations with all the major powers on the international stage. It is based on four pillars and encompasses relations with both Western (EU and US) and Eastern states (China and Russia). Serbia has a specific relationship with each of these actors. While relations with Beijing and Moscow focus on the promotion of economic and political interests (e.g., the Kremlin supports unremittingly Serbia's position on Kosovo's political status), Serbia also maintains very strong economic ties with EU Member States. Nevertheless, its relations with the United States of America are tenuous and complicated by the Serbian society's negative views on the US and its particular stance on the future political status of Kosovo (Beckmann-Dierkes and Rankić, 2022).

Serbia's foreign policy is becoming increasingly important against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine that altered Europe's security situation. It has taken on a new dimension since the deterioration of the West's relations with Russia. It will therefore be interesting to watch and reflect on the positions the Serbian political elites will take in the future. Belgrade is widely perceived as one of Moscow's few allies in Europe, along with Minsk. In this context, the EU could opt to accelerate the European integration of the Western Balkans (Serbia included), while the Kremlin might try to reverse this trend with its malign influence.

Our primary research objective is to establish whether Serbia builds its foreign policy on the theoretical premises of the small states' foreign policy and, in doing so, how it manages to pursue its pragmatic policies based on cooperation with both the EU and Russia. A secondary objective is to infer how Serbia's foreign policy might change due to the security developments triggered by the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Will Serbia manage to maintain its pragmatic foreign policy, or will it be compelled to take sides in the future? It is worth noting that no previous study has analysed Serbia's foreign policy from the "small state" perspective. Hence, we decided to fill this research gap with the current study.

This paper does not cover the events that preceded the collapse of Yugoslavia and led to the creation of an independent Serbian state. It deals only with Serbia's relations with the EU and the Russian Federation between the years 2012 and 2022, which saw the Kremlin's growing influence in Serbia, as well as changes in Belgrade's relations with the EU. We have chosen this timeframe (before the Russian invasion of Ukraine) for two key reasons. First, the primary data (drawn from expert interviews and archival work) were collected in the second half of 2021 and, thus, do not capture

the events of the last three years. Second, this study seeks to clarify the nature of Serbia's multi-vector foreign policy before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, we hope to stimulate further research on Serbia's foreign policy post-February 2022. Thus, the ambition of our current scholarly contribution is to generate – among academics and experts – discussions about the future direction of Serbia's foreign policy and diplomacy. Despite these self-imposed limitations, we present a possible scenario for the development of Belgrade's foreign relations with Moscow and the EU.

Literature review

Serbia's foreign policy has been the subject of several academic articles in recent years. Its ambivalence is highlighted in Ristić's study (2012), which concludes that President Tomislav Nikolić was in favour of a broader cooperation with Russia in the early days of his political career. However, during the 2012 election campaign, he promised his fellow citizens that Serbia would move closer to EU membership under his leadership (Ristić, 2012). Konitzer has a similar outlook on Serbia's geopolitical orientation, pointing out that narratives justifying Serbia's possible cooperation with both the East and the West are emerging in the Serbian public discourse (Konitzer, 2011).

The inclination towards a partnership with Russia in Serbia's foreign policy is explained by Patalakh (2018), who argues that the political elite's pro-Russian attitudes are rooted in the history of the Serbian-Russian relations, and in the cultural affinities between the two nations (in this case, the Orthodox Church plays an essential role). According to Patalakh, identity and emotions are instrumental in Serbian-Russian relations, and thus strengthen the cooperation on defence issues (stepping up Serbia's defence) and mutual trade (Patalakh, 2018). Belgrade's balancing act between Russia and the EU is highlighted, for example, in recent studies conducted by Ponomareva (2020), and Beckmann-Dierkes and Rankić (2022). Hartwell and Sidlo (2017) analyse Belgrade's foreign policy relations with Beijing, Moscow, Washington, and Brussels, providing thus the most comprehensive overview of Serbia's relations with major international actors.

In Serbia's foreign policy, the Kosovo issue is often mentioned as one of the obstacles on Belgrade's EU path. This is confirmed by Bieber's study "The Serbia-Kosovo agreements: an EU success story?" (2015), which summarises the history of the negotiations on the future political status of Kosovo, negotiations wherein the EU played a key role. Juzová *et al.* (2022), on the other hand, point to Serbia's lack of democratisation as an impediment to closing the accession chapters. However, none of the above studies has looked at Serbia from the angle of the "small state" concept and considered the evolving security situation in Europe in the context of the Russian aggression.

The concept of "small state" in international relations and specific features of small states' foreign policy

The international system does not consist only of great powers. Small states clearly predominate (Maass, 2009). Nevertheless, they have long been overlooked in

scholarly research. The first attempt to define a small state can be traced back to the Treaty of Chaumont (1814) during the Napoleonic Wars. Small states have become a topic of academic interest since the 1940s (Glazebrook, 1947). A valuable analysis is provided in David Vital's *The Survival of Small States* (1971). Vital reflects on how they can be defined and how they shape their foreign policy, given their limited power in the international system. In his 1968 book, Rothstein concludes that small and weak states join international organisations to protect their security interests and increase their foreign policy leverage.

Other authors have addressed the issue of the military neutrality of small states. Radoman (2021) highlighted its historical aspects in Sweden and Serbia. Although Serbia is not a typical example of a military-neutral state, it has been committed to this principle in its foreign policy since 2007, with the approval of the Serbian Parliament. Hey (2003) and Simpson (2020) also share the belief that small states are usually military neutral. Moreover, in Keohane's view (1969), their foreign policy is influenced by domestic factors. More recently, Brady and Thorhallsson (2020), Long (2017), Radoman (2018, 2021), and Baldacchino and Wivel (2020), among others, have dealt with the small states' foreign policy.

Before moving on to Serbia's foreign and security policy, it is necessary to ask what characteristics a state must have to be considered small. Several authors have discussed this issue, but there are no clear criteria for establishing the relative size of a small state: see, for example, Henrikson (2001), or Maass (2009). An analysis conducted by Baldacchino and Wivel (2020) provides an interesting overview of this concept. Handel argues that a small state can be identified by its power capacity. Simply put, if a state has less power capacity than the great powers, it automatically falls into the category of small states (Handel, 2016). This definition is the least difficult. Today, the key to determining great powers is whether they are permanent members of the UN Security Council (Fiemotongha *et al.*, 2021) and possess nuclear weapons (Handel, 2016).

The realists bring to the debate a different definition of the small state. They believe it is necessary to use quantifiable data to get a clear picture of what is deemed a small state and what no longer is. They focus on the size of the economy in terms of GDP, or on the size of the population. Last but not least, they look at the defence expenditure or the state dimensions (Crowards, 2002). However, it is worth noting that it is practically impossible to determine the exact quantifiable threshold under which states can be considered small. According to the World Bank, a country with less than 1.5 million inhabitants on its territory is a small state (World Bank, 2022a). Nevertheless, this criterion might be too strict and counterproductive in the very operationalisation of the concept (Baehr, 1975), since states with a slightly larger population do not differ from them significantly in terms of power capacity. Jean-Marc Rickli and Khalid Almezaini (2016) have also criticised the use of this criterion in categorising states. Despite this wave of criticism, some authors still think that the number of inhabitants is crucial in determining whether a state is small or not.

Confoundingly, there is no single definition of "small states" agreed upon by

the experts. For Briguglio, Persaud and Stern (2006), small states are territorial units with no more than 1.5 million people. Kuznets (1960), on the other hand, includes in this category states with a population of less than 5 million. In his turn, Vital (1967) assumes that the population of a small state from among the developed countries does not exceed 15 million inhabitants, while that of a small developing state can comprise twice that number of people. It is equally difficult to quantify the economic performance of small states.

The population size remains the most important criterion in defining small states because it forms the basis of a country's capacity to promote its interests abroad and defend itself in case of an attack. Small states often resort to military neutrality being aware that they are surrounded by more powerful countries.

In light of the aforementioned definitions, the authors of this study consider that a small state is a territorial unit with fewer than 15 million people. The current research builds on Hey's (2003) concept of "small state foreign policy", which provides some essential insights. Hey has identified 10 characteristics that inform the behavioural patterns of the small states in international relations. The limited scope of our study has not allowed us to cover all of them. Hence, we have focused on three key aspects of their foreign policy: i.e., military neutrality, the efforts to join international organisations whenever possible, and the commitment to respect international law (Hey, 2003). These aspects and the way we tackled them in the empirical part of the study are further explained and justified.

Small states are forced to face challenges arising from their small size. Thorhallsson and Steinsson (2017) describe this situation very well in their paper. They point out that an insufficient population limits a state's power, e.g. in economic and diplomatic negotiations. Membership in international organisations can help small states overcome some of the difficulties they encounter (for instance, the weak negotiating position in commercial and diplomatic matters). From this perspective, a very relevant contribution was made by Panke's (2012) study, which summarises the benefits small states derive from their membership in international organisations. This phenomenon is discussed by other authors, too. See, for example, Scheldrup (2014), Long (2017), and Thorhallsson and Steinsson (2017). The latter argue that a "highly institutionalized, cooperative, and peaceful international system" is most beneficial for small states (Thorhallsson and Steinsson, 2017).

Starting from these theoretical assumptions, we first sought to uncover whether Serbia, beyond its frequent political proclamations, really aspires to EU membership. Theoretically, Belgrade would benefit not only economically, but also diplomatically from its possible membership because its bargaining position with the EU members would be strengthened. Yet, Serbia maintains very close relations with Russia, even though the Kremlin is committing unprecedented war crimes in Ukraine. Therefore, we aim to pinpoint the obstacles that prevent Serbia from advancing towards EU membership and identify the pillars of Belgrade's cooperation with Moscow.

As regards national security, it is noteworthy that small buffer states are more exposed to the threat of losing their independence, while pursuing their foreign policy goals: see, for example, Valeriano and Van Benthuyssen (2012), or Fazal (2004). The

sword of Damocles of a potential invasion constantly hangs over them, which means that they must strive to maintain their statehood (Poast, 2013). Therefore, they try to form alliances with more powerful neighbouring states. In the specialised literature, the term “bandwagoning” refers to alliances between a weaker state and its stronger neighbour (see, for example, Walt, 1987). The problem, however, is that requests for alliances with a stronger state are often ignored. An example from history is Hungary's attempt to get Great Britain on its side in a possible conflict against Tsarist Russia. Moreover, when such a military alliance is forged, its commitments are often not honoured: e.g. the case of Poland, which asked for help in a conflict against Russia in the late 18th century (Poast, 2013). In his seminal work, *Politics Among Nations* (1948), Morgenthau already pointed out that the sovereignty of small and weak states inherently requires the consent of stronger actors. This means that the existence of small states depends on decisions taken by more powerful states. Neutrality is perceived by small and weak states as a chance to preserve their sovereignty. This option designed to ensure national sovereignty is also acknowledged by Radoman (2021) who presents the cases of Sweden and Serbia in her book *Military Neutrality of Small States in the Twenty-First Century*.

The security threats that small states deal with relate to the third feature of their foreign policy we focused on, namely the willingness to respect international law and to see it enforced on the international stage. This is an essential aspect because, unlike great powers or other powerful states, small states do not have sufficient military and economic leverage to impose their will at the international level (Lupel and Mälksoo, 2019). The international law protects, to some degree, the weaker states, and their leaders are very much aware of it. Consequently, small states are among the strongest supporters of international law within the international system, though individual countries may interpret this law differently.

And yet, are these assumptions confirmed by the way Serbia conducts its foreign and security policy? Is this country militarily neutral and what kind of security policy does its government pursue? Does its military neutrality indicate an ambiguous direction of its foreign policy, with Russia on one side, and the EU states on the other?

Methodological framework

Our interpretative case study is primarily based on the expert interviews we have conducted. An interpretative case study is usually characterised by the fact that its theoretical framework gives the researcher a means to formulate his conclusions (Lijphart, 1971). In this case, the concept of “small state” is applied to the foreign policy orientation of Serbia, which – despite its interest in joining the EU – has visible links to the Kremlin. As already mentioned, the timeframe chosen is the period 2012-2022.

We have opted for this type of case study because it allows us to test the validity of the assumptions made in the theoretical part of this article. If those assumptions are invalidated, we can point to a case that is outside the scope of the basic theoretical premises. This would mean that the concept of “small state foreign policy” is not universally applicable.

Finally, it should be noted that most studies, except of Patalakh's 2018 study,

are descriptive in nature and, hence, do not enable a different perspective on Serbia's behaviour in international relations. We are convinced that the concept of "small state foreign policy" can provide a new perspective on Belgrade's foreign policy.

Thus, the objective of this study goes beyond verifying hypotheses to generate knowledge on a carefully selected case. The study monitors the specific multi-vector foreign policy of a typical small state, namely Serbia. Using process tracing, the paper divides the Serbian foreign policy into a chain of events along which causal relations are traceable. Based on these causal relations, one can discover factors that influence Serbia's ambivalent foreign policy.

The necessary data was collected in two phases. During the first phase, we strived to gather and use, as much as possible, existing and/or published data (especially, scientific/scholarly articles, speeches of the current Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, and official foreign policy documents of Serbia, Russia and the EU) and to identify areas with missing or insufficient data. We filled those gaps in the second phase of data collection, during our field research in Serbia (namely in Belgrade, and in the city of Novi Sad) in August 2021. Respondents belonging to the Serbian civil society, academia, and political elites were found through the snowball sampling method (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981; Browne, 2005; Noy, 2008). In general, this sampling technique implies that the researcher gradually contacts individuals (sample respondents) that refer him to other respondents, thus, forming an imaginary chain composed of all the respondents.

In August 2021, two gatekeepers (a representative of the Serbian academia, and a municipal politician from Belgrade), contacted in advance based on publicly available information, were selected for the survey. They referred us to further potential respondents. The interview with the gatekeepers was preceded by biographic preliminary research, which helped us lay out the topic of the interviews. Thanks to the gatekeepers' contacts, it was possible to carry out interviews with a representative of the diplomatic staff of an EU country in Belgrade, an academic in Novi Sad, and a representative of the non-profit sector in Serbia. The acquired interviews cannot be clearly categorised due to the occasionally tough requirements of field research, the necessity to adapt to local conditions and to process continuously the collected data.

The dialogues with the gatekeepers were expert interviews following a four stage elicitation process (cf. Flick, 2009), consisting of:

- (1) *An overview interview*, wherein an expert freely expresses his/her opinion on the given issues.
- (2) *A structured interview*, whereby an expert answers the researcher's specific questions that mirror the statements the interviewee made in the overview interview.
- (3) *Analyses of the acquired data* performed during the field research.
- (4) Supplementary questions presented to the interviewee based on acquired data.

Other interviews had a freer structure, as they had to take into account the respondent's personality and the situation in which they were conducted.

In the process of recruiting respondents, the authors encountered several

problems, which might have thwarted the efforts put into this study. From among these, it is worth mentioning: the refusal of several respondents to meet us in person (of course, this may render some of the conclusions herein subjective), and the relatively small number of respondents. We have tried to overcome these limitations by including relevant respondents with knowledge of the issues targeted by our research, and we have sought to maintain a balance of opinions. Hence, we have selected respondents from different professions: academics, diplomats, and NGO workers.

Nevertheless, we are aware that it is not possible to draw from a handful of interviews generally valid conclusions that can apply to the entire Serbian population. Hence, we have approached critically the interviewees' opinions to avoid any unconscious bias. Further research is needed to explore in depth the views of Serbian society on such sensitive topics.

The expert interviews (five in total), conducted in English, lasted almost three hours. Their length ranged from 60 minutes (the longest interview) to 30 minutes (the shortest one). We have prepared an interview outline to introduce the interviewees to the research topic before asking them questions. To clarify any ambiguity, the researchers asked additional questions. As the data presented is quite sensitive, the respondents expressed their wish to remain anonymous; the authors fully respected their anonymity.

In the empirical part of this study, the focus is on Serbia's efforts to join the EU and on the way its government has advocated for the respect of the principles of international law, while trying to maintain Serbia's military neutrality. We have chosen to tackle these two features of the small states' foreign policy (namely, the commitment to observe international law and military neutrality) in one separate section because we believe they are inextricably linked to the defence policy. This was well illustrated by the examples of Finland and Sweden who have recently reconsidered their long-standing position on military neutrality in light of the Kremlin's violations of international law. Finland joined NATO in April 2023, and Sweden in March 2024.

Serbia's efforts to join international organisations – the case of the EU

Given its population size and economic performance, Serbia is undoubtedly a small state. With less than seven million inhabitants, a territory of over 88,000 km² (the 19th largest country in Europe), and a nominal GDP of about 131 billion euros (2021), Serbia meets all the aforementioned criteria to be classified as a small state. According to the World Bank, Serbia belongs to the upper middle-income countries (World Bank, 2022b), so one can say that it is not yet one of the most advanced economies in the world.

Its geopolitical orientation has already raised concerns at the beginning of the last decade, due to particular developments on its domestic political scene. Konitzer alludes to this fact in his article "Serbia between East and West" (2011). He recalls that during the 2008 Serbian parliamentary elections, there was a debate on whether Serbia should envisage greater cooperation with the EU or gear its foreign policy more towards Russia (Konitzer, 2011). Savić's (2014) analysis, which presents five basic geopolitical narratives of Serbia, also tackles this topic. In his opinion, more than half of those

narratives (i.e., three) concern the geopolitical orientation of the country. In addition to the traditional West versus East dichotomy, a narrative depicting Serbia as a “bridge between the West and the East” emerges in the public discourse. Its proponents argue that it is necessary to cooperate with both the West (the EU and the United States) and the East (Russia).

Among the proponents of this line of action are the former president of Serbia, Tomislav Nikolić, and the former leader of the Serbian Radical Party, Vojislav Šešelj. Nikolić used this narrative to defend Serbia's foreign policy vis-à-vis the EU and Russia. He argued that Serbia should be an imaginary bridge between the two sides (Savić, 2014). The reference to Nikolić's statement is not accidental in this section of our study. We consider that a crucial feature of the small states' security policy is their military neutrality, which entails the pursuit of a balanced foreign policy designed to avoid taking sides in a potential conflict. Former Prime Minister and current Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić shares the views of Nikolić and Šešelj on this topic, as confirmed by two of our interviewees: a diplomatic representative and an academic. The diplomatic representative commented on Vučić's foreign policy orientation: “You know, President Vučić's rhetoric is interesting. Vučić's rhetoric is different externally and internally. Externally, he is clearly committed to European integration and is in favour of the country's EU membership. However, domestically the situation is different. Brnabić is a mere puppet in the hands of Vučić: she is not a strong personality, but a technocrat who follows the instructions of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (...), I believe that Serbia has no real interest in becoming a member of the EU” (*Interview 1 with a diplomatic representative in Belgrade*). This opinion is similar to that of another interviewee: “If you look at Vučić's political career, this man was a fierce opponent of the West in the 1990s. Of course, the bombing of Belgrade by the West played a role in that (...), today one can say that he is sitting on two chairs. On the one hand, Vučić announces that Serbia wants to join the EU, but on the other hand, he is trying to strengthen relations with Russia. In principle, it can be said that Serbia is trying to pursue a pragmatic foreign policy, it wants to have good relations with the EU, Russia or China” (*Interview 4 with an academic in Belgrade*).

This Balkan country has made continuous efforts to join the EU since 2009, when it officially applied for EU membership. Its aspirations were heightened in 2012, when it was granted candidate status. However, twelve years later, Serbia is still in the Union's waiting room (Ponomareva, 2020). Concrete steps for its EU accession were made in 2015, when negotiations started with the first two out of the 30 accession chapters. By 2020, 18 chapters had already been opened. “You see, it is not so important how many chapters are opened or not opened. What is important is how many of them will be closed (...); we see this in the example of Türkiye, which has opened all accession chapters, but is not able to close them”, said the academic we interviewed in Novi Sad. Moreover, in his opinion, EU Member States are hypocritical towards Serbia, and although Serbia is trying to align its legislation with EU standards, it has come under fire from the EU. “I do not think our judiciary and corruption are in a worse state than in Bulgaria or Romania, for example. But these countries are in the EU, we are not” (*Interview 2 with an academic in Novi Sad*). However, reports from the European Commission indicate that the EU legislation is only partially implemented in Serbia,

and the process of implementation is slow (European Commission, 2020; 2021).

Kosovo's status is the most pressing issue that hampers the ongoing European integration process. Serbia has found once again a strong supporter in Russia, which opposes the Western countries' convictions on this burning territorial issue. That is why the alliance with Russia is so relevant to Serbia: "In principle, Russia is very important for Serbia, as well as China, because in the UN, on issues related to Kosovo, Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or the declaration of Great Britain that Serbia should be recognised as a country that has committed genocide, Russia can veto these proposals" (*Interview 4 with an academic in Belgrade*). Kosovo's situation greatly complicates Serbia's ambitions to join the EU. The issue of its independence was one of the key points of the so-called Berlin Process, launched in 2014. However, that initiative did not lead to a swift resolution of Kosovo's status, despite promises of a possible admission of Serbia to the EU in 2018, in case of a successful resolution. Following other unsuccessful attempts at solving that territorial dispute (Davos 2019, Washington 2021), the prospect of Serbia's accession to the EU seems unlikely. As Zordan points out, Belgrade is not particularly interested in joining the EU because it is satisfied with its current format of relations with both the EU and Russia (Zordan, 2022). According to one interviewee, the country's eventual admission to the EU depends heavily on whether the Member States are interested in Serbia at all. His statement suggests that rather the opposite is the case (*Interview 3 with a municipal politician in Belgrade*).

EU leaders have long criticised Serbia for its stance on Kosovo, and their strained relations were exacerbated by the deterioration of the relations between Kosovo and Serbia in the years 2022-2023. Nevertheless, EU leaders have consistently reiterated that the EU accession of the Western Balkans is crucial to the EU. The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, has expressed himself in the same vein several times, during his visits in the region. In light of the current events that changed Europe's security situation, such assurances are very much needed so that the EU's influence is not replaced by that of other external actors.

The West's geopolitical challenger in Serbia is Russia. The Kremlin has long-standing interests in Serbia, as it has in the entire Western Balkan region. The Kremlin's situation is in fact easier because it pursues its strategic goals without spending large financial resources (Pavičić, 2019). In practice, Moscow's foreign policy toward the Balkans is based on several viable premises:

- First, Serbia's alliance with Russia at the highest political level, and Russia's support for the Kosovo issue.
- Second, the fact that the Kremlin relies heavily on the power of the "post-Soviet sentiment", very often reminding the Serbs who defeated Nazi Germany on the territory of former Yugoslavia. Hence, a strong historical bond reinforces the present relations between Russia and Serbia.

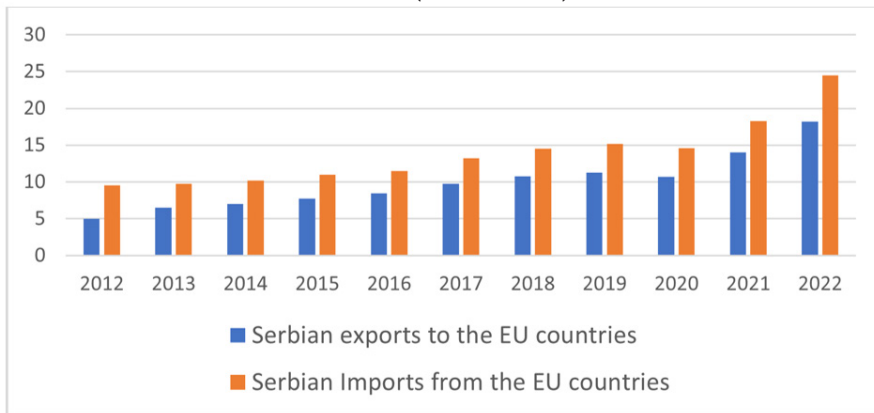
Russia tries to emphasise that it has always been on Serbia's side, e.g., in the conflicts with Bosnia and Kosovo (Pavičić, 2019). Incidentally, this was confirmed by one of our interviewees, who added: "The reason why Serbian society likes Russia is simple. In all the conflicts that were waged against us, the West supported our opponent (Bosnia, Albania) and I do not understand why. After all, we are members

of the Christian civilisation, just like the Czechs, Slovaks, or Bulgarians. Nevertheless, the West has supported the Muslims in the conflicts with us” (*Interview 5 with a representative of the non-profit sector in Novi Sad*).

These arguments shape Serbian public opinion and explain why many Serbs continue to perceive Russia as a friend even nowadays. The public mood in Serbia is also reflected in the opinion of one interviewee who considers Russia as Serbia’s friend and brother because it respects its positions (especially, on the issue of Kosovo’s independence). He thinks the West is largely hypocritical when, on the one hand, it recognises the independence of Kosovo and, on the other hand, it does not accept that the population of Crimea decided in a referendum to join Russia (*Interview 2 with an academic in Novi Sad*). In sharp contrast, Moscow has repeatedly sided with Serbia on the Kosovo issue, as it did during the recent riots of 2022-2023.

Though Russia condemned the violence that led to the loss of lives, it clearly supported Serbia’s territorial claims, which triggered critical remarks from the EU. It is therefore not surprising that Serbia is somewhat reluctant to obtain EU membership and continues to maintain close relations with the Kremlin. Hence, the balancing act between the EU and Russia seems to be a characteristic of the Serbian foreign policy. The diplomatic representative we interviewed suggested that Serbia’s foreign policy lacks a clear vector. “Serbia tries to pursue a multi-vector policy and cooperates with various countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and China. However, Serbia’s strongest ties are clearly with the Kremlin” (*Interview 1 with a diplomatic representative in Belgrade*).

Figure 1. Serbian volume of trade with the EU countries in 2012-2022 (in bill. euros)



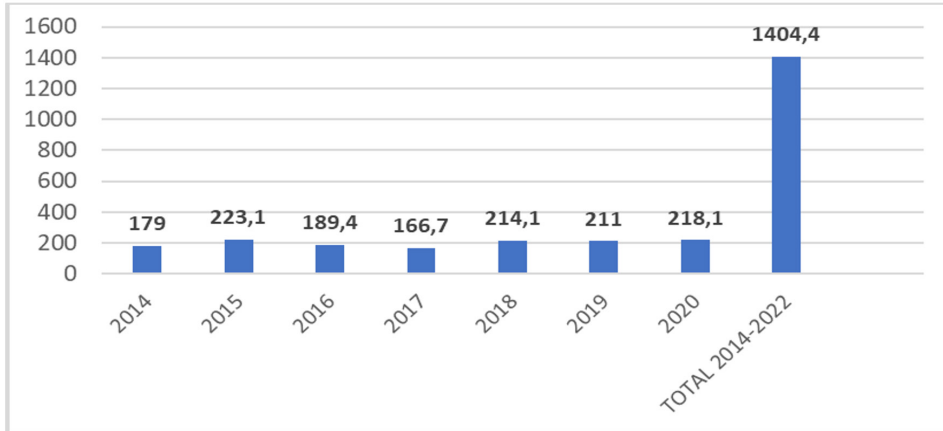
Source: Compiled by the authors, based on data from the European Commission (2024).

In economic terms, it seems more advantageous for Serbia to join the EU, as available statistics show. Just for illustration, in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic reached Europe and affected international trade (Eurostat, 2021), mutual trade between Serbia and EU Member States amounted to almost 25 billion euros (*Figure 1*). It should be noted that no other Balkan country has such a large trade exchange with the EU. Almost 50% of the EU’s exports to the Western Balkans go to Serbia, and Serbia’s

exported goods to EU Member States reach a similar level (Eurostat, 2021). In 2012, Serbia's exports to the EU single market did not even reach a nominal value of 5 billion euros, while at the end of the second decade of this century, they exceeded 11 billion euros (EU in Serbia, 2022).

A simple comparison of the trade relations between Serbia and Russia is quite enlightening. According to the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), mutual trade between them amounted to a little more than 2 billion euros in 2020, and most of it concerned mineral resources, especially the export of Russian gas and oil (OEC, 2021). Therefore, as regards commercial relations, the Kremlin cannot compete with the EU Member States, but it does offer energy raw materials that are indispensable to Serbia. The energy cooperation is very important, as Zordan (2022) highlights in his analysis. Official statistics show that Russia met 80% of Serbia's oil demand as early as 2014, and almost 2/3 of its gas consumption needs in 2020 (Energy Agency of the Republic of Serbia, 2021). Though Serbia signed a three-year contract with Gazprom in May 2022, wherein it committed itself to buying gas from Russia (Reuters, 2022a), Vučić declared that his country does not have to rely solely on Russian gas (Reuters, 2022c). The year 2023 saw the construction of an interconnector to a new pipeline in Bulgaria, which ensures gas supplies from Central Asia (European Commission, 2023). It is worth noting that the Serbian government paid only half of this €100 million investment, while the EU provided the rest (Savic, 2022).

Figure 2. EU pre-accession assistance to Serbia 2014-2020 (in mill. euros)



Source: Compiled by the authors, based on data from the European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, (2022).

This overview clearly shows the EU's prevailing economic relations with Serbia. Pragmatically, it seems that EU accession would deepen the economic cooperation between Serbia and the EU's Member States, benefiting the former in particular. However, not only the financial advantages could play an important role in Serbia's decision to pursue its European integration goals. We should also take into account the fact that the European Union provides funds for Serbia to carry out the necessary reforms: e.g., over 1.5 billion euros in the period 2014-2020 alone (Figure 2). Thus, Serbia received the largest amount of funds from pre-accession assistance (European

Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, 2022).

Hence, economic aid should bring Serbia closer to European integration. This was also suggested by the diplomatic representative: “President Vučić has placed very little emphasis on how economically beneficial EU membership would be for Serbia. On the one hand, Serbs appreciate the economic support from the EU; but on the other hand, the political representation is not able to properly sell these benefits on the domestic political scene” (*Interview 1 with a diplomatic representative in Belgrade*).

This stance of the Serbian government has different consequences mirrored in the attitude of the Serbian society towards the EU. Another interviewee, a local politician, also commented on this issue: “In the beginning, there was a lot of enthusiasm in Serbia for the prospect of becoming a member of the EU, because, of course, we see the economic benefits of eventual membership. But, you know, the European integration process is full of problems and is progressing very slowly. This goes hand in hand with the decreasing support for the country's accession to this organisation” (*Interview 3 with a municipal politician in Belgrade*).

According to the *Globsec Vulnerability Index 2021 – Serbia*, 52% of the respondents would have liked to see Serbia join the EU. The declining support for this organisation can be described as a permanent trend (Globsec, 2021). This very fact points to further problems in the European integration process. If Serbia – just like the states of the ‘Bing Bang’ enlargement (e.g., the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic, etc.) – were to hold a referendum on its EU accession nowadays, the option of joining this organisation would not necessarily win. This problem was pointed out by several experts, who admitted that public support for EU accession is below 50% for the first time since 2012, when the country was granted candidate status (N1, 2022).



Source: Vuksanović et al. (2022) (compiled by the authors).

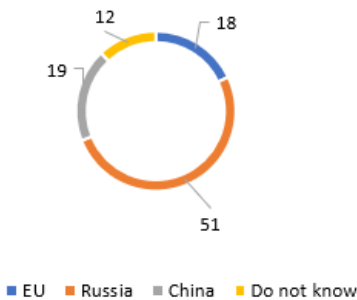
There is scepticism about Serbia's accession to the EU (*Figure 3*): more than 47% of the respondents believe the EU is not ready to accept Serbia as a Member State, less than 9.5% believe that Serbia will soon join the EU, and less than 36% are certain that Serbia will become a member of the Union in the distant future (Vuksanović et al., 2022).

On the contrary, Moscow was perceived very positively in Serbia before the invasion of Ukraine. More than 80% of Serbs

consider Russians their Slavic brothers and almost 60% see Russia as a strategic partner (Globsec, 2021). One of our interviewees argued that people in Serbia, especially in rural areas, do not perceive Russia as a threat (as it is often portrayed by the West), but

as their traditional protector who has always assisted Serbia in difficult times (*Interview 5 with a representative of the non-profit sector in Novi Sad*). Russia's aggression in Ukraine has not changed this trend. An opinion poll (*Figure 4*) conducted in October 2022 reveals that the Serbian society continues to feel great affection for Russia. More than half of the survey respondents consider it Serbia's closest foreign policy ally. Only 18% of them expressed their support for the EU option. Less flattering for the EU is the fact that 19% of the respondents believe that Belgrade's closest ally is Beijing, which is striking, to say the least, given the geographical distance between the two countries.

Figure 4. Who do you think is the closest ally of Serbia in foreign policy? (in %)



Source: Compiled by the authors, based on Vuksanović et al. (2022).

aggression in Ukraine. First, Finland was accepted into the North Atlantic Alliance, while Sweden had to await Hungary's approval to finally join NATO on March 7, 2024. In addition, the EU has broken off trade relations with Moscow and has largely reduced its dependence on Russian oil and gas imports.

In our view, in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, it is unthinkable that Serbia continues to serve as a 'bridge' between the West and the East. Hence, Serbia will soon have to decide which side to take. The fact that it is economically beneficial for Belgrade to enhance its cooperation with the West (and thus with the EU) argues in favour of broader cooperation. On the other hand, the Kosovo issue seems currently intractable, and the inability to solve this dispute is somewhat reflected in the slowdown of the EU accession negotiations.

Moreover, wider cooperation with Russia is apparently the wish of a significant part of the Serbian population. However, the deepening of relations with Moscow comes at a price. We have all seen in the last years how Russia treated its partners, when the latter acted contrary to its expectations. In this sense, we could mention the war in Georgia (2008), the annexation of Crimea (2014), the invasion of Ukraine (2022), or the recent disputes between Russia and the Republic of Moldova occasioned by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. In all these cases, the Kremlin has used various strategies to make these states feel that they cannot do without Russia.

All these events should serve as a warning to Serbia that Moscow's favour does not last forever. It is not that Moscow would begin to threaten it with a military invasion, but it could refrain from endorsing Serbia's claims, in multilateral forums, on the issue of Kosovo's political status, which is crucial for Belgrade. The question of Kosovo will determine the future shape of relations between the EU and Serbia. EU leaders are aware that the successful integration of the Western Balkans requires the acceptance of Serbia. Otherwise, the entire region might be destabilised. This is another reason why Serbia represents a key player for the EU. In turn, Belgrade acknowledges the EU's great economic potential and, in our view, could eventually side with the EU. Nevertheless, in the near future, the nature of its foreign policy is likely to stay the same, since in the December 2023 elections President Vučić's party won once again by a fairly large margin. As those parliamentary elections were allegedly held under unfair conditions, the opposition contested the results, but to no avail. However, we are convinced that increasing pressure exerted by the EU leaders on Serbia to adjust its foreign policy will eventually lead this country to full EU membership.

Military neutrality and respect for international law as instruments of Serbia's balancing between the EU and Russia

Since 2007, Serbia has conducted its security policy in the spirit of military neutrality. Its Parliament has adopted a resolution enshrining the principle of military neutrality in the Serbian legal order, due to a crucial factor: the military intervention of NATO in Serbia in the late 1990s, which created a negative image (still evident today) of the Trans-Atlantic Alliance among the Serbs. That image has remained virtually unchanged, with less than one-tenth of the Serbian population agreeing to join the Alliance (Radoman, 2021).

This explains the government's elusiveness on the issue of NATO membership. It is consistent with the statements of our interviewees. One of them even mentioned that for Serbian politicians joining NATO is still a taboo (*Interview 1 with a diplomatic representative in Belgrade*). This was confirmed by President Vučić at one of his pre-election meetings, where he announced that Serbia would never become a member of the North Atlantic Alliance (TASS, 2022). In light of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, this is an interesting statement. Indeed, one can infer that he secretly supports Russian strategic interests in the Balkans.

One interviewee told us that Serbia is important to Russia for two main reasons. First, there are strong cultural and historical ties between the two nations, and second, in his opinion, Russia will do everything in its power to prevent further NATO expansion, as evidenced by the situation in Montenegro in 2017, when the Kremlin tried to overthrow the government (*Interview 2 with an academic in Novi Sad*).

Though NATO membership is not a priority of Serbia's foreign policy, it is worth noting that Serbia's security policy does not clash with that of individual NATO member states. Unlike Russia, Serbia does not question the existence of the North Atlantic Alliance (Radoman, 2021) and even cooperates with it on several levels. As early as 2006, the Serbian government signed the Partnership for Peace, followed by the deployment of a permanent mission to NATO Headquarters in Brussels in 2010. Furthermore, in 2016, the Serbian government signed an agreement allowing NATO to

pass through its territory (Radoman, 2021). Radoman notes, however, that government officials hardly mention publicly these NATO-friendly steps, as Serbian citizens have great reservations about the North Atlantic Alliance. One of our interviewees stated: “The trauma we experienced in 1999, when the North Atlantic Alliance bombed us, is still within us. I myself see, especially in social media, posts that are full of hatred and anger towards NATO” (*Interview 5 with a representative of the non-profit sector in Novi Sad*).

Therefore, the Serbian government needs to ponder its security policy actions. Striving for non-alignment and military neutrality is typical of a small state. The fact that Serbia did not support the Western sanctions against the Kremlin (for its aggression in Ukraine) also fits this strategy. Through the prism of the concept of “small state foreign policy”, this can be construed as Serbia’s effort to maintain maximum neutrality out of concern for its sovereignty (Zordan, 2022).

To sum up, Serbia does not exclude cooperation with NATO. Yet, it has no intention of joining the Alliance and continues to cooperate with the Kremlin in the military sphere. The Declaration on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of Serbia and the Russian Federation was signed back in 2013. This document states that both states will seek to deepen their cooperation in the economic, political, and military spheres (Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). In this spirit, in 2014, Vladimir Putin was invited to the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Serbian capital (Radoman, 2021). Along with the economic cooperation (based on oil and gas supplies), the political and military cooperation is therefore equally important. Russia seeks to include Serbia in its integration structures and to supply it regularly with its weapons systems. These include MIG fighter jets and T-30 tanks. Another advantage is that Serbia does not have to buy additional weapons from Russia at full retail price. These factors make Russia the largest weapons supplier of Serbia (Ponomareva, 2020). Moreover, the Russian army organises joint military exercises with the Serbian army. In a 2021 publication, Radoman reported that military training operations have been conducted three times in the period 2014–2016 alone (Radoman, 2021).

Serbia’s option for a balanced security policy, illustrated by its military neutrality, is also demonstrated by its stance towards the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), of which Russia is a founding member. In 2013, Russia offered Belgrade an observer seat in the CSTO’s parliamentary assembly (Zordan, 2022). Since then, the Serbian government has been cooperating with the member states of this organization (Collective Security Treaty Organization, 2023) without seeking to join it. This detail reinforces the thesis that small states embrace military neutrality.

The last factor we focus on in this study is Serbia’s tendency to disregard international law. Manifested in Belgrade’s stance toward the EU and Russia, this tendency clashes with the idea that the small states’ foreign policy is based on respect for international law. Serbia is a small state. Yet, its foreign policy swings back and forth between the EU, which supports the rules-based order, and Russia, which does not abide by international law. A prime example was the situation in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea. At that time, Serbia refused to support the European Union’s sanctions against Russia. Regarding this decision of Belgrade, one interviewee noted that the Serbian

government took into account the historical context that led the USSR to cede Crimea to Ukraine. According to him, Crimea historically belongs to Russia and the West should respect this fact (*Interview 3 with a municipal politician in Belgrade*).

Serbia's reluctance to join EU sanctions against Russia is mentioned in several European Commission (EC) reports (see, for example, Serbia Progress Report 2014). In these reports, the EC provides information on the progress of the accession negotiations and the implementation of legal norms required for EU accession. While an optimistic tone prevailed until 2014, a year later the Commission sharply criticised Serbia's position on Russia's annexation of Crimea (European Commission, 2015).

At the highest levels of Serbian politics, words were spoken in Russia's defence practically from the beginning of the occupation. As Zorić points out, top Serbian politicians met with their Russian counterparts 17 times between 2008 and 2016, including during the annexation of Crimea. Tomislav Nikolić, President of the Republic of Serbia (2012-2017), expressed the view that his country would always remain an ally of Moscow and would never accept EU-style sanctions against Russia (Zorić, 2017).

One of the interviewees explained to us the stance of the Serbian government and society on the Crimea issue. In his opinion, Serbs draw a parallel between the cases of Crimea and Kosovo. Therefore, they do not understand the West's different attitudes towards these two "similar" issues. While the West supports Kosovo's independence, it has a strong anti-Russian stance on the Crimea issue, which, according to the interviewee, denotes hypocrisy (*Interview 5 with a representative of the non-profit sector in Novi Sad*). However, those issues seem to be similar only taken out of their context. Indeed, some of the Russian Federation's closest allies (Syria, Cuba, Venezuela, Afghanistan, North Korea, and Sudan) currently recognise its 2014 annexation of Crimea. Yet, Kosovo's independence has been recognised based on remedial secession (after the mass ethnic cleansing carried out by the then Yugoslav government) by more than half of the UN member states.

A new potential fuse on the Russia-Belgrade-EU axis is the aggression against Ukraine, which started in February 2022. Belgrade has acted again in line with its envisioned balancing act between the Euro-Atlantic structures and Russia. It has supported a UN resolution condemning Russia's action against Ukraine, but – on the domestic political scene – Serbian MPs refused to call this act of Moscow "a war" (Morina, 2022) and opposed the anti-Russian sanctions. This conduct fully contradicts the spirit of the foreign policy of small states, which inherently strive to defend international law and enforce its observance. For Belgrade international law can be a means of balancing between the West and Russia to advance its interests, i.e. the annexation of Kosovo. Moreover, the Serbian public sides with Russia in the ongoing conflict, as evidenced by two demonstrations held in March and April 2022 (Filipovic, 2022; Euractiv, 2022).

Serbia's close relations with Russia are also illustrated by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's scheduled visit to Belgrade in June 2022. Lavrov was forced to cancel his visit at the last minute, as his flight was denied access to the airspace of some countries due to European sanctions (Reuters, 2022b). According to Sztítás, Serbia's behaviour in the context of the Russian aggression against Ukraine is a clear example

of how military neutrality can manifest itself on the international stage. Moreover, it also proves that EU officials' criticisms of the way Serbia handles this matter will not persuade it to change its position (Szitás, 2022).

Concluding remarks

Why have we applied the concept of “small state foreign policy” to Serbia's case? The Western Balkans are becoming the focus of a potential power struggle between the West and Russia, and this geopolitical contest is currently unfolding in Serbia, where Russia's influence (in the energy and defence spheres) and that of EU Member States (especially in the economic sphere) are evident. Thus, Serbia finds itself at a crossroads where it must choose between cooperation with the EU and deepening relations with Russia. We think that our research may facilitate the understanding of the factors Serbia considers in shaping its foreign policy. It may also serve as a springboard for further field research, or for a more pragmatic study of Serbia's balancing act between China and the West (i.e., US and EU). Additionally, the current article could be a model for structuring and diversifying the methodological approach in similar studies on the small states' balancing acts.

Serbian foreign policy seems to run counter to the theoretical assumptions about the small states' foreign policy. In the 2012-2022 period under review, our analysis showed that Serbia did not seek to join international organisations or fully respect international law. The only theoretical premise confirmed in Serbia's case is its compliance with the principle of military neutrality.

However, Belgrade's unusual political stances are part of its strategy to pursue the pragmatic foreign policy that has allowed it to cooperate with both Russia and the EU over the past decade. Though Serbia has proclaimed its interest in becoming a member of the European Union, it has extensively cooperated with Russia. This is largely due to the Serbian public opinion, which has long been in favour of Russia for historical, cultural and political reasons.

In our opinion, a change in Serbia's foreign policy can occur, if the EU pressures Belgrade into aligning its foreign policy with that of its Member States. Belgrade currently stands at a crossroads in its foreign policy relations. It will have to choose one of its strategic partners. From a pragmatic perspective, it should side with the EU with which it has strong trade ties, for the Kremlin has nothing to offer beyond political alliances and the idea of Slavic kinship. If Serbia continues to implement the necessary reforms for EU accession, while trying to resolve the Kosovo issue, its admission to the EU should not take too long. However, the outcome of the parliamentary elections held in December 2023 shows that, for the time being, things are unlikely to change substantially in terms of foreign policy, as Aleksandar Vučić's party still forms the most important part of the government.

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State-captured Europeanisation. A Rational Choice Alternative

Radu-Vladimir Răuță¹

Abstract: *What is missing in our understanding of the stagnation and/or regression in the Europeanisation of the Western Balkan candidate countries? The current paper aims to present a conceptual novelty, coined as ‘state-captured Europeanisation’, which is based on rational choice institutionalism (RCI). The proposed alternative concept traces its origins to the literature on state capture and the episodes observed in the Western Balkan (WB) countries through state capture assessment diagnostics (SCAD). Designed as an article, this paper offers an in-depth literature review of the main concepts surrounding Europeanisation and state capture. It examines corruption from the perspective of the literature on rational choice institutionalism. In this theoretically inclined research paper, the references to the Western Balkans reveal a resistance to Europeanisation. In fact, Europeanisation in the WB countries can be, and has been, hijacked or manipulated by vested interests within the state apparatuses, resulting in what we have termed as ‘state-captured Europeanisation’. State capture can be described as an evolutionary institutionalisation of corruption relations. Adapting the conceptualisation that explains how Europeanisation is seized by an illegitimate monopoly on the governance and economy of the countries on track to EU accession, the paper builds on the literature that explored the rationale behind the institutionalisation of corruption to advance an additional view about the effects of state capture on Europeanisation. The methodological framework used is that of rational choice institutionalism, focused on unveiling the causes of stabilitocracy, stagnation, and regression in Europeanisation. To contrive arguments and identify the episodes of state-captured Europeanisation, the article uses SCAD, bringing into the spotlight several instances in which political elites, bureaucratic agencies, and interest groups have acted as driving forces for mimicking Europeanisation (with examples from Serbia between 2007 and 2018).*

Keywords: *Europeanisation, Western Balkans, state capture, rational choice institutionalism, SCAD.*

Introduction

‘State capture’ is an important concept for understanding the hurdles of the process of Europeanisation, especially because of its specific way of affecting governance, policy-making, and institutional reforms within EU Member States and candidate countries. State capture refers to the situation where private interests significantly influence a state’s decision-making processes to their own advantage, often at the expense of the public good. This phenomenon has critical implications for Europeanisation, which involves aligning domestic policies and institutions with EU

¹Radu-Vladimir Răuță is a PhD student at the National University of Political and Administrative Studies (SNSPA) in Bucharest, Romania, and a researcher at the European Studies Center of SNSPA.
E-mail: rv.rauta@gmail.com.

norms and standards.

State capture is highly relevant for European studies because it intersects with key themes, such as governance, corruption, democratisation, EU integration, and the implementation of EU policies. The concept of 'state capture' provides a critical lens through which scholars and policymakers can analyse the complexities and challenges faced by European and candidate states in their political and economic development.

State capture relies on corruption, which in turn reduces economic growth by diverting resources and lowering investment rates (Mauro, 1995; Mauro, 1996; Tanzi and Davoodi, 1997; Tanzi, 1998). It degrades the welfare of a state's poorest citizens because it generates increasing income inequalities and is responsible for the underfunding of education and healthcare (Mauro, 1997). Thus, it becomes a threat to the very security of many states (Leiken, 1996). The hypothesis of this paper builds on the specialised literature on European studies and points to a macro phenomenon, namely the slowdown of Europeanisation and/or its regression. However, there is a tendency to dismiss granular details of events that weigh heavily.

Willing to bring a meaningful contribution to what the literature on the subject might be missing, and to offer a preliminary basis for developing an alternative concept, our article covers, in its first section, the contextual setting, and the theoretical framework used to present and assess the factors involved in this process. Moreover, it provides an overview of the concept of 'Europeanisation' from a historically evolving perspective and it tackles two concepts related to it: 'stabilitocracy' and 'de-Europeanisation'. These three concepts are intertwined and interdependent and have made the object of an extended body of literature for the past ten years.

The second section focuses on the theoretical framework in which the above-mentioned concepts are to be understood. Opting for rational choice institutionalism as a framework to analyse the complex relations that constitute Europeanisation, we have presented the theoretical elements one should use when constructing an alternative theory to comprehend the episodes of regression.

The third section connects Europeanisation (as a conditionality for EU accession) with rational choice institutionalism. It sets forth the theoretical conceptualisation of the role of state capture in the Europeanisation process. In the final section of the article, a new theoretical perspective is developed (based on the findings/arguments of the previous section), offering an alternative approach to 'Europeanisation', 'stabilitocracy', and 'de-Europeanisation', which are thus observed in practice and tested. Adapting the conceptualisation made by Stoyanov *et al.* (2019) regarding the way Europeanisation is seized by an illegitimate monopoly on the governance and economy of the countries on track to European accession, this article builds an empirical theory of state capture manifesting itself in key moments.

Contextual and conceptual setting: Europeanisation, de-Europeanisation and stabilitocracy

Before developing an alternative concept to cover what might be missing in understanding the effects of state capture on Europeanisation, a theoretical contextualisation is necessary for highlighting the key concepts under discussion. In the early 2000s, Radaelli (2000) started a long-lasting debate about the analytical devices [i.e., methods] used for studying the European Union. This came as a follow-up to the ontological phase that tried to define Europeanisation in the late 1990s. Radaelli underlined that the concepts of ‘Europeanisation’ and ‘European integration’ should not act as vehicles for new concepts with old meanings. Europeanisation was first defined in 1994 as “an incremental process re-orienting the direction and shape of politics to the degree that EC political and economic dynamics become part of the organisational logic of national politics and policymaking” (Ladrech, 1994, pg. 69). In other words, countries seeking to join the European Union internalise EU’s policy dynamics. For more clarity, Ladrech defined ‘organisational logic’ as the “adaptive processes of organisations to a changed or changing environment” (Ladrech, 1994, pg. 71).

Several years later, based on attempts to study Europeanisation systematically and comparatively, another definition cropped up in this field of research. From this novel perspective, the Europeanisation process was defined as the “emergence and development at the European level of distinct structures of governance, that is, of political, legal, and social institutions associated with political problem solving that formalize interactions among the actors, and of policy networks specializing in the creation of authoritative European rules” (Risse *et al.*, 2001, pg. 3). This definition is similar to Haas’s definition that focused on the ‘loyalty shift’ towards the EU (Haas, 1968).

In the second half of the 2000s, the research on Europeanisation departed from these conceptual debates, with some researchers exploring the domestic impact of Europeanisation projected by the European Union or on the European Union (Flockhart, 2010). Thus, Europeanisation and European integration started to intertwine, with the former being perceived as a new step in European integration theory (Caporaso, 2008). However, at the same time, a ‘postfunctionalist theory’ of European integration does not even mention Europeanisation as an element of its theoretical advancement (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). Moreover, some experts do not perceive Europeanisation as a theory but as a phenomenon that should be explained (Bulmer, 2008).

As a result of using theoretical frameworks to understand Europeanisation, various interpretations and theories about its mechanisms, outcomes (Exadaktylos and Radaelli, 2012; Moumoutzis and Zartaloudis, 2016) and indicators (Nanou *et al.*, 2017) have been developed. Since Europeanisation draws its origins from the study of the implementation of EU’s directives and regulations in EU candidate countries (Toshkov, 2010; Steunenbergh and Toshkov, 2009; Mbaye, 2001; Fjelstul and Carrubba, 2018), the early literature on this topic focused on a neo-institutionalist debate. That debate revolved around the approaches specific to rational choice institutionalism, and the constructivist approaches to Europeanisation that explain its conditions and

mechanisms (Börzel and Risse, 2000; Jacoby, 2004; Kelley, 2004; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005a).

The neo-institutionalist approach is an updated version of the institutional theory applied to the study of the role of institutions — such as organisations, stakeholders, or actors — in Europeanisation (Peters, 2019). Unlike institutionalism, which deals with the rigidity of institutional structures, neo-institutionalism emphasises the interaction between institutions and their broader contexts, acknowledging that the latter induces organisational changes in institutions despite inherent rigidity (Peters, 2019). Neo-institutionalism comprises three strands: rational choice institutionalism, historical institutionalism, and sociological institutionalism (Peters, 2019). Rational choice neo-institutionalism is highlighted by Graziano and Vink, who consider that its essence lies in the abundant political opportunities offered by European integration “when domestic political actors ‘rationally’ use European resources to support predefined preferences” (2017, pg. 40).

In the Western Balkans, the mechanisms and tools used to foster Europeanisation and promote EU enlargement, especially those related to the rule of law and democratisation, have served as a ‘democratic façade’ (Kmezić, 2020). In light of this stratagem, the unfolding events, and the implementation of policies and laws merely mimic the compliance with the conditions negotiated and monitored through the EU’s Stabilisation and Association Process. Since there is no European standard or official blueprint for institution building or monitoring activities in the Western Balkans, the European Union relies on a contractual relation and institutional ties (based on political dialogue and monitoring), coupled with financial assistance and technical aid.

In his study on the Europeanisation of the Western Balkans through the application of the rule of law, Kmezić (2020) addresses a broad range of issues. They refer to the requirements for EU accession and the way these are or should be fulfilled, the institutional or organisational reforms that have been implemented, the actors who manifested resistance and those who supported the reforms, what were the effects of conditionality, and how certain criteria (such as independence, accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness) have changed over the years.

Some studies show that the European Union’s incentives cannot work properly in an increasingly contested field due to corruption, clientelism, and politicisation. In the last years, in the Western Balkans, the EU’s economic and political conditionalities have produced ‘stabilitocracy’ (Bieber *et al.*, 2017). In other words, the EU’s quest for stability in the region has sacrificed the consolidation of democracy and has perpetuated state capture by legitimising the corrupted elites (Richter and Wunsch, 2019).

The concept of ‘stabilitocracy’ (sometimes referred to as ‘stabilocracy’ in the research of various think tanks such as the Center for Strategic & International Studies) was first used by Primatarova and Deimel in 2012 for describing a country that “provides stability externally but domestically oscillates between democracy and autocratic tendencies” (2012, pg. 7). Subsequently, in 2017, Bieber and the BiEPAG experts further refined the conceptualisation of stabilitocracy (Bieber *et al.*, 2017). In their view, stabilitocracy manifests itself when governments claim and/or pretend to

secure stability (by adopting EU's values, and seeking EU integration), while continuing to rely on informal structures based on clientelism, control of the media and generation of superficial political crises. This undermines the rule of law, parliamentary procedures, and the country's overall constitutional legal order (*Ibid.*).

Nowadays, stabilitocracy is present in the Western Balkans. The autocratic model of governance in this region has been continuously reinvented since the 1990s. Over the years, the European Union has restrained itself from reacting to the rise of autocratic governance in the Western Balkan countries. In the specialised literature, we can find an explanation for this impassivity, namely a trade-off between democratisation and stability, the latter being ensured by leaders who have gradually eroded the rule of law in their countries (Mirel, 2018). In other words, EU's quest for stability has sacrificed the consolidation of democracy and has enabled state capture by legitimising the corrupted elites (Richter and Wunsch, 2019). Though WB countries do not respond to democratisation effectively, mainly due to the challenges of upgraded Europeanisation, they have managed to decouple the formal compliance (to EU norms and values) from the democratic transformation at the national level. To sum up, the Western Balkans have backslid on democracy.

Besides Europeanisation and stabilitocracy, the literature on European studies has explored different types of de-Europeanisation. If Europeanisation implies processes characterised by socialisation, learning, and integration, de-Europeanisation triggers the return to the intergovernmental processes of logrolling and hard bargaining (Thomas, 2021). The research on de-Europeanisation comes as a reaction to the literature based on the assumption that Europeanisation facilitates the adoption of European models. Since the late 2000s, a series of studies have explored how EU inputs faced resistance and contestation on the ground (Börzel and Risse, 2008). These developments have subsequently led to the emergence of de-Europeanisation, perceived as a sociologically sensitive approach to classical Europeanisation (Aydın-Düzgit and Kaliber, 2016). This new approach gained momentum (Haughton, 2007; Jacquot and Woll, 2003; Ketola, 2013) due to the need to distinguish between 'EU-isation' and 'Europeanisation', i.e., between the formal and technical process of aligning with EU institutions, policies, and legal structures, on the one hand and, on the other hand, a socio-political and normative context (Kaliber, 2012, 2013, 2014).

Aydın-Düzgit and Kaliber consider that de-Europeanisation indicates the "loss or weakening of the EU/Europe as a normative/political context and as a reference point in domestic settings and national public debates" (2016, pg. 5). Furthermore, this theory of de-Europeanisation does not dismiss the existence of Europeanisation but highlights the distancing of the domestic context from the European system of norms, values and policy expectations. The 'reverse gear' theory of Radaelli and Salter (2019) emphasises the Europeanisation progress can be reversible, at the level of the European Union, through policy dismantling from below (through the actions of challenger governments), and as a manifestation of non-compliance.

With the Europeanisation's evolution over the years, various theoretical frameworks have been used to better understand the intricacies of this process and its effects. The following section presents the main elements of *rational choice*

institutionalism, explaining the reasons that determined us to employ this particular framework.

Rational choice institutionalism as an analytical framework applied to corruption

Understanding how the concept of Europeanisation was developed in the field of European studies, and how de-Europeanisation and stabilitocracy rose to prominence, the current section advocates for the use of rational choice institutionalism (RCI) as an adequate theoretical framework for building an alternative theory that would explain the underlying elements of de-Europeanisation.

As mentioned in the previous section, the concept of Europeanisation has been generated by the relations (in various forms and at different moments) between the European Union and its candidate countries. Therefore, it is necessary to delve more deeply into RCI because this theoretical framework enables us to pinpoint the relevant actors and their decisions in an institutional setting. Traditionally, the authors of the literature on RCI plead for **the supremacy of the logic of consequences** (Noutcheva, 2009, 2012; Kelley, 2004; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005a and b; Vachudova, 2005) **over the logic of appropriateness**, which is a perspective advocated by constructivist authors (Checkel, 1999 and 2001; Manners, 2002; Sjursen, 2006). RCI offers a theoretical framework to understand how political actors react to cost-benefit calculations (Featherstone and Radaelli, 2003), and/or to coercion and material incentives (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004 and 2005a). Moreover, it helps us test if conditionality is successful based on its tangible effects (Schimmelfennig, 2001; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004, 2005b; Grabbe, 2002; Vachudova, 2005). Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005a) evaluated the mechanisms and conditions that prompted Europeanisation during the 2004 Eastern enlargement. To this end, they compared three models: the rationalist institutionalist ‘external incentives model’ (EIM), the ‘social learning model’ (specific to sociological institutionalism), and the ‘lesson-drawing model’. They found that the EIM, based on *acquis* conditionality, was the predominant method for Europeanisation applied in non-member and accession countries. In their 2007 work, the same authors posited that post-accession compliance pathways vary depending on the policy area and the dominant pre-accession rule transfer mechanism, based on conditional incentives or social learning.

Starting from the premise that state capture is an institutionalisation of corruption, we have chosen the RCI framework because, for the past decade, its principal-agent analyses have provided a model for the research on corruption (Rothstein, 2011). A 2011 meta-analysis, conducted by Ugur and Dasgupta to assess the impact of corruption on economic growth, found that every study under analysis adhered to an explicitly stated principal-agent approach to corruption or was “closely related to that approach” (Ugur and Dasgupta, 2011, pg. 43).

Upon finding the best modalities to capture and depict the functioning of an institutional setting, the role of institutions in their wider environment should also be understood. Early theorists perceived formal organisations as bounded and self-contained entities, while institutional theory considers them embedded in their

environment rather than simply interacting with it (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Tolbert and Zucker, 1996). Institutional work, as a more recent strand of institutional theory, explores the functioning of the process wherein the intentional activities of actors impact the institutions under which they operate (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence *et al.*, 2009).

Considering the definition of institutional work as “the purposive action of individuals and organisations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006, pg. 215), RCI devotes enhanced attention to understanding how actors, in their regular work activities, affect the functioning of institutions and their objectives to achieve desired outcomes. Thus, comprehending the role of such individuals means understanding the role of agency in organisational changes.

This narrative is part of the institutional theory’s concept of ‘institutional logics’, proposed by Thornton and Ocasio (2008), and Thornton *et al.* (2012). The latter is defined as “the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organise time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality” (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008, pg. 101). Acknowledging the role of human agency, the *institutional logic* explains how social actors construct and reconstruct their institutional existence and provides them with a set of logics they can mobilise to advance their interests, effect organisational change and enact a new institutional environment.

‘Formal regulative structures’ meant to combat corruption produce limited results, whereas institutional logics, social actors, and the available resources determine the effectiveness of remedies for corruption (Misangyi *et al.*, 2008, pg. 750). Furthermore, culture, structure, and compliance systems are instrumental to the success of anticorruption initiatives (Luo, 2005). Therefore, the current research proposes a RCI theory to prove that state capture is an acute dimension of corruption generated by the social context of institutions, which shape the actions of social/political actors (Pillay and Klivers, 2014).

The internal context of an organisation is essential for its functioning and can be “influenced by the deliberate actions of key members of the organisation, and includes an organisation’s culture and climate, education and training, peer pressure and relationships, leadership and management” (Mannion *et al.*, 2018, pg. 26). That is why the self-interest of key members of the organisation, as rational choice theory assumes, is dictated by their understanding and forming of opinions in support of or against policies based on a self-serving bias (Rhodes *et al.*, 2017; Shwom *et al.*, 2010).

Under the RCI paradigm, an institution is the result of agents willing to address existential issues, forge alliances, and pursue rational interests. While some writers use the term of “actor-centred institutionalism” (Mayntz and Scharpf, 1995), Coleman considers institutions and norms as coordinated and mutually reinforcing patterns of individual behaviour (Coleman, 1990). Rational choice explanations depend on three key elements: “(...) individual preferences, beliefs, and constraints” (Wittek, 2013, pg. 688). In other words, actions are deemed rational if they are linked

to the aforementioned elements. Anchored in economics and organisational theory, RCI postulates that an action is rational as long as it represents the best course of action taken by an agent according to his preferences and beliefs. It can be deemed rational based on the evidence available. This process and the quality of the evidence determine the accuracy of a cost-benefit analysis.

Nevertheless, corrupt behaviour cannot be explained in terms of rationality. We cannot demonstrate that it is logical to be corrupt following the norms of a societal context (Winch, 1964). Rationality cannot provide convincing arguments for justifying corruption because this phenomenon is highly variable and pervasive in the social strata (Rothstein and Teorell, 2008; Uslaner, 2008). Corrupt behaviour emerges “not from a conflict between being good... and being selfish, but instead a tension between conflicting moral norms” (Dungan *et al.*, 2014).

In political and economic sciences, the predominant theory regarding corruption hinges on the principal-agent model. Hence, corruption is labelled as a criminal behaviour of some agents entrusted to act on behalf of some principal (Rose-Ackerman, 1978; Klitgaard, 1988). In some cases, rules are ‘the principal’ and bureaucracy ‘the agent’ (Becker and Stigler, 1974), sometimes rules are ‘agents’ and the citizens are ‘the principals’ (Persson and Tabellini, 2000; Adserà *et al.*, 2003; Besley, 2006).

According to some theories, corruption in itself is ‘an institution.’ North’s definition of institutions as “the rules of the game in a society” is congruent with those theories because it offers a general meaning applicable to both formal and informal institutions (North, 1990). If formal institutions can be considered the legal contracts of a country’s constitution, informal ones can be perceived as tacit agreements, social norms, or codes of conduct (Knight, 1992). At the same time, corruption, as an institution, can be highly formalised (McMillan and Zoido, 2004).

Karklins developed a typology of corrupt activities, ranging from ‘petty corruption’ to the highest level of corruption able to influence political institutions. The first one is a type of medium-level corruption taking the form of exchanges within the bureaucratic hierarchy with the purpose of embezzlement and procurement kickbacks, and the second one aims to undermine electoral processes and results, corrupt the judicial process or the media outlets, leading thus to disinformation or misinformation (Karklins, 2005).

Rose-Ackerman offers two types of models (1999) for the manifestation of corruption within hierarchical bureaucracies. On the one hand, a top-down approach (also presented as a ‘selectorate theory’) wherein corruption works as a policy established by the top political leadership to reward with private goods the support coalitions they benefit from (Bueno de Mesquita *et al.*, 2003). This theoretical approach explains that political leaders secure the compliance/support of their subordinates by informal contracts, allowing them occasionally to get involved in cases of graft and embezzlement, which in return serve as a tool for systematic blackmail and the threat of enforcing the law (Darden, 2008). By contrast, the bottom-up approach implies the concealment of lower-level corruption by high-ranking officials in exchange for a share of the profits of corruption (Cadot, 1987), or cases in which law enforcement officials

might be corrupted while relying on their corrupted superiors in the bureaucratic hierarchy (Basu *et al.*, 1992).

As an institution, corruption has a strong self-reinforcing equilibrium (Aidt, 2003), with its profitability and costliness depending on its frequency. For instance, if a civil servant is surrounded by corrupt officials, it is more profitable for him to be corrupt. However, at the same time, the costs for auditing officials increase (Lui, 1986; Andvig and Moene, 1990; Sah, 2007). Some authors argue that it is not in the interest of the individual to be honest, if the group he is part of has gained notoriety for being corrupt. Thus, the choices of the older members of a group or organisation will be passed on to the younger generation long after the former has gone (Tirole, 1986).

The institution of ‘corruption’ cannot be perceived anymore as a systematic pattern of events with negative externalities that spread to other parts of a system. This was previously depicted by the term ‘greasing the wheels’ (Rose-Ackerman, 1999). In the logic of RCI, institutional arrangements are apparently amorphous, but actually consist of a collection of rules and incentives, which set parameters that guide individual behaviour (Peters, 2019). Such rules determine the political/social space in which individuals act rationally (Jones, 2001; Jones, 2003). In turn, individual actors try to influence the behaviour of others to maximise their self-interest and profits and to bend the rules of the institutional arrangements.

Since we have already covered the theoretical elements of RCI and the functioning of the corruption as an institution, the following section presents the interplay between EU conditionality and state capture, showcasing the institutional setting and the determining factors (money, power, glory), as presented by Richter and Wunsch.

The linkage between EU conditionality and state capture

Building on the arguments for rational choice institutionalism (RCI) and the institutional nature of corruption, Richter and Wunsch (2019) inspired us to continue in this direction of research. Their article brought three key contributions to the debate on EU conditionality in transition contexts. Firstly, it provided a theoretical model that explains the various effects of conditionality, including its negative impact on domestic politics. Secondly, it emphasised the importance of informal politics in EU candidate countries, adding to existing academic discussions on the temporal limitations of conditionality and the role of domestic politics in mediating EU pressures. Finally, their article explained an empirical puzzle, by demonstrating how EU conditionality has paradoxically strengthened state capture, while encouraging compliance with formal membership requirements.

In a broader discussion tackling the EU’s transformative power in the Western Balkans and the external promotion of democracy, their article would suggest that the widespread state capture, which poses a significant challenge, is responsible for the disconnect between formal compliance and liberal democracy in the Western Balkans (Keil, 2018). The European Union has acknowledged that state capture is a major obstacle to reforms in the region and is currently seeking to address it through increased monitoring (European Commission, 2018).

However, one could argue that the EU conditionality has inadvertently reinforced the patterns of state capture instead of mitigating them. The existing literature suggests that EU enlargement policy may have unintended negative consequences in third countries, such as the creation of superficial organisational structures that mask underlying informal decision-making practices. The proposed explanation for the adverse effects of EU conditionality focuses on domestic politics. It argues that domestic actors engage, both formally and informally, in a continuous struggle for political power and influence. Compliance with political conditionality is determined not only by adaptation costs or by policy appropriateness, but also by patterns of informal power politics. Understanding the EU's impact at the national level requires a systematic examination of how conditionality affects informal politics, particularly about state capture.

Upon developing their argumentation on the role and particularities of state capture, different authors have offered an overview of this concept that encompasses its key features. First of all, the concept of 'state capture' originated from the research on transition economies in Eastern Europe, especially that conducted by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the World Bank (Rijkers *et al.*, 2014). It describes a form of corruption whereby informal decision-making processes fail to integrate into formal democratic systems (Grzymala-Busse, 2008). This leads to the subordination of the legislative, administrative, and judicial branches to private interests, hindering the state's ability to fight corruption and represent citizens effectively (Pech, 2009). State capture results in selective rule application, resource allocation in line with private interests, and biased decision-making. This creates a stagnating *status quo* resistant to change.

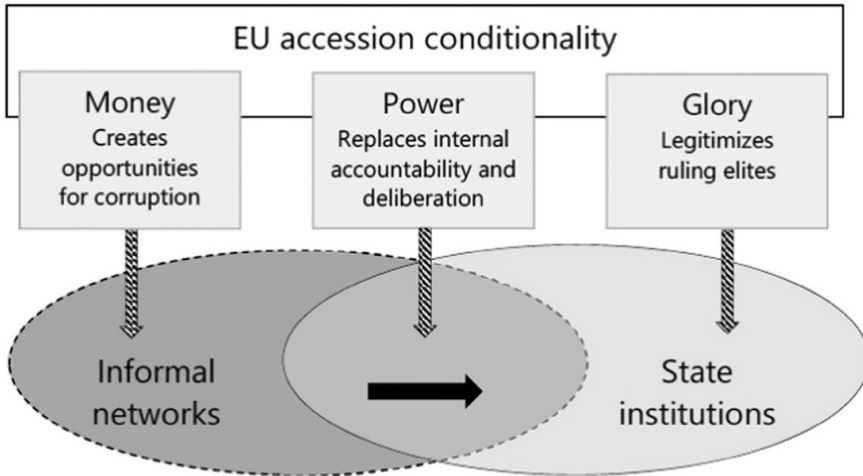
Based on this perspective on state capture, Richter and Wunsch argue that the relationship between conditionality and state capture involves three mechanisms: money, power, and glory, each representing a different dimension within the state capture model. As regards the first mechanism (i.e., money), the authors argue that market liberalisation is central to both the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) and the EU accession process. However, while the Western European countries have gradually implemented deregulation, privatisation, and the European single market, the Western Balkan countries have been faced with the difficult "dilemma of simultaneity" (Offe, 1991). They had to implement simultaneously political and market reforms, while undertaking comprehensive state-building processes, and consequently their political systems have become vulnerable to state capture. The lack of robust regulatory frameworks has allowed a narrow elite of economic actors to amass significant private gains, establish clientelist networks, and increase its political influence.

Richter and Wunsch offered a visual representation of how state capture functions in their scenario presented below, in *Figure 1*.

Besides this theoretical conceptualisation of the role of state capture in the Europeanisation process, the authors provide a case study of Serbia. In the absence of a direct indicator for state capture (Fazekas and Tóth, 2016), the following indirect factors were taken into account: the gap between governance effectiveness and political participation, the levels of political participation and accountability, and the degree of corruption control. The next section of this paper presents an alternative perspective

on the underlying elements of state capture responsible for the progress or regression of Europeanisation in developing states.

Figure 1. “EU conditionality and the state capture model”



Source: Richter and Wunsch, 2019.

A theory of state-captured Europeanisation

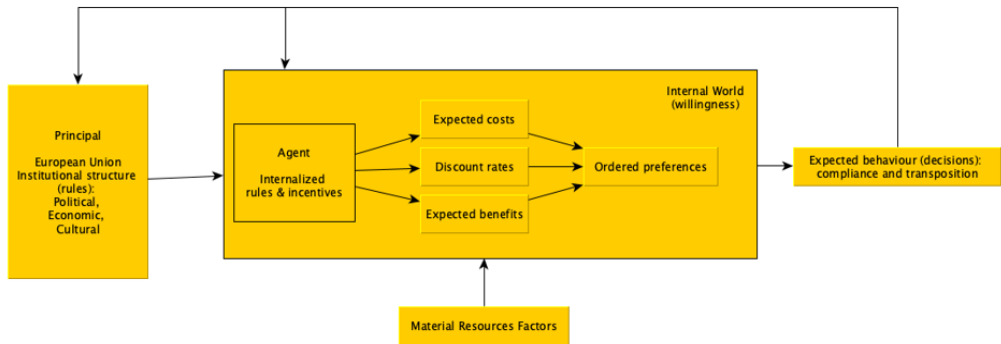
Through its findings, Richter and Wunsch’s paper offered an important theoretical framework that confirmed the importance of the systematic incorporation of informal domestic politics into the research on the impact of the EU’s accession conditionality. Our present approach aims to further advance the observations of the so-called side effects of the EU’s efforts to bolster the rule of law in third countries. Having established the research hypothesis, the premises underpinning Europeanisation, and the rationale behind the use of rational choice theory, we present in *Figure 2* an analytic framework for institutional choice that covers both the internal and external worlds. On the one hand, the internal world is represented by ‘the agency’, the institutional structure that influences the internal decision-making process (of the Western Balkan countries, in this case), according to stimuli from the Principal/external world. The agents of the Principal are the political leaders of the internal world. The political leadership negotiates and receives from the Principal – the European Union in this instance – the prerequisites for accession. The scenario is built on actions unfolding within the limits of a typical Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), which has been ratified. Each SAA signed with the EU is unique. Moreover, the negotiation, ratification, and implementation of SAAs have different characteristics in each country. Without delving into the complexities of the negotiations, monitoring, achievement of the Copenhagen criteria, or of the Stabilisation and Association Process, it is worth noting that each SAA defines mechanisms and official terms for the implementation of reforms aimed to ensure alignment with the EU in all policy areas until standards are met for EU accession. Furthermore, the internal world depicted in *Figure 2* can

be associated with a typical ‘national programme for the implementation of the SAA’ that candidate countries adopt as a roadmap for meeting the requirements. For a more detailed analysis of rational choice institutionalism applied to the process of European integration, see the research conducted by Schneider and Ershova (2018).

On the other hand, the Principal (the external world) constitutes the institutional structure that influences the agent’s decision-making process at national level (i.e., the internal world). As already mentioned, here the Principal is the European Union, which provides material resources/factors that shape the agent’s expectations regarding the benefits and costs of joining the EU. The material resources offered are conditions, guidelines, and support for successfully adopting changes that align the candidate country with the internal rules of the European Union.

The feedback loop, shown in *Figure 2*, offers a minimalist representation of the internal, top-down process, specific to a strategy for fulfilling the requirements of the SAA. This feedback loop symbolises the process of internal transformation and is the key element of the theoretical framework presented by the current research.

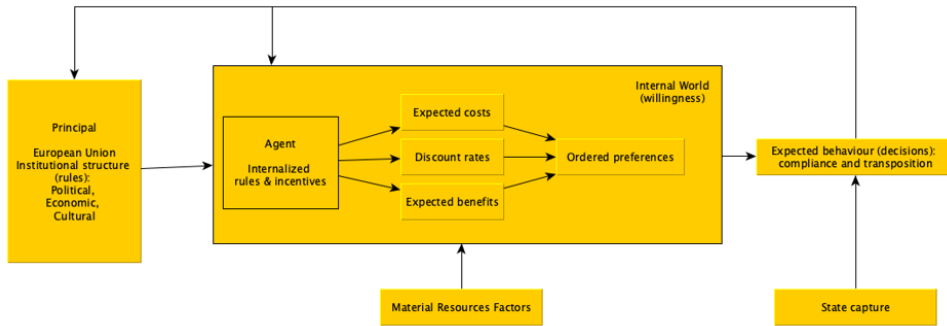
Figure 2. Feedback loop for fulfilling the SAA requirements



Source: Author’s conceptualisation.

The conceptualisation of the alternative theoretical framework, depicted in *Figure 3*, traces its origins back to the State Capture Assessment Diagnostics (SCAD) elaborated by Stoyanov, Gerganov, and Yalamov (2019). SCAD is a methodology developed with the purpose of verifying the existence of state capture practices in given economic sectors and regulatory institutions. Subsequently, SCAD enables the adoption of policy adjustments that leave no window of opportunity for special interests to use the institution of public governance for private ends. In a roadmap study published by the Centre for the Study of Democracy, state capture is defined as “a deviant form of relations between the state, the business sector and the political class” (2019, pg. 27). Previously, it has been defined as a specific and extreme form of corruption (Brooks *et al.*, 2013) found in both transition and developed states. Considered to be an evolutionary institutionalisation of corruption (Magyar, 2016), state capture comprises various forms of corruption, such as favouritism, cronyism, conflict of interest, and abuse of discretionary power and property.

Figure 3. The hypothetical role of state capture in a feedback loop for fulfilling the SAA requirements



Source: Author's conceptualisation.

SCAD includes two major components for measuring state capture effects. First, the Business State Capture Pressure (BSCP), a model focused on *the monopolisation pressure* at national, sectoral, or institutional levels. Second, a model developed around State Capture Enablers (SCE) that encompasses institutional and environmental factors at the national level. Furthermore, SCAD differentiates between three main components of state capture:

- Institutional enablers (for instance, the inefficiency of anticorruption norms, the lack of a culture of integrity).
- Environmental enablers (e.g., corruption in the public administration and the judiciary system).
- Dimensions (initiators) of state capture (e.g., political capture, business capture, etc.). Dimensions are built on the characteristics of the captors of state functions (government officials, parties, businesses, etc.). These actors exert an illegitimate influence: they can change the legal environment, acquire complete control over the media, gain particular access to public resources, etc. to their own benefit and at the expense of the public good.

In the SCAD framework, institutional enablers form the institutional environment in which the businesses of a specific sector operate. The ability of that environment to ensure the impartiality of the administration is essential. Such enablers can affect all the actors in a sector. Hence, their value is measured at the sectoral level. Organisations that regulate businesses in specific sectors offer an illustrative example in this sense. According to SCAD, the most important institutional enablers are the effectiveness of anticorruption policies, the integrity of public officials, the neutral attitude towards citizens and businesses, and the lack of bias toward specific private interests.

Environmental enablers refer to the corruption transactions and the processes/procedures that facilitate or inhibit them. Since they have only an indirect impact on state capture measurable at the national level, it is worth mentioning that the three major environmental enablers are the level of media freedom (or media independence),

the overall level of administrative corruption in the country, and the general level of corruption in the judiciary and law enforcement. Moreover, the soundness of the environmental setting in which state capture occurs is detrimental to such enablers. If characterised by the rule of law, a low level of administrative corruption, and media freedom, then the occurrence of state capture is minimal.

In the literature on the limited effectiveness of EU conditionality, we have observed the dichotomy between interest- and identity-based explanations, as drivers of domestic change. The current theoretical approach proposes a new perspective on the implications of state capture in the context of the Europeanisation process. Admitting that state capture is a key structural reason for decoupling formal compliance from democratic performance in the candidate countries, the SCAD tool can be instrumental in further exploring the environmental enablers' influence in crucial decision-making. Such an approach could apply to the analysis of the literature on the involvement of oligarchic networks (or parties) in decision-making and state capture at the expense of open deliberation and access to power for outsiders (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2007).

Examples from the specialised literature that support the arguments developed in this paper are found in Pestic's early works on state capture and widespread corruption in Serbia. As the aforementioned author says, "political elites gain control of public offices, enterprises, utilities, and resources through a mingling of state, political party, and economic power" (Pestic, 2007, pg. 7). Pestic presented six mechanisms of state capture illustrated with examples from the mid-2000s in Serbia (the case of the Serbian railways' procurement procedure, the case of the National Savings Banks, to name a few). Examples from 2017 onwards are given in the specialised literature. Pavićević has provided state capture examples related to the SPP's campaign to delegitimise and criminalise the political opposition: e.g., the cases "Helicopter" and "Savamala" characterised by selective justice and impunity (Pavićević, 2017). Čečen *et al.* (2018) listed 12 examples of state capture in Serbia, several related to Europeanisation, namely:

- The trial of Mirjana Marković – manipulation of statistical data, and prosecution system weaknesses.
- The case of judge Vladimir Vučinić, who left the judiciary as a result of the pressures he was subjected to during the trial of the businessman Miroslav Mišković, pressures meant to influence his decisions.
- The case of Minister Goran Knežević, which revealed the arbitrary nature of prosecution decisions in situations involving campaign financing and politicians' asset declarations.
- The cases of Bogoljub Karić and Stanko Subotić – show possible dual political influence on the work of prosecution authorities, with particular emphasis on the statute of limitations and other systemic weaknesses exploited by the police, judiciary, and prosecution.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to illustrate the value of rational choice institutionalism (RCI) as a theoretical framework for analysing corruption. We have proven the utility of such a choice through the development of an alternative theory centred on state capture as a disruptive, derailing, and sometimes a regressive element in the process of Europeanisation. This analysis and the theoretical alternative set forth showcase the RCI's ability to bring under its umbrella the perspectives of various authors. This is just a preliminary stage in broader research on corruption, state capture, and Europeanisation. We have tested the value of the RCI framework and the alternative theory to see if they help us understand the reality they are supposed to describe, and if their use might engender falsifiable predictions.

This alternative conceptual model – i.e., state-captured Europeanisation – enables us to investigate and explain specific episodes of decoupling between apparent compliance to EU values and norms and actual democracy levels in decline. In sharp contrast to the External Incentives Model (EIM), which failed to explain the occurrence of this phenomenon, the Business State Capture Pressure (BSCP) and the environmental enablers can offer new insights into the state capture and its various forms of power abuse for private gains, which can be decisive in hindering the progress of the Europeanisation process.

As avenues for further research, more in-depth studies should be conducted using the SCAD framework to test the concept of 'state-captured Europeanisation', observing a sequence of consecutive years in a comparative approach to the politics of the Western Balkan countries. The focus should be on the episodes of stagnation in certain policy areas (when state institutions and high-level civil servants adopt inaction or backslide on good practices designed to bring them closer to EU accession) because these could be manifestations of 'state-captured Europeanisation'.

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Status Seeking by Small States: The Case of Lithuania and the EU's Policy on Belarus

Beāte Livdanska, Karlis Bukovskis¹

Abstract: *Using the example of the Republic of Lithuania and of its engagement towards Belarus, this paper seeks to explain how small states may elevate their status in the European Union by influencing the common foreign policy. Thus, it addresses Lithuania's specific interests and the rationale behind its desire to consolidate its status among EU's partners in the context of the violent post-election crackdowns on the opposition in neighbouring Belarus. Moreover, this paper seeks to examine the theoretical conceptualisations of status seeking and, to this end, it uses empirical evidence from the specific Lithuanian-Belarusian case. The article concludes that by its strong diplomatic and political outcry against Belarus, accompanied by the hosting of the Belarusian opposition's leadership, Lithuania not only demonstrated that it is a pro-democratic country, but also flexed its foreign policy muscles on the international stage. The motivation behind its foreign policy was a positive change for Lithuania among the EU Member States and a revamp of the country's image to free it from the post-Soviet "stamp". The heartening feedback from its partners in the EU and NATO has cemented Lithuania's resolve to be a trustworthy and capable partner that does not shy away from taking the initiative and from assuming responsibilities in the European Union's foreign policy.*

Keywords: *Small states, status seeking, European Union, Lithuania, Belarus.*

Introduction

Small states constitute assuredly the largest number of countries in the modern world. While most of them are internationally recognised *de jure* and *de facto*, and therefore are members of the United Nations, their very existence is a phenomenon of international relations that continues to puzzle many scholars. The sovereignty principle protects the statehood of numerous small countries that otherwise would be absorbed by mightier countries. When making foreign or economic policy choices, or even societal choices, small countries often undergo pressure from larger countries. Hence, each decision related to foreign policy, economic and societal affairs becomes a security matter for them. 'Blunders' are often not forgiven and cause vulnerabilities that can be exploited by external enemies.

After having secured for themselves a relative autonomy in terms of policy-making and security, small states tend to engage in more pro-active and assertive

¹Beāte Livdanska is a visiting Lecturer and a PhD student in political science at Riga Stradiņš University, and researcher at the Latvian Institute of International Affairs.

E-mail: beate.livdanska@rsu.lv

Karlis Bukovskis, PhD, is an Associate Professor at Riga Stradiņš University, and the Director of the Latvian Institute of International Affairs.

E-mail: karlis.bukovskis@rsu.lv.

foreign actions, if the international environment allows. They seek to increase their financial welfare, influence and prestige, just like the larger and more resourceful countries. Naturally, the tactics and toolkit used by small states can differ from those used by larger states. The tactics and toolkit can range from financial investments (e.g., those made by the Nordic countries or Switzerland to acquire influence and prestige) to malevolent actions: hybrid war tactics, the weaponisation of migration (e.g., the case of Belarus). The small states' leadership aspires to gain prestige and influence, no matter how relative the latter may be. Having limited financial resources, small states may use their membership in multilateral organisations to enhance their international visibility and foreign policy presence. Small EU Member States, among other things, may be inclined to develop their foreign policy specialisation² or to elevate their status in the EU.

In this specific context, it is worth mentioning that from the analysis of Lithuania's foreign policy and stance vis-à-vis the political instability in Belarus we can extrapolate patterns of behaviour of other small states that do not have EU member state status.

Moreover, it is equally important to emphasise that our choice to focus on the *Lithuanian-Belarusian case* has been determined by two factors. First, Belarus' geostrategic and political significance, not only in the narrow security context of the Lithuanian-Belarusian bilateral relations, but also in the broader security context of Europe. Second, the need to fill the research gap concerning the EU's interactions with Belarus, and especially the dynamics of relations between small EU member states and Minsk.

Status seeking by a small country is the central issue of this paper, which aims to analyse the case of Lithuania influencing the European Union policy on Belarus to establish a pattern of behaviour. This article employs qualitative research methods: document analysis and a specific case study. The first chapter of this article establishes what is a small country based on its definition. The second chapter addresses the concept of "status" mirrored in the small states' behaviour. Finally, the third chapter uses empirical evidence to evaluate the hypothesis that Lithuania's current foreign policy approach is determined primarily by its specific status as a proponent of EU's policy on Belarus.

Smallness as a Formative Power of Foreign Policy

The impact and significance of major powers on the world stage are undisputable. However, it is not accurate to suggest that only they have the ability to shape the international system. Following the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire in 1919, and the subsequent decline of other European empires (the British, the French, etc.), the decolonisation process of the 1950s and 1960s, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991³, the international system witnessed the emergence of numerous

²Bukovskis, K., Palkova, A., and Bikovs, A., (2021). "Foreign Policy Specialization of Small States: Latvia's Engagement in Central Asia", *Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 114-129.

³Neumann, I.B., and Gstöhl, S., (2006). "Introduction. Lilliputians in Gulliver's World?", in Ingebritsen, C., Beyer, J.L., Neumann, I.B., and Gstöhl, S. (eds.), *Small States in International Relations*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, pg. 5.

sovereign states, most of which are small. Unlike the established major powers or large states, the small states have consistently grappled with the challenge of a lack of consensus on their definition.⁴

Small states are mainly defined on the basis of quantitative indicators. According to the World Bank definition, all countries with a population of less than 1.5 million inhabitants fall into the category of small states, and their overall levels of development and economic capacity are significantly lower, compared to those of larger states. As indicated by Archer and Nugent, not only the economic capacity (specifically: GDP) is important for categorising states,⁵ but also their territorial size. However, it should be noted that quantitative indicators do not provide strict limits for delineating small states, as highlighted by B. Thorhallsson. In the international system, there are several countries with small territories, but high population levels and strong economic indicators, which allow them to be classified as major powers or defined as such.⁶ Therefore, it is necessary to refer to the three ideal-type definitions of small state proposed by Baldacchino and Wivel.

The first ideal-type definition is rooted in history and it indicates that small states are those states that are not great powers.⁷ Theoretically, such an explanation would be correct. However, nowadays, it is not that easy to define major powers as it was in the 19th century.⁸ The second ideal-type definition distinguishes small states from the other states based on their absolute or relative material capabilities, while placing a special emphasis on the military aspect. As noted by Baldacchino and Wivel, a small state lacks the military capability required to project power beyond its borders or to deter an enemy attack. Hence, states can be categorised by their ability or inability to respond to security challenges.⁹ From this perspective, the task of categorising states into small and large states seems straightforward. Nevertheless, this definition is not adequate for the case study conducted on Lithuania within the scope of this paper.

The third ideal-type definition presents the small state as a “political construct”. It stems from the assumption that a state is viewed as “small” due to the perceptions and preferences of its citizens, of its institutions, and of the other states. In other words, a state can be described as small in the specific reality in which it exists.¹⁰ Such a definition would enable us to explain Lithuania’s particular interest in the EU’s policy on Belarus, manifest in its activities carried out within the EU’s institutional framework (and especially within the Council of the European Union, which plays a crucial role as a forum that allows Member States to coordinate their policies across various areas). Lithuania’s proactive role in dealing with the Belarus issue at EU level

⁴Panke, D., (2010). *Small States in the European Union: Coping with Structural Disadvantages*, 1st ed., Surrey: Ashgate, pg. 15.

⁵Archer, C., and Nugent, N., (2002). “Introduction: Small States and the European Union”, *Current Politics and Economics of Europe*, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 1-10.

⁶Thorhallsson, B. (2018). “Studying Small States: a Review”, *Small States & Territories*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pg. 18.

⁷Wivel, A., Bailes, A.J.K., and Archer, C., (2018). “Small states and international security”, in Wivel, A., Bailes, A.J.K, and Archer, C., *Small States and International Security: Europe and Beyond*, London: Routledge, pg. 3.

⁸*Ibid.*, pg. 3.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 3-5.

¹⁰Radoman, J., (2018). “Small States in World Politics: State of the Art”, *Journal of Regional Security*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 182-183. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5937/JRS1802179R>.

would later stimulate its desire to acquire a specific status in the European Union and to influence other policies. Therefore, we can infer that it is possible to formulate a definition tailored to small EU Member States.

As indicated by Thorhallsson and Wivel, all states are sovereign and equal in the European Union's institutional framework. Hence, they have equal rights to influence the international affairs regardless of their size or power.¹¹ It follows that, within the EU's framework, there is no consensual definition meant to place Member States in specific categories. Thorhallsson and Wivel also point out that usually the small states' views do not carry much weight in the security-policy sector.¹² Consequently, these states are more active in policy sectors where they have a stronger political and economic interest. However, in Lithuania's case, we can notice a pronounced interest in Belarus' domestic and foreign policies, which is natural, considering their geographical proximity and their historical relations. Lithuania's political positioning toward Belarus is justified by the challenges arising from the latter's internal politics (human rights violations and authoritarian regime policies) and foreign policy, based on close ties with Russia. Thus, Lithuania's interest in Belarus' domestic and foreign policies is coupled with concerns over its national security and the European Union's security.

It is crucial to emphasise that small EU Member States consider that their integration into the EU's institutional framework is meant to effectively represent their interests and achieve the implementation of desired policies. However, significant challenges stand in their way and small states need to mobilise greater resources to navigate the complexities of the institutional framework.¹³ Here, by resources we mean diplomatic resources, assuming that many agreements are reached 'behind closed doors'. The small states' lack of a large administrative apparatus leads to the need of setting priorities, but at the same time enables a more effective decision-making process. The formal, institutional communication in a small state is not as restrictive as that in larger states, and the resource constraints facilitate manoeuvring through various informal channels of policy influence. In light of these considerations, it is clear that if a state belongs to the category of small states this does not necessarily imply that its ability to act effectively in an international institutional framework is limited; rather, the opposite. The small states' activities are noteworthy. Therefore, the next section of this study is dedicated to analysing the country status as an element that can serve as a driving force for the small states acting within the EU framework in specific policy contexts.

Understanding the interplay between status and small states

The discussion in the previous section suggests that small states are noteworthy players in the international system. Their definition has no negative bearing on their role, especially within institutional frameworks (e.g., within the European Union, in the context of this research). Hence, it is crucial to address the question of why small states

¹¹Thorhallsson, B., and Wivel, A., (2006). "Small States in the European Union: What Do We Know and What Would We Like to Know", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 19, No. 4, pg. 652.

¹²*Ibid.*, pg. 659.

¹³Thorhallsson, B., (2002). "Small States in the European Union: A Theoretical Approach", in Beltrán, L., Maestro, J., and Salo-Lee, L. (eds.), *European Peripheries in Interaction: The Nordic Countries and the Iberian Peninsula*, Universidad de Alcalá, Servicio de Publicaciones, pg. 53.

are so active in specific policy sectors. The small countries' determination to seek status in the international system should be seen as an additional instrument to their toolkit of foreign policy strategies. Choosing a foreign policy strategy tailored to a country's capabilities and interests can become a key to success not only in strengthening security, but also in increasing influence at regional and international levels. However, the small countries' foreign policy strategies often focus on their ability to respond to different security challenges. In the international relations theory and practice, these strategies imply relations with powerful countries, and balancing against potential threats, by bandwagoning or developing hedging strategies or by remaining neutral.¹⁴ In this section, for the purpose of this article, we assume that the driving force of the small states' actions – visible in this case study on Lithuania – is their status, or in a broader context, the efforts to obtain it.

The interactions between states, irrespective of their size or classification as small or large states, occur based on the understanding that there is a certain hierarchy within the international system and that states aim to achieve greater political and economic influence and prestige. In this context, prestige is an important element because it has a hierarchy of its own, born of the acceptance of the status quo by lesser powers who aspire to form alliances with one or several major powers. Thus, small states acknowledge the hegemon as a provider or guarantor of public goods, and they contribute to the establishment of an ideology that rationalises the hegemon's dominance. Ultimately, prestige stems from a state's economic and military capabilities. It can be viewed as the credibility of a state's power and it serves to clarify how nations can accomplish their objectives without necessarily resorting to direct exertion of power. The third aspect – the power credibility – encompasses a set of rights and rules related to three distinct domains: diplomacy, warfare, and various other forms of state interaction.¹⁵ One can assume that the dominant or great powers shape the international rules and institutions, but does this assumption fully correspond to the realities of the contemporary international system? Although the international system is commonly viewed as an environment with a distinct hierarchical structure, the small states' efforts put into specific EU policy sectors can lead to optimal benefits, as small EU members may thus acquire the status they crave for or maximise their prestige.

According to Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth, status, by definition, refers to a certain hierarchy and order. In a hierarchy, the issue of status is not taken for granted. On the contrary, it implies a generally acknowledged pre-eminence. Each state recognises that it is positioned higher or lower than the others within a specific hierarchical structure¹⁶. Thus, the definition of status inherently implies that a state cannot unilaterally assign to itself a status. There must be an interstate interaction, including within an institutional framework, to recognise the existence of a country status. If such an interaction is necessary, it is logical to wonder how to determine the status of a small state, like Lithuania, in the context of EU's policy on Belarus. Is status determined by the pursuit of certain goals or by the outcome and consequences of specific activities? This issue

¹⁴Vaicekauskaitė, Ž.M., (2017). "Security Strategies of Small States in a Changing World", *Journal on Baltic Security*, Vol. 3, No. 2. DOI 10.1515/jobs-2017-0006.

¹⁵Gilpin, R., (1981). *War and Change in International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-49.

¹⁶Dafoe, A., Renshon, J., and Huth, P., (2014). "Reputation and Status as Motives for War", *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 17, pg. 375.

is of utmost importance in the case of the states considered small in the international system.

As Neumann and de Carvalho have pointed out, the smaller states' real problem is not so much about being recognised as equals by the great powers, it is rather about being recognised alongside the great powers. However, for the purposes of this analysis, it would be appropriate to employ the concept of 'good power', proposed by de Carvalho and Neumann in their analysis of the Norwegian case.¹⁷ Hence, the concept of 'good power' can be applied to the small states who are recognised alongside the great powers thanks to a consistent strategic approach that enables them to achieve their interests and increase their influence, by engaging in various multilateral forums and actions, and by fostering good norms and values (e.g., human rights, democracy) internationally. The reinforcement of a small country's status requires interaction with the other states to validate that specific status.¹⁸ Thus, the status sought and acquired opens up new opportunities for international interactions, which can further solidify it. Based on this assumption, we can first discuss multilateral formats (e.g., the meetings held by the EU institutions) as a crucial setting for states not only to attain status but also to affirm it. Secondly, if a small state acts as if it already possesses a strong status, it is crucial to see it successfully engaged in specific policy sectors in which typically small states do not engage. It is noteworthy that de Carvalho and Sande Lie have highlighted the importance of the peace and security sectors for assessing the status of a small state like Norway.¹⁹ However, such an assessment can target other policy sectors as well. For example, in Lithuania's case, it can be applied to the economic sector and to the normative efforts in the security sector.

First and foremost, to better understand whether "status seeking" can truly be regarded as a driving force of the small states' demarches in a specific policy sector within the EU framework, it is essential to bear in mind the point we made about the engagement of small states in policy sectors where such engagement would usually not be expected. This kind of engagement in policies that seem to be "out of their league" suggests that small states have realised they can elevate their status through relevant hierarchical interactions with influential states (which are often major powers) in particular policy sectors. Status is a relational concept; it is meaningless outside the nexus of relations at the societal or international levels. The country status can be gained and improved based on recognition from other countries (typically, from major powers or larger states with established status in a specific sector), or lost.²⁰ Finally, this allows us to conclude that the status is dynamic in nature and cannot be taken for granted as an inherent and inalienable element.

These assumptions about a hierarchy of status generate debates regarding the relevance of the comparison between small states and major powers. As previously mentioned, a small state can acquire a higher status recognised by major powers. Yet,

¹⁷Neumann, I.B., and de Carvalho, B. (eds.), (2015). *Small States and Status Seeking: Norway's Quest for International Standing*, Routledge, pg. 16.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pg. 16.

¹⁹ de Carvalho, B., and Lie, J.H.S., (2015). "A great power performance. Norway, status and the policy of involvement", in Neumann, I.B., and de Carvalho, B., *op. cit.*, pp. 56-57.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 59.

which is the significance of this new status and how is it perceived by other small countries or 'among peers'? In this regard, the multilateral frameworks that facilitate interactions play a crucial role. Schia and Sending underscore that there the small states' search for status is different, especially due to the specific conditions of multilateral frameworks, which operate mainly in a normative perspective.²¹ Hence, state interactions are governed therein by the norms and rules that countries adhere to. Therefore, a country's status is defined more by its concrete actions or role (in a certain multilateral framework) than by its resources or economic capacity. The roles within such formats may vary. For example, in the next section of this article, we are talking about the way Lithuania grappled with the Belarusian politics and influenced the EU's stance towards Minsk to safeguard its national and European interests. Thus, this small Baltic state assumed the status of an 'advocate' for the EU's policy on Belarus.²² This allows us to conclude that different multilateral frameworks enable small states, regardless of their economic capacity and size, to become a driving force in certain policy sectors, thereby improving their status among other countries, whether great or small. As noted earlier, research on the small states in the international system is a relatively narrow niche, partly because there is no unified definition of small states. Given these circumstances, the aim of this paper is to examine the significance that small states assign to the country status. The country status and 'status seeking' by small states are relatively under-researched topics, as evidenced by the research conducted on Norway and edited by Neumann and de Carvalho – "Small States Status Seeking: Norway's quest for international standing". Based on this study, one can conclude that the analysis of country status is significantly enriched by specific case studies, such as our in-depth study on Lithuania. We consider that our paper represents a notable contribution to the theoretical debate and literature on the interplay between status and small states.

The case of Lithuania

This section lays out the reasoning behind Lithuania's actions within the scope of the EU's policy on Belarus. It provides examples that validate the hypothesis that Lithuania's actions, as a proponent of the aforementioned policy, have been driven primarily by status seeking. Lithuania and Belarus have somewhat complex bilateral relations shaped by close historical ties, geographical proximity, and the current political situation in Vilnius and Minsk. The outcome of the 2020 Belarusian presidential elections and the subsequent events not only led to a deterioration of these bilateral relations, but also entailed changes in the EU's policy on Belarus to address this new geopolitical reality in which Belarus represents a potential security threat not only to Lithuania, but also to the other EU Member States.

Shortly after the rigged elections in Belarus (held on August 9, 2020), Lithuania was among the first EU Member States whose top officials, including the president

²¹Schia, N.N., and Sending, O.J., (2015). "Status and sovereign equality: Small states in multilateral settings" in Iver B. Neumann and Benjamin de Carvalho, *op. cit.*, pg. 73.

²²Kłysiński, K., (2013). "No other choice but co-operation. The background of Lithuania's and Latvia's relations with Belarus", OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, July 1. Available at: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2013-01-07/no-other-choice-co-operation-background-lithuanias-and-latvias>. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

and the foreign minister, declared that Aliaksandr Lukashenko is not the legitimate president of Belarus, and that the massive suppression of the peaceful opposition protests is unacceptable.^{23,24} Lithuania's reaction was appropriate and foreseeable, given the results of the electoral process and the ensuing human rights violations. It was foreseeable not only due to the neighbouring relations, but also due to Lithuania's status as an EU Member State, which requires a unitary view on the adherence to democratic norms. It is noteworthy that, on August 12, 2020, a few days after the brutal suppression of the Belarusian protests, the Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda set forth a three-step plan designed to restore peace in Belarus, that is, to stop the violence, to initiate a dialogue with the civil society by establishing a National Council, and to immediately release detained civilians. Thus, Lithuania was the first among all EU Member States to come up with practical recommendations on how to stabilise the situation in the neighbouring country.²⁵

However, two factors play a major role in Lithuania's positioning vis-à-vis Belarus that calls for increased attention. First, Lithuania's sharp rhetoric that theoretically could affect the security of this small EU Member State, given its geographic proximity to Belarus and their former close economic relations. Such blunt statements would normally be expected from a larger Member State like Germany. Second, the fact that Lithuania was among the first EU members to question the legitimacy of Lukashenko's re-election is highly significant. It demonstrates Lithuania's efforts to take the lead in the development of the EU's policy on Belarus. These efforts are also illustrated by Lithuania's subsequent statements and proactive stance. Lithuania became the first EU Member State and, all the more important, the first Baltic state (which makes it a leader among "kin" or other small Member States, like Latvia and Estonia) to call for concrete action. On August 12, 2020, Lithuania opened its borders to Belarusian citizens, allowing them to seek asylum on its territory.²⁶ Moreover, it hosted Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, becoming for the latter a refuge.²⁷ Thus, Lithuania took decisive steps to consolidate its stance on the political situation in Minsk, and prove its readiness to support the Belarusian democratisation efforts. Consequently, it became a centre for the development of those democratic processes, and a safe haven for the leaders of the Belarusian opposition. At the same time, Lithuania's position and actions set an example for its neighbouring countries,

²³Lithuanian National Radio and Television, (2020). "Lithuanian president: Lukashenko not legitimate leader of Belarus", August 14. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1210314/lithuanian-president-lukashenko-not-legitimate-leader-of-belarus>. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

²⁴ Beniušis, V., BNS. "Former president' Lukashenko should 'face reality', says Lithuanian foreign minister", Lithuanian National Radio and Television, August 16. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1211198/former-president-lukashenko-should-face-reality-says-lithuanian-foreign-minister>. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

²⁵Lithuanian Republic Presidency, (2020). "The President's plan for Belarus: stop the violence, release detainees and start a dialogue with civil society", August 12. Available at: <https://lrp.lt/en/news/the-presidents-plan-for-belarus-stop-the-violence-release-detainees-and-start-a-dialogue-with-civil-society/34510>. Accessed on: October 22, 2024.

²⁶The Baltic Times, (2020). "Lithuania allows unrestricted entry to Belarusians 'for humanitarian purposes'", August 12. Available at: <https://www.baltictimes.com/lithuania-allows-unrestricted-entry-to-belarusians-for-humanitarian-purposes/>. Accessed on: 24 July 24, 2024.

²⁷Beniušis, V., (2020). "S. Cichanouskaja – Lietuvoje: Baltarusijos opozicijos lyderė ilsisi, su ja ryšį palaiko Prezidentūra" [S. Tsikhanouskaya – In Lithuania: The Belarusian opposition leader is resting, the Presidency maintains contact with her], August 11. Available at: <https://www.lrytas.lt/pasaulis/ivykiai/2020/08/11/news/1-linkevicius-s-tichanovskaja-yra-lietuvoje-15927062>. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

Latvia and Estonia, because they demonstrate a kind of political know-how. Hence, Lithuania could become a leader among the Baltic states in the implementation of common policies, which might later be successfully enacted at the EU level.

Lithuania's role in applying the EU's sanction mechanism against Belarus is another important step meant to strengthen its status. The Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs initially proposed the sanctioning of 118 Belarusian officials, including Aliaksandr Lukashenko²⁸, following the fraudulent elections and the mass repression of the peaceful protesters and of the opposition. The first sanctions against Lukashenko and other 29 Belarusian officials were adopted by Vilnius as early as August 2020,²⁹ while the EU was just beginning discussions on the technical implementation of the sanctions, and was weighing the possibility of addressing the situation through political dialogue.³⁰ Following Lithuania's decision, Latvia also decided to impose a ban on 31 Belarusian officials, declaring them *personae non gratae*.³¹ From the perspective of the traditional theoretical assumptions about the small states' behaviour in the international system, Lithuania's decision to impose sanctions can be seen as an unconventional and bold step.

Though it is an EU Member State, it has opted for independent action, which automatically called for a swift and unified EU position on the application of the sanction mechanism. This was further emphasised by President Gitanas Nausėda's statement that the political regime in Belarus is not ready for dialogue. Thus, Lithuania urged all EU Member States to follow its example³² and implement a sanction regime against Belarus. However, Lithuania did not limit itself to simply setting an example; it actively engaged in discussions with the other EU Member States to achieve consensus on the application of sanctions and to keep the Belarus issue on the EU's political agenda. For example, Lithuanian President Nausėda had a telephone conversation with the President of the European Council to stress the need to address the situation in Belarus at the EU level. He highlighted the importance of organising an extraordinary Council meeting to evaluate possible sanctions and stabilisation measures, including their potential impact.³³ Alongside its interactions with other EU Member States and with the EU institutions, Lithuania took the lead in the political discussions conducted

²⁸Lithuanian National Radio and Television, (2020). "Lithuanian sanctions 30 Belarusian officials including Lukashenko", August 31. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1222568/lithuania-sanctions-30-belarusian-officials-including-lukashenko>. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

²⁹Beniušis, V. (2020). "URM siūlo nacionalines sankcijas įvesti daugiau kaip šimtui Baltarusijos pareigūnų" ["MFA proposes to impose national sanctions against more than a hundred Belarusian officials"], *Delfi.lt*, August 26. Available at: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/urm-siulo-nacionalines-sankcijas-ivesti-daugiau-kaip-simtui-baltarusijos-pareigunu-85083327>. Accessed on: July 24, 2020.

³⁰European Union External Action, (2020). "Video conference of Foreign Affairs Ministers: Main outcomes", August 14. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/video-conference-foreign-affairs-ministers-main-outcomes_en. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

³¹Public broadcasting of Latvia, (2020). "Foreign Minister bans 30 Belarusian officials from entry to Latvia", August 31. Available at: <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/politics/foreign-minister-bans-30-belarusian-officials-from-entry-to-latvia.a372513/>. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

³²Sytas, A., (2020). "Baltic states impose sanctions on Lukashenko and other Belarus officials", Reuters, August 31. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/baltic-states-impose-sanctions-on-lukashenko-and-other-belarus-officials-idUSKBN25R0ZC/>. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

³³President of the Republic of Lithuania, (2020). "The President called the Head of the European Council to discuss the situation in Belarus at the EU level", August 11. Available at: <https://www.lrp.lt/en/news/the-president-called-the-head-of-the-european-council-to-discuss-the-situation-in-belarus-at-the-eu-level/34501>. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

with the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, urging these countries to agree on applying a sanction mechanism against Belarus.³⁴ Thus, Lithuania's demarches extended beyond the EU's borders.

Based on the conceptualisations of 'status seeking' and its benefits, we can infer that Lithuania's aforementioned activities (that brought to the forefront of international affairs the 2020 political crisis in Belarus) were aimed at improving this country's status. However, one cannot take for granted that Lithuania can gain a specific status within the EU without a wider international recognition. To validate this, several statements and events have been of utmost importance. From among the events, two stand out. First, the telephone conversation of President Gitanas Nausėda with Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel in August 2020. On that occasion, the two high officials discussed the upcoming meeting of the European Council, as well as the situation in Belarus, stressing the need to immediately impose sanctions against the Belarusian regime. Merkel emphasised the importance of Lithuania's support for the leader of the Belarusian democratic opposition and commended its efforts to stabilise the Belarusian crisis.³⁵ In December 2020, after attending the EU's Foreign Affairs Council meeting, Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius declared in a press release that the EU should facilitate an international investigation of the crimes of the Belarusian regime by setting up an international panel of law experts to bring those responsible to court.³⁶ Second, the meeting between the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius in September 2020. During this visit, they discussed topics such as 5G security, national security vulnerabilities in communication networks, and the Belarus issue.³⁷ In this context, Pompeo emphasised Lithuania's role in addressing the ongoing political crisis in Belarus.³⁸ This statement is significant – considering the United States' position in the international system as a global superpower, a model of democracy and an ally – because it does not highlight the collective efforts of the Baltic states, but those of Lithuania specifically.

Hence, it can be concluded that Lithuania is gaining status as a country that plays a major role in resolving democratic crises within its region. The declaration of the U.S. Secretary of State provides the first confirmation of Lithuania's status at the international level, and can also be interpreted as an assessment of its efforts. For this case study, not only the international recognition is important, but also Lithuania's activity within EU's institutional framework. The status conferred on Lithuania by the US is to some extent accepted in the EU as well. In this sense, it is worth mentioning

³⁴ President of the Republic of Lithuania, (2020). "The President calls on the EU, US, Canada, and UK to impose sanctions on the Belarusian regime", September 10. Available at: <https://www.lrp.lt/en/media-center/news/34668>. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

³⁵ President of the Republic of Lithuania, (2020). "Prezidentas su Vokietijos federaline kanclere aptarė būdus išspręsti Baltarusijos krizę" ["The President and the Federal Chancellor of Germany discussed ways to resolve the Belarus crisis"], August 17. Available at: <https://lrp.lt/lt/ziniasklaidos-centras/naujienos/34549>. Accessed on: October 22, 2024.

³⁶ Lithuanian National Radio and Television, "EU Must Help Investigate Regime Crimes in Belarus, Says Lithuanian Minister", December 8. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1293876/eu-must-help-investigate-regime-crimes-in-belarus-says-lithuanian-minister>. Accessed on: October 22, 2024.

³⁷ U.S. Department of State, (2020). "Secretary Pompeo's Meeting with Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linkevičius", September 16. Available at: <https://2017-2021.state.gov/secretary-pompeos-meeting-with-lithuanian-foreign-minister-linkевичius/>. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

that the European Parliament has acknowledged Lithuania's overall activity in support of the Belarusian opposition and of asylum seekers, but also Poland's contribution in assisting the Belarusians.³⁹ Therefore, Lithuania is not perceived in the EU as the only country entitled to receive gratitude.

Should we jump to the conclusion that, from the EU's perspective, Lithuania's status is not an exceptional one? No, that would be wrong. First, it is important to emphasise that other countries, including Poland and Latvia, have followed Lithuania's example. Second, Lithuania has also sought to strengthen its status as a supporter of Belarus at the domestic level. One striking example was the creation of a human chain from Lithuania, across Latvia and Estonia, all the way to the border with Belarus, on August 23, 2020, the anniversary of the Baltic Way.⁴⁰ Primarily, this was a grand gesture, showing support for the Belarusian civil society's path to democracy. Moreover, it proved the Lithuanians' shared understanding of the necessity to provide support to the Belarusians. This meant that the civil society had embraced the policymakers' objectives, creating a somewhat logical synergy in the domestic political atmosphere.

We can conclude that Lithuania has strengthened its status as a result of its actions. More precisely, it has gained recognition from the EU and significant international partners, and has set an example for the Baltic states. However, we should stress that the validation of Lithuania's new status comes also from the reaction of Belarus to its activities. Shortly after Lithuania's refusal to recognise Lukashenko as the legitimate president of Belarus (followed by the adoption of a sanction list against Belarusian officials), this Baltic state's activities came to the attention of Minsk. The Belarusian leader, Aliaksandr Lukashenko, escalated his rhetoric on various occasions, claiming that Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland sought to destabilise Belarus by demanding new presidential elections.⁴¹

Considering Lukashenko's rhetoric, we can infer that Lithuania's activities have not gone unnoticed by Belarus. In contrast, they have somehow managed to shake Lukashenko's confidence in the stability of his political regime. This is also suggested by the Belarusian leader's statements about military activities near his country's borders with Lithuania and Poland. In his view, both these countries have interfered in the internal affairs of Belarus by influencing the election results and by supporting the opposition.^{42,43} Though Lukashenko's rhetoric is targeted at both Poland and Lithuania,

³⁹European Parliament, (2021). "Resolution of 7 October 2021 on the situation in Belarus after one year of protests and their violent repression" (2021/2881(RSP)). Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0420_EN.html. Accessed on: July 24, 2024.

⁴⁰Lithuanian National Radio and Television, (2020). "People in Lithuania form human chain from Vilnius to Belarusian border", August 23. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1217587/people-in-lithuania-form-human-chain-from-vilnius-to-belarusian-border>. Accessed on: July 25, 2024.

⁴¹Belarusian Telegraph Agency, (2020). "Lukashenko: If we give in to their demands, we will go into spin", August 17. Available at: <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-if-we-give-in-to-their-demands-we-will-go-into-a-spin-132605-2020/>. Accessed on: July 25, 2024.

⁴²Belarusian Telegraph Agency, (2020). "Lukashenko comments on most dramatic decision in his career", August 24. Available at: <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-comments-on-most-dramatic-decision-in-his-career-132811-2020/>. Accessed on: July 25, 2024.

⁴³Belarusian Telegraph Agency, (2020). "Lukashenko: Several centers of power at play against Belarus", August 21. Available at: <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-several-centers-of-power-at-play-against-belarus-132784-2020/>. Accessed on: July 25, 2024.

this does not necessarily mean that Lithuania lacks status and, thus, influence on the Belarusian politics. Rather, the opposite is true: Lithuania, by its example, has managed to promote a certain course of action by addressing the Belarusian issue both internally and externally.

The theoretical assumptions about status, examined in the previous chapter, do not suggest that a country's status is recognised exclusively by the states that positively evaluate its activities. As the case study of Lithuania indicates, Belarus reaction to Lithuania's demarches involves a recognition of status. Though Belarus is a larger country than Lithuania, the activities of the latter have provoked a response from the Belarusian regime. This is a significant aspect, as it highlights the need to further explore the status of small states and their possible beneficial interactions with other countries in the international system.

Conclusions

Small states seeking to establish their status among partners and in the international system do not form a recent trend. Such status-seeking behaviour is a long-standing phenomenon. What is different in Lithuania's case is that this Baltic country has established and increased its foreign policy capacities since it regained its independence and national sovereignty. Its foreign policy and its relations with its neighbouring countries, Belarus included, underwent changes when Lithuania joined various international organisations, military alliances and thus increased its diplomatic and financial outreach.

Status seeking by Lithuania, as a small state in the European Union, has been an ongoing trend for more than a decade. Its relations with Belarus, the plea for EU sanctions against Aliaksandr Lukashenko's regime and rule, the strong opposition to the state repressions against the Belarusian opposition have been clear options to re-emphasise Lithuania's status as a democracy supporter, valuing human rights, as it is expected from a EU Member State. The positive feedback Lithuania received from its EU and NATO partners for its strong reactions and messages to the Belarusian regime has encouraged the Lithuanian diplomats and the political leadership to pursue this foreign policy vector that guarantees prestige and influence to the small country.

Lithuania's actions against the Belarusian regime were not isolated, as many other countries, including its fellow Baltic states, followed suit by denouncing the Belarusian President. Yet, Lithuania considered that it was its obligation and a good opportunity to demonstrate leadership on the Belarusian issue. For Lithuania, as well as for Latvia and Estonia, it was an opportunity to stand out against undemocratic and violent states of the former Soviet Union. Additionally, it was an opportunity to change the small countries' status from post-Soviet to fully Western.

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The Baltic States Twenty Years after the EU's “Big Bang” Enlargement: Political, Economic, and Social Transformations

Aleksandra Palkova¹

Abstract: *The article offers a unique and comprehensive reflection on the 20-year membership of the Baltic states — Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — in the European Union (EU), highlighting the multifaceted impacts of their integration across the political, economic, and societal spheres. The novelty of this paper lies in its holistic approach to the Baltic states’ evolution from new EU members to proactive leaders. Politically, the Baltic states have transitioned from passive participants to influential actors, particularly in response to regional security challenges, such as the Russian threat. Economically, their adoption of the euro and integration into the Schengen Area have bolstered their stability and growth within the EU’s single market. Societally, EU membership has reinforced democratic values and human rights, marking a clear departure from Soviet-era influences. This focus on the small states as proactive agents in shaping EU policy, rather than merely beneficiaries of EU membership, offers a fresh perspective on their contributions to the EU’s development over the past two decades. The article brings valuable insights into the broader discourse on EU enlargement and the future trajectory of the European project.*

Keywords: *Baltic states, EU integration, “Big Bang” enlargement, EU accession, small states, case study.*

Introduction

In 2024, the Baltic states — Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — along with other countries from the “Big Bang” enlargement, marked the 20th anniversary of their accession to the European Union (EU).² The path to EU membership for these states began on October 27, 1995, when their governments formally submitted applications for EU membership, initiating a complex and demanding process of candidacy and accession negotiations.³ This period was characterised by profound political, economic, and social reforms, aimed at aligning them with the stringent criteria required for EU integration.

¹Aleksandra Palkova is the Head of the EU Programme at the Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Lecturer at Riga Stradiņš University, and Associate Researcher at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR).
E-mail: aleksandra.palkova@rsu.lv.

²Public broadcasting of Latvia, (2024). “Baltic Presidents on 20 years of European Union membership”, *Eng.LSM.lv*, May 2. Available at: <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/features/commentary/02.05.2024-baltic-presidents-on-20-years-of-european-union-membership.a552605/>. Braghioli, S., (2024). “The Baltics have grown up: Do not call them new member states”, *New Eastern Europe*, June 22. Available at: <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2024/06/22/the-baltics-have-grown-up-do-not-call-them-new-member-states/>.

³Kapustans, J., (2002). “Baltic States and EU Accession Negotiations: An Assessment”, *Latvian Institute of International Affairs*, pp. 47-55. Available at: <https://www.liia.lv/en/publications/baltic-states-and-eu-accession-negotiations-an-assessment-49>.

The process of accession reached its critical juncture in the early 2000s, when each of the Baltic states held referendums to gauge public support for EU membership. In Latvia, 67.49% of voters approved the nation's entry into the EU, with 32.51% voting against.⁴ Similarly, in Estonia's 2003 referendum, 63% of the electorate voted in favour of joining the Union, while 37% opposed it.⁵ Lithuania exhibited the strongest support, with an overwhelming 91.1% of voters endorsing EU membership in their 2003 referendum, and the turnout was 63.37%, which exceeded the required threshold.⁶ These results reflected not only the popular desire to break away from the Soviet past, but also a deep commitment to rejoining the broader European community. The official accession of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to the European Union on May 1, 2004, was a historic moment that marked their full reintegration into Europe.⁷

A key aspect of this integration was the inclusion of the Baltic states into the Schengen Area on December 21, 2007.⁸ The removal of these barriers significantly enhanced economic, social, and cultural exchanges, further intertwining the Baltic states with the broader European community. Moreover, their adoption of the euro exemplifies their deepening integration into the European Union. Estonia led the way by adopting the euro in 2011, followed by Latvia in 2014, and Lithuania in 2015.⁹ This transition to the common European currency was more than an economic adjustment: it was a strategic move, which reinforced financial stability, facilitated cross-border trade, and aligned these economies more closely with the Eurozone. The euro adoption also underscored their commitment to the EU's economic framework, providing a foundation for sustainable growth and making these countries more attractive to foreign investment.

In addition to their economic integration, the Baltic states have played active roles within EU's governance structures, exemplified by their respective presidencies of the Council of the European Union. Lithuania was the first to assume the Council's presidency in 2013, when it prioritised crucial issues such as energy security, Eastern Partnership initiatives, and the stabilisation of the EU's economic policies.¹⁰ Latvia, in its turn, held the Council's presidency in the first half of 2015, a period marked by significant geopolitical challenges. During its presidency, Latvia played a crucial role in guiding the EU's foreign and defence policies, reflecting its growing influence and

⁴Deloy, C., and Levy, H., (2003). "Referendum on the European Union in Latvia", *Robert Schuman Foundation*, September 20. Available at: <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/monitor/224-referendum-on-the-european-union-in-latvia-september-20th-2003>.

⁵DW, (2003). "Estonians Say 'Jah' to the EU", September 15. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/estonians-say-jah-to-the-eu/a-967912>.

⁶Voice of America, (2003). "Lithuanian Referendum on EU Membership Under Way – 2003 – 05 – 10". Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-a-2003-05-10-11-lithuanian-66317417/543157.html>.

⁷European Council | Council of the European Union, (2004). "2004 Enlargement: Facts and Figures". Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/2004-enlargement-facts-and-figures/>.

⁸European Commission, (2007). "Background on Schengen Enlargement", MEMO/07/619, p. 3. Available at: https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-07-619_en.htm.

⁹European Commission, (2024). "EU countries and the euro". Available at: https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/euro/eu-countries-and-euro_en.

¹⁰Griguolaite, R., (2019). "Lithuania", *European State Aid Law Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 208-211. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26694324>.

capacity to contribute to the Union's strategic agenda.¹¹ Estonia followed suit with its Council presidency in the second half of 2017, when it placed a strong emphasis on digital innovation, cybersecurity, and the strengthening of the EU's single market. Estonia's focus on digitalisation was particularly noteworthy, as it mirrored the country's own national priorities and its status as a leader in digital governance.¹²

There are two principal factors underlying the Baltic states' steadfast commitment to pro-Europeanism. Firstly, these nations' determination to maintain their independence from Russian influence has been perceived as a clear-cut resolution and has enhanced their consistent support for the EU and NATO for almost two decades.¹³ Secondly, EU membership has delivered substantial economic benefits to the Baltic region in its economic transition.¹⁴ In exchange, the Baltic states have adopted a more confident and proactive stance within the EU, over the past two decades, and now they are also assuming leadership responsibilities, as evidenced by their response to the recent conflict in Ukraine.

This article presents a three-stage model for explaining the EU integration of these small states—*Active Learning*, *Steady Observer*, and *Confident Team Player*. Thus, it introduces several novel and significant elements in the fields of international relations and EU studies, and it offers a new theoretical framework for understanding the long-term integration processes. Our comprehensive, longitudinal analysis of the Baltic states' EU integration covers two decades, and provides critical insights into the evolving strategies of small states within the EU. Moreover, it examines how these three post-Soviet states transitioned from the status of policy-takers to that of policy-shapers within the supranational structures. This new model of analysis highlights the small states' adaptability, explores the long-term effects of EU enlargement, and weighs the influence of historical legacies (e.g., the Soviet past) on the integration strategies. Hence, this article significantly enhances the scholarly understanding of the small states' potential to shape EU policies and structures.

Therefore, the research endeavours have been guided by the need to address two main research questions: How have the Baltic states navigated their three-stage EU integration process over the past two decades, and how does this enrich our understanding of the small states' adaptability within supranational structures?

Literature review

This research seeks to bridge a critical gap in the existing literature on European integration and small state behaviour in supranational frameworks. Extensive research

¹¹Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, (2015). "Progress achieved in the Council during Latvian Presidency". Available at: <https://eu2015.lv>.

¹²Council of the European Union, (2017). "Programme of the Estonian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 1 July 2017 – 31 December 2017". Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/56237/2017-jul-dec-ee-programme.pdf>.

¹³Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, (2024). "20 years of Latvia's membership of the European Union", March 22. Available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/20-years-latvias-membership-european-union>.

¹⁴Bukovskis, K., (2022). "The Four Stages of State Rebuilding in the Baltic States Since 1990" in *State-Building, Rule of Law, Good Governance and Human Rights in Post-Soviet Space*, Routledge. Available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003198024-3/four-stages-state-rebuilding-baltic-states-since-1990-karlis-bukovskis>.

has been conducted on the EU enlargement and integration processes, but most of it focuses on larger Member States, or treats small states as undifferentiated entities. Analyses of the distinct challenges the small states-particularly those with a post-Soviet legacy-deal with in their long-term integration journey, and of the strategies they have devised are scarce. Sharing a unique historical and geopolitical context, the Baltic states offer a valuable case study because their policies and strategies have not been thoroughly explored within the framework of a multi-staged integration model. By focusing on a 20-year period of their EU integration, this article highlights how these states have evolved from passive recipients of EU policies to proactive contributors, or policy-shapers, within the EU. The proposed three-stage model of integration captures this dynamic evolution, providing a more nuanced understanding of small state behaviour over time. This approach not only uncovers the specificities of the post-Soviet states' adaptation to the EU context, but also enriches the scholarly literature on European integration.

The Baltic states' integration into the EU has attracted a lot of scholarly attention, particularly due to their post-Soviet status. Works by Galbreath and Lamoreaux (2008),¹⁵ Mole (2012),¹⁶ and Van Elsuwege (2008)¹⁷ have explored the geopolitical and security dimensions of the Baltic states' integration journey, emphasising their dual objectives of consolidating democracy and securing protection from external threats, particularly from Russia. Berg and Ehin (2009)¹⁸ examine in depth how Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have navigated the EU accession process, focusing on their adaptation to the Copenhagen criteria and to the EU's governance standards. The authors highlight the importance of the Baltic states' strategic identity construction, which implied their framing as European, both culturally and politically, to accelerate their acceptance into the EU. Additionally, Nello (2012) analyses the economic dimension of the Baltics' EU integration, exploring how they tailored their economies to the EU's market dynamics and competitive pressures, through structural reforms and the adoption of EU economic regulations, which facilitated their integration into the single market.

However, the existing studies on these small states with post-Soviet legacies focus more on the accession phase or the early years of their EU membership. Not much attention is given to the constant evolution of their strategies that go beyond the initial adaptation to EU norms. This article seeks to fill this gap by providing a longitudinal analysis of the Baltic states' integration over two decades. At the same time, it offers a new model for understanding their increasing role within the EU.

¹⁵Lamoreaux, J.W., and Galbreath, D.J. (2008). "The Baltic States As 'Small States': Negotiating The 'East' By Engaging The 'West'". *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 39, Issue 1, pp. 1-14. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01629770801908697>.

¹⁶Mole, R., (2012). *The Baltic States from the Soviet Union to the European Union: Identity, Discourse and Power in the Post-Communist Transition of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania*, London, Routledge. Available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780203121498/baltic-states-soviet-union-european-union-richard-mole>.

¹⁷Elsuwege, P.V., (2008). "From Soviet Republics to EU Member States: A legal and political assessment of the Baltic States' Accession to the EU", Brill. Available at: <https://www.europeansources.info/record/from-soviet-republics-to-eu-member-states-a-legal-and-political-assessment-of-the-baltic-states-accession-to-the-eu/>.

¹⁸Ehin, P., and Berg, E. (eds.), (2009). *Identity and Foreign Policy: Baltic-Russian Relations and European Integration*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. Available at: <https://www.routledge.com/Identity-and-Foreign-Policy-Baltic-Russian-Relations-and-European-Integration/Berg-Ehin/p/book/9780754673293>.

Methodology

For this paper we have employed a qualitative approach, and we have conducted a comparative case study to juxtapose and analyse the long-term European integration strategies of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Our research carried out in a multi-method framework, combines historical aspects, policy and content analysis (of key policy documents, official statements, EU-level communications, government reports, and legislative changes from 2004 to 2024, publications from prominent think tank, etc.) with quantitative data to enable a comprehensive understanding of the Baltics' evolving roles in the EU.

Think tank reports have been selected based on their relevance to the Baltic states' EU policies and their impact on the public discourse and policy formulation. Special attention has been given to publications that address the small states' behaviour in supranational structures, or tackle the geopolitical challenges faced by post-Soviet EU members. To support the qualitative findings, the study integrates quantitative analysis of economic and social indicators. Data from Eurostat, the World Bank, and national statistical offices is used to assess the progress of the Baltic states in terms of GDP growth, unemployment rates, foreign direct investment, and social welfare indicators. These metrics provide empirical backing to the discussion on how economic and social factors have influenced the Baltics' integration strategies and policy choices.

Thus, we strived to capture the stages of their European integration, key milestones and turning points in their strategic approach to EU membership. A comparative study was necessary to identify the commonalities and divergences in the integration strategies of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. By comparing their economic, social, and foreign policy initiatives and reforms, we highlight how these states that share a post-Soviet legacy have adopted different pathways and priorities in their integration processes.

The study acknowledges certain limitations, particularly regarding data availability and the challenges of generalising about small states with a common historical background. While the findings are context-specific, they offer valuable insights for the broader theme of small state behaviour in the EU.

Discussion: Two decades of political transformation: the Baltic states' path through three stages

Compared to the founding countries of the European Union, the Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – have taken a distinct path toward EU membership, influenced by their unique geopolitical and historical contexts. Their integration journey can be delineated into three distinct phases: the *Active Learning Phase* (1991-2006), the *Steady Observer Phase* (2006-2013), and the *Confident Team Player Phase* (from 2013 onwards).

In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991,¹⁹ the Baltic states endeavoured to establish themselves as independent European entities. This transition involved substantial efforts to align with EU standards, requiring extensive reforms across their economies, legal frameworks, and governance structures. For instance, in 1992, Estonia adopted a new constitution²⁰ that underscored democratic principles and the rule of law. Additionally, the introduction of a flat tax system in 2000²¹ was pivotal in simplifying its tax regime and attracting foreign investment. Latvia implemented significant legal and economic reforms. From among these, it is worth mentioning the enactment of the Law on the Protection of State Secrets in 2002,²² which is in line with EU norms on data protection and transparency. Similarly, Lithuania's economic reform efforts focused on liberalising its economy and restructuring the banking sector, which included the privatisation of state-owned enterprises and enhancements to the business environment. Throughout this *Active Learning Stage*, all three Baltic states have made notable progress in adopting the EU acquis. This reflected their commitment to upholding EU values, such as democratic governance, rule of law, and human rights.

The subsequent *Steady Observer Phase* (2006-2013) marked a shift in the Baltics' approach. As they advanced towards deeper EU integration, they began to critically assess and occasionally diverge from certain EU policies. Estonia's accession to the Schengen Area in 2007 was a significant milestone, facilitating border-free travel within the EU and demonstrating its compliance with EU standards on border management and security.²³ During the 2015 European migration crisis, Latvia's stance was characterised by cautious engagement. Latvian Prime Minister Laimdota Straujuma initially opposed the EU's refugee quota system, due to domestic concerns about the migration's impact on national security and social cohesion, concerns fuelled by the historical grievances about forced migration under Soviet rule.²⁴ Public sentiment in Latvia was largely against accepting refugees, with surveys indicating that a significant majority of Latvians believed their country should not admit refugees at all. This reluctance, rooted in the historical narratives depicting the mass migrations and deportations experienced during the Soviet era, has generated a cautious attitude towards new waves of migration. In the end, Latvia agreed to accept 531 refugees from Italy and Greece within two years, but insisted that participation in the EU's relocation efforts should be voluntary. Thus, it emphasised each country's right to make its own decisions regarding refugee intake.²⁵ Similarly, Lithuania has adopted a prudent stance,

¹⁹Graney, K., (2019). "The Baltic States: 'Successful Return to Europe'" in *Russia, the Former Soviet Republics, and Europe Since 1989: Transformation and Tragedy*, online edn. Oxford Academic, pg. 175. Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/book/32447/chapter-abstract/268793067?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 178.

²¹Funke, M., and Strulik, H., (2003). "Taxation, growth and welfare: Dynamic effects of Estonia's 2000 income tax act", BOFIT Discussion Papers, No. 10, *Bank of Finland, Institute for Economics in Transition (BOFIT)*, Helsinki, pg. 8. Available at: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/212524/1/bofit-dp2003-010.pdf>.

²²EUR-Lex, (2002). "Accession Criteria (Copenhagen Criteria), Latvia profile". Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/LV/ALL/?uri=legisum:e22104>.

²³EU Monitor, (2010). "Schengen: some basic facts". Available at: https://www.eumonitor.eu/9353000/1/j9vvik7m1c3gvxp/vik6henf9fyv?ctx=vh7douwe0cp7&start_tab0=375.

²⁴Latvian Public Broadcasting, (2015). "Latvia and the refugee crisis: a primer", *Eng.LSM.lv*, October 19. Available at: <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/features/features/latvia-and-the-refugee-crisis-a-primer.a150836/>.

²⁵European Commission|European Website on Integration, (2024). "Governance of migrant integration in Latvia". Available at: https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/country-governance/governance-migrant-integration-latvia_en.

participating in discussions about the European Union's collective response, while expressing concerns about the social implications of increased migration. The country was initially reluctant to accept its share of refugees, as proposed by the EU, and criticised the quotas assigned to it. Lithuania was asked to accept 1,105 refugees, but managed to take in only about half of that number.²⁶ Lithuania's approach was characterised by a focus on border security and the implications of migration on national stability. The government was particularly concerned about the potential social impacts of integrating refugees. Those concerns led to a preference for restrictive measures rather than proactive integration policies. This prudent approach was evident in the political discourse, wherein officials highlighted fears over the long-term effects of migration on the Lithuanian society. Subsequently, public policy views have intensified these apprehensions and, in July 2021, Latvia and Lithuania declared a state of emergency due to a significant influx of migrants (primarily from Iraq, but also from other countries) crossing their border with Belarus. Their decision was influenced by the belief that the Belarusian government was orchestrating these movements as a form of hybrid warfare against the Baltics.²⁷ Overall, the Steady Observer Phase illustrated the transition from active implementation of EU reforms to a more evaluative and sometimes critical stance on EU policies, driven by the Baltic states' strategic positioning and historical experiences.

From 2013 onwards, the Baltics have demonstrated increased confidence and influence within the EU, especially when they assumed the Presidency of the EU Council, which marked their transition to the *Confident Team Player Phase* and left a distinct mark on EU policy. Lithuania's 2013 Presidency – focused on energy security and the Eastern Partnership – led to significant progress on the Energy Union initiative, and strengthened ties with the Eastern European nations. A key deliverable was the advancement of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, which laid the groundwork for closer political and economic relations.²⁸ Latvia's 2015 Presidency was instrumental in shaping the EU's digital future. Its most notable achievement was its crucial contribution to the negotiations on the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). This landmark legislation, enacted in 2016 and implemented in 2018, has fundamentally altered data protection practices across the EU and globally. Latvia has also pushed forward the Digital Single Market strategy, setting the stage for increased digital integration of the Member States. Moreover, during its Presidency, Latvia has successfully negotiated a provisional deal to eliminate mobile phone roaming fees within the EU, enhancing connectivity for travellers across Member States.²⁹ Estonia's 2017 Presidency further cemented the Baltics' reputation as digital pioneers, with the Tallinn Digital Summit serving as a platform to advance EU-wide digital policies. Estonia's 'digital by default' principle has influenced the EU governance, promoting e-solutions

²⁶Benas Gerdžiūnas, (2023). "Fences, detentions, pushbacks – five questions about Lithuania's migration crisis answered". *LRT.lt*. Available at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2018482/fences-detentions-pushbacks-five-questions-about-lithuania-s-migration-crisis-answered>.

²⁷Human Rights Monitoring Institute, (2021). "Lithuania's Response to the Migrant Crisis: Milling About in Confusion, Curtailing Human Rights, and Building a Wall", *Liberties.eu*, August 12. Available at: <https://www.liberties.eu/en/stories/lithuania-migrant-crisis/43723>.

²⁸European Commission, (2013). "FACTSHEET Eastern Partnership summit Vilnius, 28-29 November 2013", MEMO/13/1057, Brussels, November 26. Available at: https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-13-1057_en.htm.

²⁹Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, *op.cit*.

in public services and cross-border cooperation. Concrete outcomes included progress on the free movement of non-personal data and enhanced cybersecurity measures.³⁰ Collectively, the Baltic presidencies of the Council of the European Union have highlighted the region's ability to drive the EU agenda-setting process, particularly in digital innovation, data protection, and energy security. Thus, they have demonstrated that smaller Member States can shape the Union's future direction.

In the Baltic states, the institutional Euroscepticism, though relatively mild compared to that in Hungary or Poland, is present in certain political parties that question aspects of the European integration. In Lithuania, for instance, the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union (LVŹS), which had a significant political clout during the 2016-2020 period, has criticised specific EU policies, especially those related to agricultural regulations and fiscal oversight. Its position reflects a cautious approach to deeper integration, and voices concerns about the EU's sway over national decision-making. In Latvia, the National Alliance (NA), which has been part of several coalition governments, advocates for safeguarding the Latvian identity against what it perceives as external pressures from the EU. Therefore, the NA often pushes for a more intergovernmental approach to EU governance. In Estonia, the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) is the most outspoken critic of the EU. EKRE, whose members have held various governmental positions since 2019, often frames its Euroscepticism in terms of national sovereignty. It rejects the idea of EU federalism and advocates for a stronger national control over issues like migration and cultural policies. EKRE's stance aligns with intergovernmentalism, a model in which national governments maintain substantial autonomy and decision-making power within the EU framework, and thus resists the idea of a more centralised European authority. One can observe this cautious intergovernmental stance throughout the Baltic states, where even mainstream parties tend to prioritise national interests and are wary of ceding too much power to Brussels.

Public opinion data from the Baltic states show a generally high level of support for EU membership, but with notable reservations caused by mistrust in the EU institutions. According to a Eurobarometer survey conducted in 2023, support for EU membership stood at 82% in Lithuania, 73% in Estonia, and 62% in Latvia.³¹ This strong support is largely driven by economic benefits (e.g., access to the single market and EU structural funds), and security considerations, especially in the face of regional threats from Russia. However, trust in EU institutions has significantly dropped. In the same survey, trust in the European Commission was only 45% in Lithuania, 48% in Estonia, and 42% in Latvia. These low percentages reflect concerns about the EU's decision-making processes and its capacity to take heed of local needs.³² In Latvia and Estonia, Euroscepticism is more pronounced among the Russian-speaking minorities,

³⁰Politico, (2017). "Estonia's presidency: How it went", December 20. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/estonias-presidency-how-it-went/>.

³¹European Commission, (2023). "Standard Eurobarometer Survey 2023: Support for EU Membership in Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia". Available at: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3152>. European Commission, (2023). "Eurobarometer Survey: Winter 2022-2023 Results". Available at: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2872>. Buras, P., and Morina, E., (2023). "Catch-27: The contradictory thinking about enlargement in the EU", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, November 23. Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/catch-27-the-contradictory-thinking-about-enlargement-in-the-eu/>.

³²*Ibid.*

which make up about 25% and 30% of the population, respectively.³³ Many members of these communities feel marginalised by the EU policies, primarily in terms of language, laws, and socio-economic disparities. These dissatisfactions result in higher levels of Euroscepticism within these groups. Notwithstanding these challenges, there is a broad public support for EU membership, as the perceived benefits, mainly in terms of security and economic development, continue to outweigh the criticisms.

Over the last decade, the political landscape in the Baltic states has further evolved, reflecting both the challenges and opportunities brought by EU membership. Despite a rise in scepticism about certain EU initiatives (mostly, those regarding migration and fiscal policies), the Baltic states continue to prioritise their role within the EU framework. Their commitment is evident in the collaborative efforts on security issues, particularly in light of the regional tensions with Russia, which call for a cohesive EU foreign policy. Collectively, the Baltic states have shown a strong interest in the EU's Eastern Partnership programme, designed to foster closer political and economic ties with six Eastern European neighbours. Their advocacy for reforms in Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia underscores a shared commitment to democratic values and stability in a region crucial – in terms of security – to both the EU and the Baltics. Additionally, the Baltic states' engagement with Central Asia highlights their ambitions to diversify geopolitical relationships and extend trade ties beyond Europe. This collaboration includes discussions about educational exchange programmes and trade agreements—prospects that converge with the EU's broader aspirations to build partnerships with the emerging markets. In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, the Baltic states have emerged as formidable advocates for a robust and unified EU foreign policy. They have taken a leading stance in condemning the Russian aggression. In this sense, one can say that the Baltic states not only shape the EU's foreign policy, but also foster greater solidarity among Member States, and reinforce the EU's commitment to democratic principles and collective security.

From transition to convergence: the economic evolution of the Baltic states since EU accession

In the early 1990s, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania faced the formidable task of shifting from centrally planned economies to market-driven systems.³⁴

Latvia, like its Baltic neighbours, has dealt with severe economic challenges after regaining independence in 1991. The country's GDP contracted significantly, falling by approximately 50% between 1990 and 1993, as Latvia transitioned from a centralised economy to a market-oriented system.³⁵ Hyperinflation was a critical issue, i.e. inflation peaked at around 950% in 1992, due to the collapse of the Soviet economic structure and the initial difficulties in establishing a new and stable economic

³³Askew, J., (2024). "From gains to grumbles: Euroscepticism in the Baltic states", *Euronews*, March 4. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2024/03/04/from-gains-to-grumbles-euroscepticism-in-the-baltic-states>.

³⁴Knöbl, A., and Haas, R., (2003). "IMF and the Baltics: A Decade of Cooperation", IMF Working Paper 03/241, *International Monetary Fund*. Available at: <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2003/wp03241.pdf>.

³⁵Bitāns, M., and Purviņš V., (2012). "The development of Latvia's Economy 1990-2004", in *The Bank of Latvia XC*, November 23, pg. 141. Available at: https://www.bank.lv/images/stories/pielikumi/publikacijas/citaspublikacijas/Bitans_Purvins_EN.pdf.

framework.³⁶ Subsequently, Latvia has implemented several key reforms and measures to stabilise its economy: rapid privatisation of state-owned enterprises, introduction of a new currency (the Latvian lats) in 1993, the liberalisation of trade and investment policies.³⁷ These measures have been successful in bringing inflation under control, with rates dropping significantly by the mid-1990s, when Latvia's economy began to recover, with GDP growth averaging about 5-7% annually between 1995 and 2000.³⁸ Latvia has focused on diversifying its economy, by placing significant emphasis on the development of the services sector (particularly, financial services, transportation, and logistics) and of the manufacturing sector (especially, wood products, textiles, and food processing). Foreign direct investments (FDIs) have become increasingly important, growing from relatively low levels in the early 1990s to over \$350 million by 2003.³⁹ During its preparations for EU membership, Latvia has undertaken extensive reforms to align its economy with EU standards. These included modernising the legal and regulatory frameworks, enhancing the infrastructure, and improving transparency in business practices.⁴⁰ Latvia's strategic focus on developing its service industries, especially finance and transportation, has played a key role in building a more resilient and diversified economy, and has paved the way for sustained growth in the years following its EU accession.

Lithuania has also experienced severe economic contractions after regaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1990. The country's GDP fell by approximately 40% from 1990 to 1994, reflecting the difficulties of the transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented system.⁴¹ Hyperinflation was a significant issue, peaking at around 1,163% in 1992, as the country struggled to stabilise its economy amid the collapse of the Soviet economic structure.⁴² Despite these challenges, Lithuania has managed to stabilise its economy through a series of reforms, including large-scale privatisation, the introduction of a new currency (i.e., the litas) in 1993, and the establishment of a legal framework to support business activities. By 1995, inflation had dropped to more manageable levels, and the GDP resumed its annual growth with about 5-6% on average between 1995 and 2000.⁴³ Lithuania has diversified its economy, by stimulating the development of its manufacturing sector (particularly, machinery, electronics, and textiles), while also harnessing its agricultural potential. The country's journey to EU membership had required the adoption of EU standards, which involved liberalising trade, enhancing regulatory frameworks, and modernising infrastructure. During that period, Lithuania had focused on reducing government intervention, fostering private sector growth, and attracting FDIs. FDI inflows increased significantly

³⁶*Ibid.*, pg. 142.

³⁷*Ibid.*, pg. 143.

³⁸*Ibid.*, pp.146-147.

³⁹Zile, R., and Steinbuka, I., (2001). "Latvia on the Way to the European Union", *Finance & Development*, Vol. 38, No. 2. Available at: <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2001/06/zile.htm>.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹European Commission| Government of the Republic of Lithuania, (2000). "Joint Assessment of Lithuania's Economic Policy Priorities", Vilnius, May 29. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/publications/pages/publication2957_en.pdf.

⁴²International Monetary Fund, (1996). "Lithuania – Recent Economic Developments", August 26. Available at: <https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/002/1996/072/article-A001-en.xml>.

⁴³European Commission, | Government of the Republic of Lithuania, *op.cit.*

from around \$30 million in 1995 to over \$800 million by 2003.⁴⁴ The strategic economic policies helped attract substantial foreign investment, bolstering Lithuania's industrial base and aligning its agricultural sector with EU standards.

Estonia, just like the other two Baltic states, has faced significant economic challenges following its independence in 1991. Between 1990 and 1994, its GDP contracted by approximately 35%, due to the difficult transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-based system.⁴⁵ Inflation was a major issue, peaking at around 1,000% in 1992 due to the collapse of the Soviet economic system and the introduction of market prices.⁴⁶ To stabilise its economy, Estonia has implemented several measures and key reforms: rapid privatisation of state-owned enterprises, the establishment of a currency board system to peg the Estonian kroon to the Deutsche Mark, and the opening of the economy to trade and investment.⁴⁷ These policies have helped bring inflation under control, with rates falling dramatically by the mid-1990s. By the second half of the 1990s, Estonia's economy had begun to recover, with GDP growth averaging around 5-6% annually between 1995 and 2000.⁴⁸ Due to its strong focus on information technology and digital innovation, Estonia has earned a reputation as one of Europe's most digitally advanced countries. It also worked to create a favourable environment for FDI, which grew significantly from negligible levels in the early 1990s to over \$900 million by 2003.⁴⁹ In preparation for EU membership, Estonia undertook extensive reforms to align its economy with EU standards. In doing so, it modernised its regulatory and legal frameworks. Thanks to its emphasis on digital governance and innovation, Estonia has positioned itself as a global leader in e-government and cybersecurity.

After joining the EU in 2004, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were often referred to as the "Baltic Tigers" due to their rapid economic growth.⁵⁰ Between 2000 and 2007, the Baltic states experienced some of the fastest GDP growth rates in the EU: annual GDP growth rates exceeded 7% at their peak in all three countries.⁵¹ The total trade has increased nearly 300% during this time period between the years 1999-2007.⁵² Estonia, for instance, saw its GDP per capita rise from approximately \$5,200 in 2000 to over \$16,000 by 2007.⁵³ Similarly, Latvia and Lithuania enjoyed significant growth, with

⁴⁴International Monetary Fund, (1996), *op. cit.*

⁴⁵Gasparini, A., (2021), "From State and Market: Thirty Years of Economic Success in Estonia", *Friedrich Naumann Foundation*, June 8. Available at: <https://www.freiheit.org/central-europe-and-baltic-states/state-market-thirty-years-economic-success-estonia>.

⁴⁶Köll A. M., (2024). *Reinterpretation of economic history in the Baltic countries, 30 years after independence*. Taylor & Francis. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03585522.2024.2314304>

⁴⁷Gasparini, A., *op. cit.*

⁴⁸Laar, M., (2007). "The Estonian Economic Miracle", *The Heritage Foundation*, August 7. Available at: <https://www.heritage.org/report/the-estonian-economic-miracle>.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰Åslund, A., (2015). "The Baltic Tigers: Past, Present and Future", *CESifo Forum* 4/2015, December, pg. 3. Available at: <https://www.cesifo.org/DocDL/forum-2015-4-aslund-baltic-tiger-december.pdf>.

⁵¹Lamberg, S., and Vålming, S., (2008). "The Rise of the Baltic Tigers". Available at: <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:220299/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

⁵²Åslund, A., (2015), "The Baltic Tiger: A Decade of Rapid Economic Growth", pg. 46. Available at: <https://www.cesifo.org/DocDL/forum-2015-4-aslund-baltic-tiger-december.pdf>.

⁵³Macrotrends. "Estonia GDP Per Capita 1993-2024". Available at: <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/EST/estonia/gdp-per-capita>.

GDP per capita increasing from \$3,500 (in 2000) to around \$13,500 by 2007 in Latvia, and from \$4,000 to \$14,000⁵⁴ in Lithuania in the same period.

The global financial crisis of 2008-2009 exposed significant vulnerabilities in the Baltic economies, with each country facing distinct challenges. Estonia's economy contracted sharply, and the GDP dropped by 14.7% in 2009.⁵⁵ However, Estonia's prudent fiscal policies and low public debt have facilitated a relatively swift recovery. The country maintained a balanced budget throughout the crisis, and by 2011, it had returned to GDP growth, showcasing its resilience and commitment to fiscal discipline.⁵⁶ Latvia experienced one of the deepest recessions in the European Union, with its GDP contracting by 14.4% in 2009.⁵⁷ The Latvian government has responded with stringent austerity measures, including significant cuts to public sector wages, tax increases, and reductions in social spending. While these measures successfully restored fiscal stability and allowed Latvia to adopt the euro in 2014, they also led to significant social challenges, such as increased emigration, particularly among the young, skilled workers.⁵⁸ This outflow has contributed to ongoing demographic issues: e.g., an aging population, labour shortages in rural areas, etc. In its turn, Lithuania faced a severe economic downturn, and its GDP contracted by 14.8% in 2009. Unemployment surged to nearly 18%, and the banking sector faced considerable liquidity challenges.⁵⁹ In response, the Lithuanian government has implemented decisive austerity measures, including cuts to public sector wages and pensions, along with structural reforms aimed at enhancing the economic resilience. By 2011, Lithuania's economy had rebounded, with its GDP growing by approximately 6%.⁶⁰ This recovery underscored Lithuania's ability to adhere to EU fiscal norms and maintain macroeconomic stability.

Despite the relatively swift economic recovery across the Baltic states, the crisis has had lasting repercussions, mostly in terms of regional and social inequalities. In Latvia, significant economic disparities have persisted between urban centres, like Riga, and rural areas. They have exacerbated social challenges, such as unemployment and depopulation, in less developed regions. The emigration of the young skilled workers creates demographic imbalances, characterised by aging populations and labour force shortages in rural areas.⁶¹ These issues highlight the current need for more inclusive growth strategies that address the uneven distribution of economic benefits and ensure

⁵⁴Macrotrends. "Lithuania GDP Per Capita 1995-2024". Available at <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/LTU/lithuania/gdp-per-capita>.

⁵⁵Macrotrends. "Estonia GDP Per Capita 1993-2024". Available at: <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/EST/estonia/gdp-per-capita>.

⁵⁶Åslund, A., (2015). "The Baltic Tigers: Past, Present and Future", *op. cit.*, pg. 7.

⁵⁷Staehr, K., (2015). "Economic Growth and Convergence in the Baltic States: Caught in a Middle-Income Trap?", *Intereconomics*, Vol. 50, No. 5. Available at: <https://www.intereconomics.eu/contents/year/2015/number/5/article/economic-growth-and-convergence-in-the-baltic-states-caught-in-a-middle-income-trap.html>.

⁵⁸European Commission, (2015), "Economic Growth and Convergence in the Baltic States: Caught in a Middle Income Trap?" DG ECFIN, pp. 1-6. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/events/2015/20150616_vilnius/paper_baltic_states_en.pdf.

⁵⁹Åslund, A., (2015), "The Baltic Tiger: A Decade of Rapid Economic Growth", pg. 7. <https://www.cesifo.org/DocDL/forum-2015-4-aslund-baltic-tiger-december.pdf>.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, pg. 7.

⁶¹European Commission, (2015), "Economic Growth and Convergence in the Baltic States: Caught in a Middle Income Trap?", pp. 9-12. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/events/2015/20150616_vilnius/paper_baltic_states_en.pdf.

the long-term social and economic stability across the Baltic region. The adoption of the euro by Estonia in 2011, by Latvia in 2014, and by Lithuania in 2015 marked a significant milestone for all three Baltic states— and facilitated their further economic integration with the EU.⁶² The euro transition has reduced currency exchange risks, has lowered interest rates, and has increased price transparency, boosting economic stability and investor confidence.

Each Baltic state has focused on different economic sectors, leveraging its unique strengths. Estonia has prioritised becoming a digital economy, with significant investments in information technology, cybersecurity, and e-services. Initiatives like the “e-Residency” programme have attracted global tech start-ups, contributing to a dynamic start-up ecosystem that includes success stories like Skype and TransferWise.⁶³ Estonia’s emphasis on technological innovation has led to improvements in productivity and business efficiency, positioning it as a hub for foreign investment. The country’s economy has significantly changed since joining the EU: its GDP per capita increased from approximately €5,300 in 2004 to over €26,000 by 2023,⁶⁴ reflecting substantial economic growth and convergence with EU averages. Estonia ranks highly in the ease of doing business and innovation indices, due to its strong focus on digital transformation and a favourable business environment. As of 2023, Estonia’s GDP growth rate was around 2.8%, and the unemployment had decreased to 5.7%, indicating a resilient and diversified economy.⁶⁵ The country has also made significant investments in renewable energy, particularly in wind and solar power, further diversifying its economic base and enhancing its competitiveness within the EU. Estonia’s strategic focus on digital innovation and technological advancements has led to rising living standards and sustained economic vitality.

Latvia has developed a robust financial sector and has leveraged its strategic location as a logistics hub between Europe and Russia. The country has seen substantial growth in industries such as wood processing, food production, and transport services, benefiting from its geographical position. However, the banking sector has faced regulatory challenges, necessitating reforms to address issues related to non-resident banking and financial transparency. Latvia’s manufacturing industry has also expanded, driven by a surge in EU’s export demand. Notwithstanding these successes, economic disparities between urban and rural areas persist, highlighting the need for targeted strategies to ensure inclusive growth. Latvia’s GDP per capita as a percentage of the EU average has risen from 47% in 2004 to around 72% by 2021, demonstrating a significant improvement in living standards and economic performance. The country has also seen a notable increase in its openness to trade, with

⁶²*Ibid.*, pp. 12-15.

⁶³O'Dwyer, G., (2022). “Estonia: Digital Economy Drives Growth”, *Global Finance Magazine*, July 22. Available at: <https://gfmag.com/emerging-frontier-markets/estonia-digital-economy-drives-growth/>.

⁶⁴European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, (2024). “Transition Report 2023-24: Transitions big and small”. Available at: <https://www.ebrd.com/documents/occe/transition-report-202324-central-europe-and-the-baltic-states-pdf.pdf>.

⁶⁵Nortal, (2022). “The key ingredients to Estonia's success as a leading digital society”, September 12. Available at: <https://nortal.com/insights/the-key-ingredients-to-estonias-success-as-a-leading-digital-society/>.

exports constituting about 60% of GDP, up from 40% prior to EU membership.⁶⁶ The country ranks well in the ease of doing business index, supported by ongoing reforms aimed at improving the business environment and attracting foreign investments. As of 2023, unemployment had fallen to 6.0%, owing to a robust and increasingly diversified economy.⁶⁷ Latvia's balanced approach to economic development, with an emphasis on exports, logistics, and financial services, has led to improved living standards and a resilient economic foundation. Lithuania has capitalised on its manufacturing base and agricultural potential, and has recorded significant growth in machinery, electronics, and food processing. Lithuania's economy has been notably transformed since joining the EU, with GDP per capita increasing from €5,500 in 2004 to over €22,000 by 2023,⁶⁸ which reflected the substantial economic growth and the convergence with EU averages. The country ranks highly in the ease of doing business and innovation indices, with a burgeoning tech sector and a strong export performance. As of 2023, Lithuania's GDP growth rate was around -0.3%, and the unemployment had fallen to 6.9%, indicating a robust and diversified economy.⁶⁹ The country has also invested in renewable energy and biotechnology, diversifying its economic base and enhancing its competitiveness within the EU. Lithuania's multifaceted approach has led to an increase in exports and GDP per capita, reflecting rising living standards and economic vitality.

The integration of the Baltic states into the EU has enabled their active participation in EU's broader economic frameworks. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have all played roles in shaping EU policies, particularly in digitalisation, where Estonia has been a leader. Their participation in EU regional initiatives, such as the Baltic Sea Strategy, has facilitated cooperation in areas like environmental protection, transport, and innovation. Additionally, the geopolitical context has fundamentally influenced the economic strategies of the Baltic states. Due to their proximity to Russia and the ensuing historical ties, over 15% of their exports were going to Russia before 2014.⁷⁰ However, since Russia's annexation of Crimea and especially following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, these countries have pivoted sharply. Energy independence has been a priority, leading to the establishment of Lithuania's Klaipėda LNG terminal in 2014, now meeting 100% of its gas needs. Furthermore, the Baltic electricity grids are on track to synchronise with the EU's network by 2025, ending reliance on Russian systems.⁷¹ Regional cooperation has deepened. The Rail Baltica project aims to connect the Baltics to the European rail networks by 2030 and thus enhance trade and security. This project has received substantial funding from the EU, with the

⁶⁶Public Broadcasting of Latvia, (2023). "Latvia's GDP per capita at about three-quarters of EU average", *Eng.LSM.lv*, March 23. Available at: <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/economy/economy/23.03.2023-latvias-gdp-per-capita-at-about-three-quarters-of-eu-average.a502074/>.

⁶⁷Investment and Development Agency of Latvia, (2023). "Latvian Economy Overview". Available at: <https://investinlatvia.org/en/useful-information/why-invest/economy>.

⁶⁸Macrotrends, (2024). "Lithuania GDP Per Capita 1995-2024". Available at: <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/LTU/lithuania/gdp-per-capita>.

⁶⁹Statista, (2024). "Lithuania: Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in current prices from 1999 to 2029". Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/541498/gross-domestic-product-gdp-per-capita-in-lithuania/>.

⁷⁰LSM.lv, (2024). "Latvian companies doing business with Russia named and shamed", April 5. Available at: <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/economy/business/05.04.2024-latvian-companies-doing-business-with-russia-named-and-shamed.a549339>.

⁷¹Swedbank Research, (2022). "Macro Focus: The Baltics and Russia – how strong are economic ties?", February 14. Available at: https://www.swedbank-research.com/english/macro_focus/2022/22-02-01/2/index.csp.

European Commission allocating €720 million through the CEF programme in 2020.⁷² These strategic shifts represent a comprehensive response to the evolving geopolitical landscape that has encouraged the reduction of the economic and energy dependencies on the Russian Federation.

Comparatively, the economic performances of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania within the EU context have been commendable, but not without disparities. Estonia, with its strong digital economy, has seen faster GDP growth and higher levels of foreign investment compared to its neighbours. Lithuania's diversified industrial base has allowed it to maintain a steady growth trajectory, while Latvia, despite its advances in financial services, has struggled with slower growth and higher social inequality. These differences highlight the varying degrees of success in economic strategies and underscore the importance of tailored approaches to national development. Nevertheless, in 2022, the combined GDP of the Baltic states reached approximately €115 billion (with Estonia contributing about €31 billion, Latvia €34 billion, and Lithuania €50 billion),⁷³ showcasing their economic resilience and growth. Furthermore, over the last decade, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have consistently ranked among the top countries in the EU for digital innovation. Estonia is recognised as a global leader in e-governance and digital services, boasting a staggering 99% of its public services available online.⁷⁴ Collectively, the Baltic states have increased their defence spending to an average of 2.5% of their GDP in response to regional security concerns.⁷⁵ As their influence continues to expand, it is anticipated that these nations will play an increasingly pivotal role in shaping security policies and in fostering European stability in the coming years.

EU funding and structural support have been essential in the economic transformation of the Baltic states. Allocations from the Cohesion Funds, the European Regional Development Fund, and other EU financial instruments have enabled these countries to modernise their infrastructure, improve regional connectivity, and support innovation. For example, the EU facilitated significant investments in transportation networks, energy infrastructure, and digital services, which helped to bridge regional disparities and boost overall economic resilience. For the further development of the Baltic states, the strategic use of EU funds will remain critical in addressing ongoing challenges and in seizing new growth opportunities.

The future relationship between the Baltic states and the EU will be crucial in shaping their continued economic development. As the EU moves towards greater economic integration and pursues ambitious goals in areas like climate change and digitalisation, the Baltic states will need to align their national policies with these broader objectives. Their capacity to influence EU policy, particularly in domains where they have expertise (e.g., digital governance, in Estonia's case), will be observed in the way they will leverage their EU membership to drive their own economic agendas.

⁷²*Ibid.*

⁷³ERR News, (2023). "Lithuania's real GDP per capita highest among Baltics in 2022", December 20. Available at: <https://news.err.ee/1609201030/lithuania-s-real-gdp-per-capita-highest-among-baltics-in-2022>.

⁷⁴ERSTE Group Research, (2021). "Baltics Outlook | Recovery in full swing", *CEE Economies Special Report*, June 30. Available at: <https://www.erstegroup.com/en/research/report/en/SR232790>.

⁷⁵Citadele, (2024). "Baltic economic overview 06/2024". Available at: <https://www.citadele.lv/en/support/economic-overview/>.

Continued alignment with EU policies will also ensure access to vital funding and support, which are essential for maintaining economic stability and growth.

Societal transformations in the Baltic states: 20 years of EU membership

Two decades after the 2004 EU accession of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, these Baltic states have undergone profound and multifaceted transformations. Known for their multiculturalism, these countries boast some of the most diverse societies in the EU, with significant ethnic minorities: Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Poles, Jews, Roma, and others. This diversity, while enriching, also reveals underlying fragility and trauma deeply rooted in a history of political oppression, wars, regime changes, and forced displacement. The historical experiences of these states have left indelible scars, which continue to influence their trajectory within the EU and shape their peoples' collective mindset. Analysing the societal changes over the past twenty years necessitates an examination of the distinct experiences of various generational cohorts: those born during the Soviet era who experienced war and occupation, those who came of age post-independence, and those born during the transitional period leading up to the EU accession. Each cohort exhibits unique perspectives on its country's path within the EU.

Additionally, at the outset of their EU integration, Estonia and Latvia have faced significant challenges regarding stateless minorities, particularly former Soviet citizens who lacked citizenship. This situation has arisen from the Soviet Union's policies that encouraged the settlement of Russian speakers in the Baltic states during and after World War II. Following the restoration of independence in 1991, both countries have implemented restrictive citizenship laws.⁷⁶ In Latvia, the citizenship policy has acknowledged the citizenship of those who had it before the Soviet occupation and of their descendants. As a result, approximately one-third of the population turned out to be “non-citizens”—individuals who do not possess citizenship, but are not considered stateless under national law. This group includes a significant number of ethnic Russians and other minorities who settled in Latvia during the Soviet era.⁷⁷ In Estonia, a similar situation has occurred, and a considerable portion of the population has become stateless or held non-citizen status. By 2012, Estonia had around 94,235 stateless individuals, while Latvia had about 280,759.⁷⁸ These numbers represented a significant percentage of their respective populations at that time: around 6-7% of the population in Estonia and approximately 14% in Latvia lacked citizenship.⁷⁹

The “Soviet generation”, encompassing individuals who have matured under Soviet rule, retains vivid memories of the occupation, of resistance, and of the complexities of life in the Soviet Union. This generation's worldview is profoundly

⁷⁶Regelmann, A.-C., (2014). “Introduction – Minority Participation in Estonia and Latvia”, *Journal of Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, Vol 13, No. 1. Available at: <https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/downloads/publications/JEMIE/2014/Regelmann.pdf>.

⁷⁷Kuczyńska-Zonik A., (2017). “Non-citizens in Latvia: Is it a Real Problem?”, *Instytut Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej [Institute of East-Central Europe]*, Lublin. Available at: <https://journals.ispan.edu.pl/index.php/sn/article/view/sn.1438>.

⁷⁸Croft, J., (2016). “Non-Citizens in Estonia and Latvia: Time for Change in Changing Times?”, in IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2015*, Baden Baden 2016. Available at: <https://ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/yearbook/english/15/Croft-en.pdf>.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*

shaped by experiences of forced collectivisation, mass deportations, political purges, and the systematic suppression of national identity. For many within this cohort, the Soviet era is not merely a historical period, but a lived reality that continues to influence their perceptions of freedom, sovereignty, and national independence. The Soviet occupation was characterised by intense suffering and resistance, marked by efforts to preserve language, culture, and national consciousness amidst Soviet attempts at erasing them. The clandestine preservation of national traditions, the transmission of forbidden histories, and the participation in underground movements are integral to their collective memory. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent independence of the Baltic states in the early 1990s represented a significant moment of triumph and relief for this generation. The EU accession in 2004 was seen not only as an economic or political milestone, but also as a symbolic return to Europe, a repudiation of the Soviet legacy, and a reaffirmation of their place within the European community. For this generation, EU membership represents peace, the protection of their hard-won sovereignty, and a safeguard against any potential resurgence of Russian influence.⁸⁰ However, support for the EU among citizens is moderated by a blend of cautious pragmatism and empirical observation. A notable generational divide emerges in the attitudes towards EU membership: whilst merely a tenth of the youth demographic (aged 15-24) perceives membership unfavourably, this proportion doubles to approximately one-fifth among the senior cohort (aged 65-74).⁸¹ This disparity can be attributed to the older generation's lived experience of geopolitical vicissitudes and acute awareness of the precariousness of national autonomy. Although citizens generally acknowledge the stabilising influence and security guarantees afforded by EU membership, they nonetheless maintain a vigilant stance on the preservation of their sovereign prerogatives and cultural patrimony.

The "transition generation", born in the late 1980s and early 1990s, constitutes a cohort shaped by significant socio-political transformations. Their formative years have coincided with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the restoration of national independence, and the complex processes of economic transition and European Union integration. This generation occupies a distinct temporal and ideological space, since it bridged its Soviet past and its European future by blending the inherent tensions and opportunities of that critical historical juncture. This generation has witnessed the dismantling of Soviet-era institutions and the often arduous restructuring of post-socialist economies, characterised by rapid privatisation, rising unemployment, and social dislocation. Their parents' struggles, coupled with their own efforts to adapt to a rapidly evolving socio-economic landscape, have left a lasting imprint on their collective consciousness. For the "transition generation", the European Union has represented both a great opportunity and a considerable challenge. It has offered unparalleled access to education, employment, and mobility across a unified Europe, but simultaneously it has demanded conformity to new legal, economic, and social norms. The representatives of this generation have

⁸⁰European Council | Council of the European Union, (2024). "Enlargement then and now: A geopolitical investment in peace and security – Speech by President Charles Michel for the 20th anniversary of the 2004 EU enlargement", April 29. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/04/29/speech-by-president-charles-michel-at-the-ceremony-for-the-20th-anniversary-of-the-2004-eu-enlargement/>.

⁸¹Austers, A., (2017). "Euroscepticism in the Baltic States: Much Ado about Nothing", *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, Riga. Available at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/baltikum/13703.pdf>.

increasingly assumed key leadership positions and have played a pivotal role in driving these reforms, often acting as a link between the past and the future. Nevertheless, their eagerness to embrace the EU's opportunities has been tempered by the complexities of navigating through regulatory compliance, market competition, and the dual-national and European-identity. Consequently, debates about supranationalism and intergovernmentalism have frequently been at the forefront of the political discourse, reflecting the ongoing negotiations between the supporters of sovereignty and those of deeper integration. Despite these tensions, Euroscepticism remains notably low within this cohort,⁸² which largely perceives European integration as essential to future prosperity and security. This generation's advocacy for closer ties with the EU is balanced by a strong commitment to preserving cultural and national identities. Thus, its representatives are some of the most articulate proponents of deeper European integration, while maintaining a nuanced awareness of national distinctiveness.

The EU Generation, born after 2004, has only known life within the European Union. For the members of this generation, the EU is not an aspirational goal but a foundational aspect of their existence. They have grown up with open borders, the euro, and a European identity as norms, not as exceptions. The EU's freedoms and benefits—such as the freedom of movement, education, and professional opportunities across Member States—are seen as inherent rights rather than as achievements of their predecessors. This generation has benefited significantly from EU membership, accessing educational programmes like Erasmus+, which facilitate study abroad, language acquisition, and international networking. In 2022, Estonia had a budget of €12.8 million, supporting 1,300 projects across 1,800 organisations, with 7,000 participants in mobility activities.⁸³ Latvia's budget was €10.2 million, funding 1,200 projects involving 1,600 organisations and 6,000 mobility participants. Lithuania had the highest budget at €15.4 million, backing 1,600 projects with 2,200 organisations and 9,000 mobility participants.⁸⁴ These countries also have high tertiary education rates, with Lithuania leading at 31.6%, followed by Estonia at 29.7%, and Latvia at 22.5%.⁸⁵ They have entered a labour market integrated into the European economy, offering career opportunities previously unimaginable. Additionally, EU funding and investment have supported infrastructure modernisation, cultural revitalisation, and have improved living standards. However, the EU Generation faces distinct challenges. There is no need for it to undergo a transformation. The cosmopolitan ideas and beliefs are common among the younger generation, who thinks matters are good as they are, without experiencing tensions between local identities and broader European ideals.

The rapid pace of change, brought by the EU accession, has triggered significant opportunities and considerable strains, highlighting the paradoxes in the Baltic states' transformation. To be more precise, though EU membership has spurred economic development, has modernised infrastructure, and has improved living standards, these benefits have not been evenly distributed. Urban centres have experienced a renaissance with thriving industries and cultural initiatives, but in rural areas the

⁸² Askew, J., *op. cit.*

⁸³ European Commission, (2024). *Erasmus+ Programme Guide*. Available at: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/opportunities/opportunities-for-organisations/learning-mobility-of-individuals/school-education>.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

traditional industries have declined, and the older generations struggling to adapt often feel marginalised. This divide between urban prosperity and rural stagnation contributes to social tensions and challenges the societal cohesion.

Despite broad support for EU membership, there remains a persistent “understanding gap” regarding EU governance and the implications of deeper integration, especially among the older and rural populations, who often perceive Brussels as a distant bureaucracy disconnected from local concerns. This perception fosters scepticism and complicates efforts towards deeper integration. Although public education efforts continue, few people understand the complexities of the EU decision-making, and the rapid political changes exacerbate this state of affairs. The swift integration process, coupled with an already fragile societal situation, has led to a sense of exhaustion among various social groups. Many citizens (particularly those born before the EU accession), who benefit from the single market’s goods and services, struggle to fully comprehend the EU’s essence. Lingering memories of the Soviet era further obstruct this understanding, and the tendency is amplified by the Kremlin’s propaganda and the historical grievances, which polarise vulnerable groups and foster simplistic dichotomies between the West and Russia. This often results in a narrow perception of the EU as a bureaucratic entity rather than as a transformative force. In contrast, the post-EU accession generation views EU membership as an opportunity for value-driven progress and innovation. Therefore, one can say there is a major generational divide in terms of perspectives on European integration.

Conclusion

The past two decades have marked a period of profound transformation for Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, as they transitioned from post-Soviet states to fully integrated members of the European Union. This transformation is not merely an economic one, but also encompasses the deeply intertwined social and political evolutions that shaped the distinct historical experiences of the three aforementioned generations.

The early 1990s were a period of great changes as these Baltic states rebuilt their political institutions and aligned themselves with Western democratic norms. Their EU accession in 2004 marked a significant milestone, i.e. it symbolised their reintegration into Europe and their commitment to democratic values. Joining the European Union not only consolidated their political stability, but also enhanced their position and role on the European stage. Despite challenges, such as regional disparities and ethnic tensions, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have demonstrated resilience and adaptability. Their ongoing engagement with EU institutions and utmost commitment to democratic principles indicate that they have successfully navigated the post-Soviet transition to integrate into the broader European community.

In the early 1990s, the Baltic states faced formidable challenges as they moved from centrally planned economies to market-oriented systems. The economic turbulence of that period was characterised by significant GDP contractions, hyperinflation, and a complex restructuring of state assets. Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia have undertaken substantial reforms—including rapid privatisation, the introduction of new currencies, and the liberalisation of trade policies—to stabilise their economies. These initial

measures have been instrumental in setting the stage for future growth and have placed these nations on a trajectory of rapid economic development after their 2004 EU accession. The following years saw the Baltic states earn the moniker “Baltic Tigers” due to their impressive economic performance, characterised by high growth rates and significant improvements in living standards. However, the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 posed a severe test to their economic resilience. The sharp declines in GDP and the consequent implementation of austerity measures underscored the vulnerabilities within their economies. Nevertheless, the relatively swift recovery of these countries highlighted their adaptability and commitment to economic stability. Despite the successes, the crisis left enduring challenges, including regional disparities and social inequalities that continue to influence the socio-economic landscape. The integration into the EU has been pivotal in shaping the contemporary economic and social fabric of the Baltic states. Estonia has emerged as a leader in digital innovation, Latvia has leveraged its strategic geographic position and has developed a robust financial sector, and Lithuania has capitalised on its strengths in manufacturing and agriculture. Notwithstanding these advances, each country faces unique challenges, such as demographic shifts, regional economic disparities, and the need for sustained investment in infrastructure and innovation. EU funding has played a critical role in supporting these countries’ modernisation efforts, by enabling infrastructure improvements and regional development.

The societal changes triggered by the EU integration are equally important. The Baltic states are home to diverse populations, marked by a historical legacy that includes political oppression and forced displacement. The generational divide – between the “Soviet generation”, the “transition generation”, and the “EU generation” – offers a nuanced understanding of how different cohorts perceive their country’s integration into the EU. The Soviet generation views EU membership as a reaffirmation of sovereignty and a safeguard against historical threats. The transition generation, having experienced the shift from Soviet rule to EU integration, tries to strike a balance between the national and the European identity. The members of the EU generation, born after 2004, see EU membership as a foundational aspect of their existence. Yet, they remain critical of EU’s complexities and bureaucratic inefficiencies.

The rapid pace of change has created significant opportunities but also tensions. Urban areas have experienced economic revitalisation, while rural regions face stagnation and socio-economic challenges. The gap in the people’s understanding of the EU governance, particularly among the older and rural populations, has fostered scepticism and hindered deeper integration. Addressing this “understanding gap” is crucial for generating broader support for the EU. These endeavours should also stimulate a more even distribution of the benefits of integration.

In reflecting on the small states’ role within the EU, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania offer a compelling example of how smaller nations can exert proactive influence and contribute meaningfully to the EU’s policies. Their experiences reveal the small states’ potential to shape European policies through innovation, strategic positioning, and active participation. By leveraging their unique strengths – such as Estonia’s leadership in digital governance, Latvia’s strategic logistics capabilities, and Lithuania’s industrial diversification – these countries have demonstrated that even

smaller Member States can drive significant EU-wide initiatives and reforms. The Baltic states' integration story also provides valuable insights for future EU enlargement. Their successful transition from Soviet-era economies to dynamic market-oriented systems illustrates the benefits of a well-managed accession process and the importance of aligning national policies with EU standards. As the EU considers further enlargement, the Baltic states' experiences highlight that the potential new members might contribute positively to the Union, while also facing and overcoming significant challenges.

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Cybersecurity in the Republic of Moldova in the Context of European Integration

Ana-Maria Costea, Natalia Putină, Mircea Brie¹

Abstract: *The current technological development has brought new opportunities, by reducing the time and transactional costs for several services. Thus, it has increased efficiency in various domains. Yet, at the same time, it has generated new threats and risks that countries need to face in the cyberspace. The unique character of this domain resides in the heterogeneity and multitude of the actors involved. This explains why there are unlimited possibilities for attacks, countless reasons for the attacks to happen, and endless strategies, which make a defence-based strategy futile, if not included within a larger resilience-based perspective. The conception of the state as the sole provider of services for the society no longer stands, as civil society and private actors gradually assume more responsibilities and competences, especially when dealing with the cybersecurity literacy of citizens. This aspect is key since we cannot truly discuss the resilience of a state – and tackle, ipso facto, its security – without taking into consideration the security of its citizens. In order to be protected against cyber threats, citizens need to identify them and find ways to address them. Thus, an adequate knowledge level is fundamental. The present article analyses the way in which the Republic of Moldova, an EU candidate state, is adhering to European norms and values regarding cyber resilience to cope with its cybersecurity threats. Firstly, we examine how its National Cybersecurity Strategy observes the European framework in terms of the state's and civil society's involvement in ensuring the security of the Republic of Moldova and of its citizens through awareness raising activities. Since one of the strategy's objectives is the cooperation with the civil society to increase the citizens' awareness of cyber threats, this research used a questionnaire designed to assess the Moldovan students' current level of knowledge of the cyber landscape and of the relevant European norms in this field. The questionnaire also aims to analyse if and how the Moldovan citizens benefited from the different measures taken by the state, the civil society, or other private actors to address this issue.*

Keywords: *Awareness, civil society, cybersecurity, the EU, Moldova, resilience.*

¹**Ana-Maria Costea**, PhD, is Associate Professor at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Department of International Relations and European Integration (DRIIE), Romania.

E-mail: anamaria.costea@dri.snsa.ro.

Natalia Putină, PhD, Associate Professor at the Moldova State University, Department of Political and Administrative Sciences, Vice-Dean of Faculty of International Relations, Political and Administrative Sciences, Chişinău, Republic of Moldova.

E-mail: natalia.putina@usm.md.

Mircea Brie, PhD, Professor at the University of Oradea, Department of International Relations and European Studies and PhD supervisor at the Faculty of European Studies of the Babeş-Bolyai University (Romania).

E-mail: mbrie@uoradea.ro.

Introduction

The current technological development came with numerous opportunities for all the levels of the society. Nowadays information travels instantaneously, and production processes are automatic reducing the costs and time constraints, and thus generating higher financial profits. For states, digitalisation has meant not only smart bombs but also integrated fires and greater coordination in the field, thereby improving military capabilities. Additionally, the public institutions digitalised important features of their services to reduce their bureaucratic burden. The critical infrastructure sectors, such as energy, water, health, education, and finance, are all undergoing digitalisation and greater interconnectivity, while individuals have become critically dependent on digital capabilities to run their affairs.

The COVID-19 pandemic emphasised the need for deeper digitalisation, since the majority of the activities were transferred online (for example, education). All these benefits came with a cost, as the cyberspace poses countless threats to states and to individuals. Internationally, due to the pandemic and the fact that the majority of the activities have been carried out online, cybercrime has increased by up to 600%, being estimated to reach \$6 trillion in damages in 2021, which represents 1% of the global GDP. The general trend and statistics show that, by 2025, cybercrimes will inflict costs of \$10.5 trillion annually (Purplesec, 2024).

The cyber domain is a unique field in which the classical defence strategy does not work due to the wide array of motives behind cyber-attacks and the heterogeneity of the actors involved (states, and non-state actors like organised crime groups, hacktivists, terrorists, hacking groups, individual hackers). The motives range from economic ones – e.g., the case of *Wannacry* (Kaspersky) to political – e.g., *SolarWinds* (Jibilian, Canales, 2021), military – e.g., *Stuxnet* (Collins, McCombie, 2012, pp. 80-91), and social ones – e.g., the Anonymous attacks against Putin (Pitrelli, 2022). Some of the attackers are driven by the desire to acquire international status (Mills, 2012). Therefore, the most suitable policy to address these threats would be one based on a credible and resilient society. Empirically, in the EU, WannaCry was classified as being the result of negligence (ENISA, 2022). Thus, part of these attacks succeeds because the individuals are not aware of the cyberspace vulnerabilities and lack the necessary skills to protect themselves against cyber threats. As mentioned by the European Commission in 2017, “many Europeans still fail to take basic cybersecurity measures: many say they care a lot about their personal data, but then give them away for free on social networks. Data is striking: 90% of the data breaches reported by the 2017 Verizon Data Breach Investigation were the result of phishing” (ENISA, 2022, pg. 4). Hence, it would be practically impossible to have a resilience-based strategy without taking into consideration the citizens’ awareness and their knowledge level of the cyber hygiene and the threat landscape. In this regard, the EU organises, among other initiatives that are to be analysed in the following chapters, the *European Cybersecurity Month*, an annual campaign – dedicated to cybersecurity awareness and best practices – during which the Member States, the civil society, and the education providers perform common activities to tackle the aforementioned security issues. But, beyond the EU Member States, are the candidate countries that prepare themselves to be integrated within the European framework. As the cyberspace is one of the most interconnected fields, their

resilience is crucial for the future security of the entire Union. Therefore, this article seeks to analyse the convergence between the Republic of Moldova's cybersecurity strategy and the European principles and activities in the cybersecurity field. Consequently, it will reveal how the Moldovan state is dealing with its citizens' lack of awareness and knowledge of the cyber field. Additionally, we will examine the current status-quo from an empirical point of view, by highlighting the Moldovan students' level of awareness of this issue and their views on the most suitable actors to act in this field: the state or the civil society. Hence, the research questions are:

Q1 - How is the Republic of Moldova integrating itself within the European framework from a strategic cybersecurity perspective?

Q2 - What is the level of knowledge among the Moldovan students regarding the European and national cyber threat landscapes and the ways to mitigate them?

Q3 - How should the Moldovan civil society involve itself in the cyber field?

From a methodological point of view, this article is structured in four sections aiming to answer the aforementioned questions. The first section is the introduction. The second section offers an overview of the existing literature on the concepts of 'resilience' and 'civil society' because a resilience-based strategy would be the most appropriate to deal with an ever-evolving security landscape. In the third section, we analyse the EU's strategies and activities related to the cyberspace and, more concretely, its ways of constructing a resilient European society through awareness campaigns, educational activities, and private-public partnerships. In the fourth one, we examine the Moldovan cybersecurity strategy to see if it follows the European principles and we analyse the concrete actions taken in this direction. We have conducted empirical research to evaluate the Moldovan students' level of awareness regarding the European and the national initiatives, as well as their knowledge of concepts such as 'cyber hygiene' and 'the security landscape of the online world'. In terms of research methods, for the first part of our paper we have used the document analysis instrument, as we have drawn upon a wide variety of strategic documents adopted at the EU level (e.g., European Commission reports on the results of the activities conducted under the framework of the *European Cybersecurity Month*) or in the Republic of Moldova. Additionally, statistical data was used to assess recent developments regarding internet coverage in the Republic of Moldova, and the citizens' awareness of online threats. Moreover, a questionnaire was sent to Moldovan students – enrolled in bachelor's (BA) and master's (MA) degree programmes – who specialise in international relations and/or public administration. Based on that survey, we provide a comprehensive overview of the Moldovan students' current awareness and knowledge level of the cyberspace and of the norms, initiatives, threats, and actors responsible for dealing with the vulnerabilities in this field. From a procedural point of view, the questionnaire was available online from December 2023 till January 2024, and 103 responses were generated.

Conceptual analysis. Literature review

Given the evolving security landscape, it is obvious that it would be practically impossible to employ classical defence strategies in the cyberspace. Firstly, there is a multitude of actors involved in the cyberspace, and they use a very wide spectrum of

strategies. As mentioned before, the cyber actors can be driven by economic, political, military-strategic, social, or irrational motives. Secondly, the accountability in the cyberspace is among the most difficult elements to address. Thirdly, the technology is developing at an incredible speed, making it difficult to establish a defence policy against shifting threats. Lastly, in terms of costs, a large-scale cyberattack is not necessarily expensive. That is why the number of potential attackers is higher than in the case of classical physical large-scale military attacks (Costea, 2023, pp. 111-127). It would therefore be counterproductive to defend yourself against a threat that is changing by the minute. Consequently, states need to develop resilient systems. One of the first definitions of 'resilience' was produced in the '70s by Holling, who saw it as a measure to absorb changes and disturbances, while maintaining unaltered the relationship between the state's institutions and the population (Holling, 1973). Although the concept is not new, it gained momentum in 2010, when several states (e.g., Canada) developed security strategies for the resilience of their systems and/or of their society (Svitkováa, 2017, pp. 24-26). Walker and Salt (2012, pg. 3) refer to resilience as being a system's capacity to continuously evolve and adapt to deviations, while preserving its core functions and structure. The EU is defining it as "the ability not only to withstand and cope with challenges but also to undergo transitions, in a sustainable, fair, and democratic manner" (European Commission. EU Science Hub). For a system to do that, we need to consider more than the management level (in this case, the states). The concept of resilience sparks debates about the monopoly that states tend to have over security matters as security providers for their citizens. Since we can have financial, economic, social, environmental, industrial, or terrorist incidents, the state cannot be the only one that responds to security threats (Fjäder, 2014). In fact, resilience refers to the "strong social compact between the state and society on their respective and mutual roles and responsibilities" (Metre, 2016, pg. 1). In the cyberspace, it is even more crucial to involve non-state actors, since the systems are so interconnected. As mentioned earlier, one of the biggest cyberattacks in our modern era was *WannaCry* and its success was due not only to the negligence (ENISA, 2022) of the states, but also of the critical infrastructure operators and of individuals. Thus, it is vital to develop a resilient society in which private actors and individuals do their due diligence. To this end, each state should seek, together with the civil society and private actors, to increase the citizens' level of awareness of the online dangers, as well as their ability to mitigate them. In this framework, the civil society organisations (CSOs) become essential actors in the democratisation process, as they are the main partners of the public authorities (Mărcuț, Chiriac 2023, pg. 264; Polgár, 2023), especially when it comes to conducting awareness raising campaigns. Without an active and independent civil society, we cannot have a democracy (Popovenciu, 2022, pg. 26; Brie, Putină, 2023, pp. 172-174; Brie, Costea, Petrița, 2023, pp. 108-109). Hence, the civil society should be involved in relevant activities, including in conflict management (Brie, Horga, 2014, pp. 207-211) and international cooperation (Brie, 2021, pp. 10-16; Brie, Jusufi, Polgár, 2022, pp. 186-192), at all levels, from local and regional to national and international levels (Zakota, Nemeth, 2022; Brie, Mărcuț, Polgár, 2022, pg. 73; Brie, Jusufi, Polgár, 2023, pp. 58-60; Jusufi, Polgár, 2023, pp. 130-135).

The European Union's approach - norms, strategies and results

The EU is among the top international leaders in the cybersecurity domain. Strategically, it adopted in 2021 the 2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade (European Commission, 2021). In 2022, the level of internet connectivity within the EU was approximately 90%, as the gap between rural and urban areas had been decreasing significantly since 2007 (Statica, 2024). This high level of connectivity opened the door for equally high and diverse online threats. To mitigate the vulnerabilities of the digital infrastructures, the EU adopted its Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (2022) that reveals its strategic emphasis on the security of the entire Union. Among the top threats that the EU is facing, the European decision-makers have highlighted the threats that come from the cyber domain, and they have proposed the development of the EU Cyber Defence Policy (*A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, 2022). Additionally, in December 2022, the EU decision-makers adopted the NIS 2 Directive, a document “that aims to achieve a high common level of cybersecurity across the European Union” (*NIS 2 Directive*, 2022).

As regards resilience, in 2015 the EU took the first major step by organising the high-level conference called “Building a Resilient Europe in a Globalised World”. In 2016 the Research Network for the Measurement of Resilience was established, and four years later “the 2020 Strategic Foresight Report announced resilience as a new compass for EU policies” (European Commission. EU Science Hub). Moreover, in 2022, the EU adopted its Cyber Resilience Act (European Commission, 2022). Among the issues that the EU has to deal with, we would like to emphasise the “insufficient understanding and access to information by users, preventing them from choosing products with adequate cybersecurity properties or using them in a secure manner” (European Commission, 2022). This lack of understanding, awareness and cyber hygiene represent key elements in the EU's cybersecurity strategy (European Commission, 2020a). To mitigate this vulnerability and to reach a credible societal resilience, the EU has developed several strategies designed to increase its citizens' level of knowledge and awareness. One of these is the GDPR. This regulation is unique at the international level and it has made the EU a normative power in the cyber domain. In a nutshell, the main purpose of this piece of legislation is to protect the EU citizens against the way in which the private and the public authorities are using their data. Through the GDPR, an individual has access to their own data, can demand its erasure from the archives of the provider, and is informed on how their data is going to be used (Regulation (EU) 2016/679). At the empirical level, the new European Cybersecurity Competence Centre (ECCC) was developed to work together with a Network of National Coordination Centres (NCCs) in order to increase the cybersecurity level across the EU (ECCC, 2021).

From an institutional point of view, in 2019 the EU adopted the regulation that established the development of ENISA, the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA, 2024). Among the activities that this agency is carrying out, we would like to highlight the European Cybersecurity Month (ECSM), an annual event that started in 2012 and is intended to promote awareness of the cybersecurity risks and threats and to provide solutions to vulnerabilities in the cyberspace. The target groups for these events are EU citizens, schools, and universities. The activities take the form of awareness raising campaigns and the sharing of good practices through

public-private partnerships (European Cybersecurity Month). The ECSM started by hosting pilot projects in less than half of the EU Member States, but in 2013, when the EU Cybersecurity Strategy (2013) was adopted, it called on all EU Member States to participate. It even went beyond the boundaries of the EU, having states like the Republic of Moldova participate and organise events under European umbrella. In 2021, the ECSM organised an event on the topic of thinking twice before clicking a specific website or attachment, for example. The target audience of the campaigns were the young people (21+ years old) since they spend a lot of time online and using social media platforms. In terms of tangible results, the campaign reached an audience of over 20 million people (over twice the 8.8 million figure reached in 2020). Additionally, more than 70% of the EU Member States consider that the campaigns had a positive impact, visible in the reduction of the cyber incidents (ENISA, 2021).

Through ENISA, the EU also engages in educational activities related to digital literacy. According to the Digital Education Action Plan for 2021-2027 (European Commission, 2020b), the second priority of the EU is to enhance the digital skills and competences all around the Union through educational programmes. Concretely, a report published by ENISA in December 2022 reveals that all EU Member States have developed educational activities for their citizens. The providers of such educational services include states like Romania (which involves governmental institutions in the process), Croatia (which implements them through the Ministry of Interior), Ireland, Finland and Estonia that develop partnerships with universities, or countries like France, Sweden and Malta that provide these training programmes through partnerships with the civil society (ENISA, 2022, pp. 9-21).

Thus, the EU is a very active party in the regional endeavours to raise the level of digital knowledge and people's awareness of cybersecurity issues. These activities are essential in creating a resilient society, since statistically "in 2022, 96% of young people in the EU made daily use of the internet, compared with 84% for the whole population" (Eurostat, 2023). In terms of digital skills, in 2021 "young people between the age of 16 and 29 report[ed] basic or above basic overall digital skills. Country shares range[d] from 93% in Finland, 92% in Malta, 89% in Croatia and 87% in Greece and the Netherlands to 49% and 46% in Bulgaria and Romania" (Eurostat, 2023).

Although the cybersecurity policy is not a supranational policy of the European Union, the Member States approach it in a concerted manner, adopting its principles and values, and developing a common ground. From this point of view, and considering that the cyberspace interconnects various domains, it is critical for EU's candidate states and partner countries to adopt the same approach. That is why we chose to analyse the Republic of Moldova's approach to the cyberspace, especially since the onset of the ongoing Ukrainian war, and in light of the cyber-attacks that occurred in the region.

The Republic of Moldova's approach - norms, strategies and results

In June 2022, the Republic of Moldova became a candidate state of the EU, and the accession negotiations officially started on June 25, 2024. Hence, it is important to know which is the status quo regarding the convergence of different Moldovan policies

and the European acquis. From a security perspective, the EU enlargement towards the East will bring crucial changes, as in the East the EU will have a large direct border with one of its strategic competitors, namely the Russian Federation. As far as cybersecurity is concerned, the Republic of Moldova adopted its first Information Security Strategy in November 2018 for the period of 2019-2024. According to it, an important factor that affects the national security of the country is represented by the general public's lack of awareness of the online risks, especially those related to misinformation campaigns (The Parliament of Moldova, 2018a, pg. 15). To tackle this issue, the Moldovan authorities proposed the development of the resilience capabilities and know-how of private and public authorities and individuals through awareness campaigns, trainings, exercises, simulations, and the development of new curricula in the field (The Parliament of Moldova, 2018a, pp. 20-21). Additionally, the strategy emphasises the importance of cooperation between the state and the civil society (The Parliament of Moldova, 2018a, pg. 22), the latter being seen as a necessary partner in raising the Moldovan citizens' level of awareness of the online threats and of the ways to mitigate them (The Parliament of Moldova, 2018b, pg. 27). Another strategic document is the Republic of Moldova's Digital Transformation Strategy 2023-2030. One foundational element of the Moldovan digital architecture is the idea that the general public needs to go through a process of digital literacy and competences development (The Government of the Republic of Moldova and the Ministry of Economic Development and Digitalization, pg. 6).

“Moldova is among the top 10 countries in the world in terms of accessibility and cost convenient access to Gigabit Internet” (The Government of the Republic of Moldova and the Ministry of Economic Development and Digitalization, pg. 10). Therefore, it is crucial to have an educated population in this field. Internationally, the EU is among Moldova's most important strategic partners. It is in the common interest of Chisinau and Brussels to develop a resilient Republic of Moldova that can handle external threats, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine. For example, as part of the European Peace Facility Assistance on Cyber Defence in Moldova, the EU sent capacity-building military actors to help Moldovan decision-makers develop resilient and robust security systems (e-Governance Academy, 2023b).

At the institutional level, the National Agency for Cybersecurity was created in December 2023 (The Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2023). Legally speaking, according to the European norms, the Republic of Moldova adopted a new legislation addressing the cyberspace that will enter into force in 2025 with EU's support (Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Moldova, 2023a). In terms of concrete activities funded by the EU, in 2023 the Republic of Moldova held a three-day cybersecurity exercise in order to enhance its resilience against cyber threats (Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Moldova, 2023b). It also took part in the European Cybersecurity Month organised in October 2023 (E-governance Agency, 2023a).

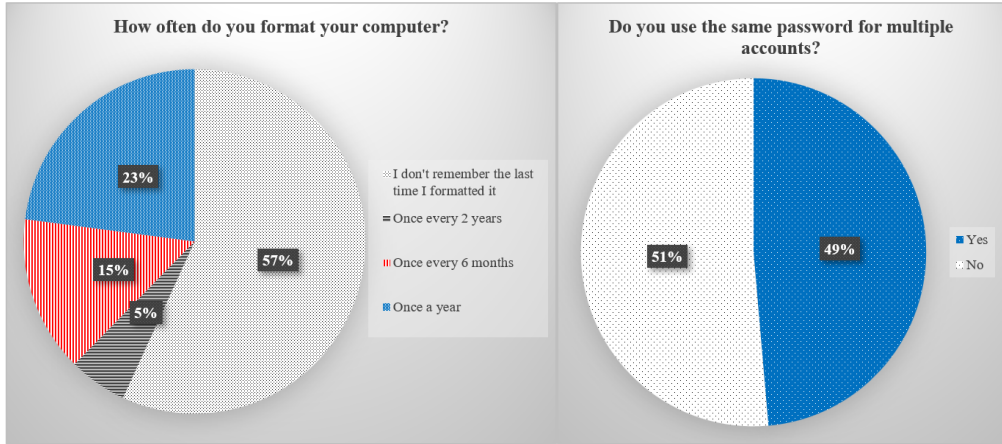
Those actions were necessary, but not sufficient. As already mentioned, the concept of resilience relates to a system. Thus, we cannot realistically speak about a country's resilience without taking into consideration relevant features of its society. According to statistical data, in 2021 approximately 80% of the Moldovan population

had access to the internet. 82% of the individuals that participated in the 2021 poll were aged between 15 and 59 (The Government of the Republic of Moldova and the Ministry of Economic Development and Digitalization, pg. 10). Hence, we can infer that the active population and the young people are among the most connected to the internet and, thus, the most vulnerable in the cyberspace.

To assess the levels of awareness, we have studied the young population from the Republic of Moldova, by applying an in-depth questionnaire designed to assess their knowledge of the connectivity level, the vulnerabilities of the cyberspace, the ways to mitigate those threats, the EU's measures and values, the state's activities, and their views on the Moldovan civil society and its role in this field. The questionnaire was applied to 103 students from Moldova State University (the biggest public university in the Republic of Moldova) that specialise in Public Administration, Political Science, International Relations, European Studies, and Law. The questionnaire was available from December 2023 until January 2024. We have chosen these specializations because they do not have a major in the field of cybersecurity, although cybersecurity has a direct impact on their everyday life. Also, given their majors, their future chances of working in the public administration sector are rather high. If civil servants do not possess the necessary competences in the fields of cybersecurity and resilience, this may affect the state's resilience in the medium and long terms. The questionnaire was targeted at the active population, hence there were 57 respondents aged 18-25 years, 28 aged 26-40 years, and 18 aged 40-60 years. As far as the gender of the respondents is concerned, 58% of them (i.e., 63 respondents) were women and 42% (i.e., 46 respondents) were men. Moreover, 58% of the respondents were students at MA level, and 42% at BA level (*Authors' own research*).

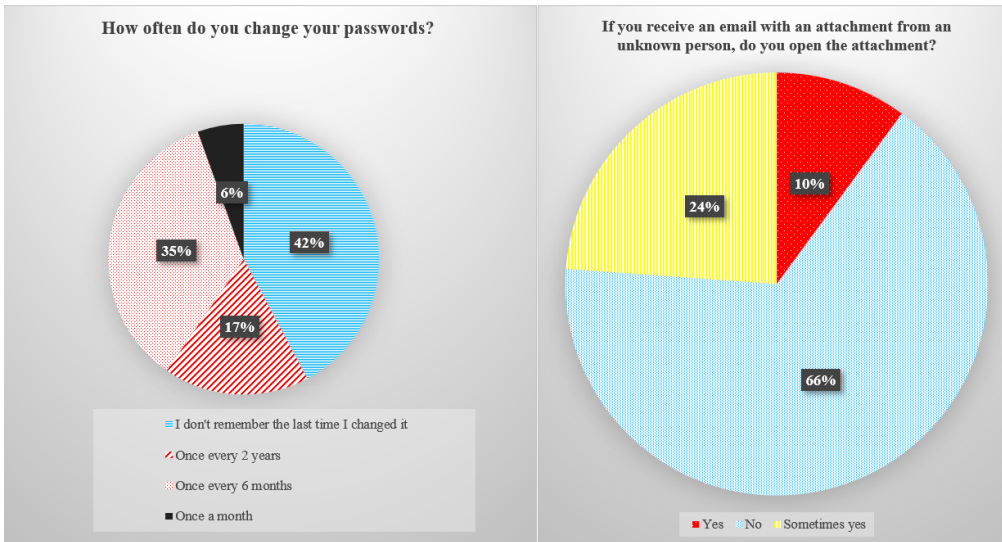
To reach a suitable level in terms of resilience (as defined in the second chapter), firstly you need to know the potential threats and the necessary steps to ensure a system's protection. Only then will you have greater chances to identify the attack and stop it, while the system is recovering. Thus, the cyber hygiene is required of all internet users. When asked what cyber hygiene is, 50 out of 103 respondents answered that they do not know or have never heard that term before. When asked when they last formatted their computer, 57% did not remember, while only 15% declared that they are doing it on a regular basis, once every 6 months (*Chart 1*). Additionally, 49% of the respondents use the same password for multiple accounts (*Chart 2*) and 42% of them did not remember the last time they have changed their passwords (*Chart 3*). Lastly, 34% of the respondents answered that they would open an email attachment from an unknown person (*Chart 4*). These results are illustrated in the charts below (*Authors' own research*).

Chart 1 and chart 2 – Questionnaire applied to the active population (18-60 years old) of the Republic of Moldova



Source: Authors' own research.

Chart 3 and chart 4 – Questionnaire applied to the active population (18-60 years old) of the Republic of Moldova



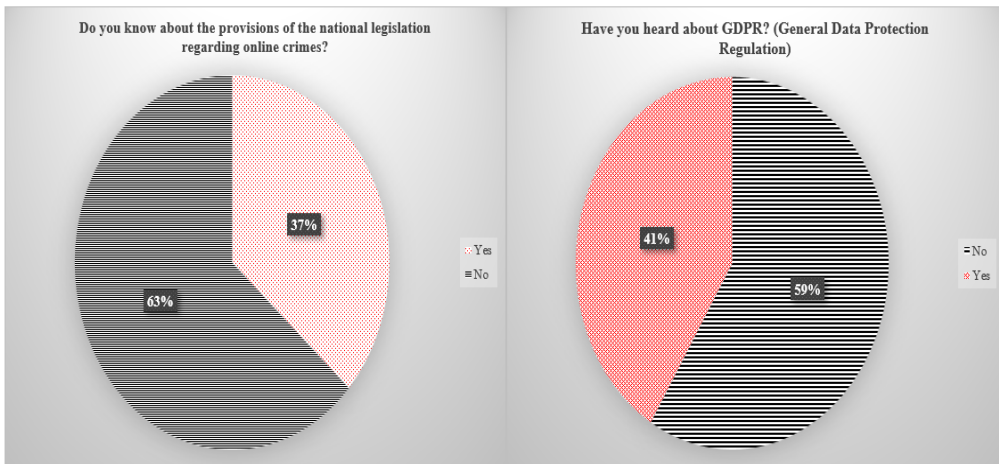
Source: Authors' own research.

Unfortunately, these results depict a very negative situation of the Moldovan society's resilience in the cyberspace. Although the target group was formed of educated individuals who spend a significant amount of time online, it came out that even they lack the basic knowledge of the current cybersecurity landscape. According to some 2023 statistics (AAG, 2024), phishing is still seen as the most common form of cybercrime, with 3.4 billion spam emails sent daily. Thus, opening an attachment from an unknown sender is highly problematic. The results of the questionnaire are

confirmed by the statistics published in December 2023 by the National Cybersecurity Index, according to which the Republic of Moldova recorded a score of 2 out of 10 in what concerns the education and professional development at the undergraduate level of cybersecurity. The statistics offer as well a bleak picture of the graduate cybersecurity education sector, which received a score of 3 out of 10 (e-Governance Academy Foundation, 2023b, pg. 1). As regards the indicators ‘public cybersecurity awareness resources’ and ‘cybersecurity awareness raising coordination’, Moldova maintained the score of 3 out of 10 (e-Governance Academy Foundation, 2023b, pg. 2).

The results of the questionnaire demonstrate that the respondents’ knowledge of the national legislation in the cyber domain remains minimal. Only 37% of them declared that they know about such provisions (Chart 5). Since the Republic of Moldova is an EU candidate state, the recorded level of knowledge about European norms is more positive, i.e. 41% of the students who took part in the poll (Chart 6) declared having heard of the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Authors’ own research).

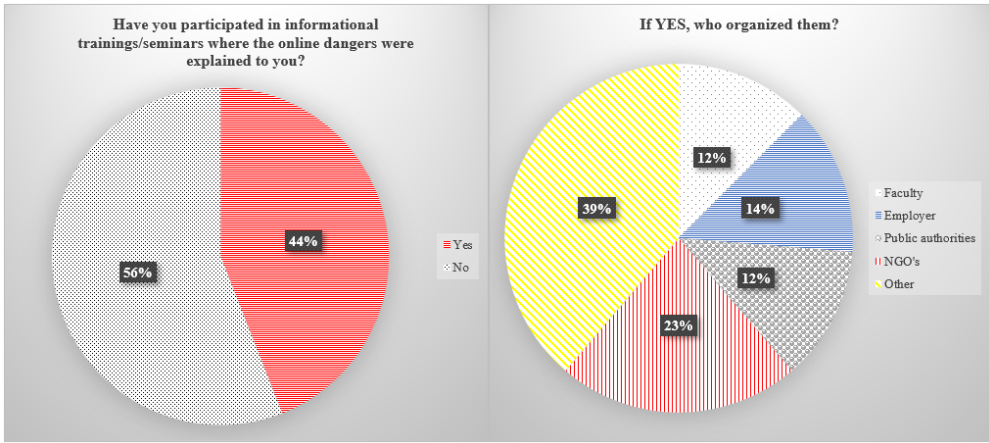
Chart 5 and chart 6 – Questionnaire applied to the active population (18-60 years old) of the Republic of Moldova



Source: Authors’ own research.

These results could be explained by the students’ limited access to trainings or awareness campaigns on all these topics. When asked about this aspect, only 44% of them confirmed having participated in informational trainings/seminars where the online dangers are presented (Chart 7). The state and the NGOs are among the top providers of such services (Chart 8), proving the necessity of developing partnerships between the public authorities and the civil society (Authors’ own research).

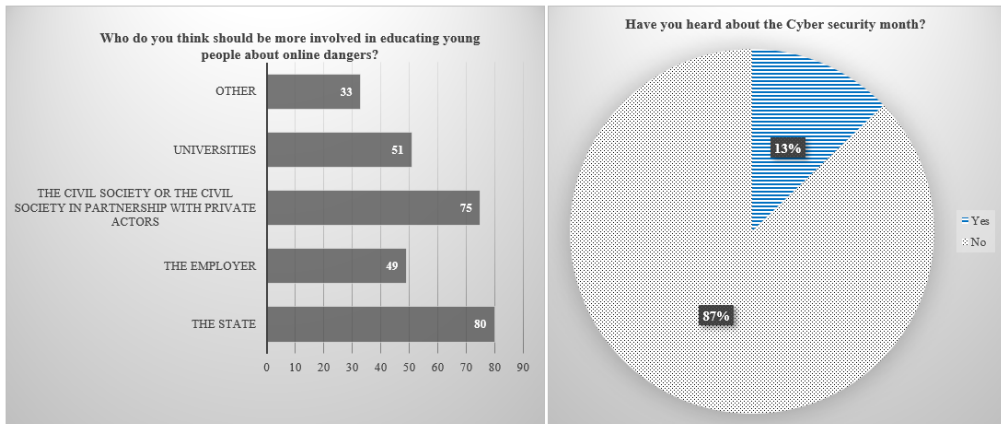
Chart 7 and chart 8 – Questionnaire applied to the active population (18-60 years old) of the Republic of Moldova



Source: Authors' own research.

As regards the issue of the most suitable actors to provide these types of trainings and awareness campaigns, the respondents had a multiple-choice question. The majority of them (80 out of 103) declared that the state should be the first provider of such services, followed closely by the civil society (75 out of 103) (Chart 9). Here the civil society was viewed as an actor that acts on his own or in cooperation with private actors. In what concerns the visibility of EU's annual event titled "Cyber Security month", 87% of the respondents stated that they had not heard about it (Chart 10), although, as previously mentioned, it is organised at the European level since 2012, and the Republic of Moldova itself organised it in 2023. (Authors' own research).

Chart 9 and chart 10 – Questionnaire applied to the active population (18-60 years old) of the Republic of Moldova

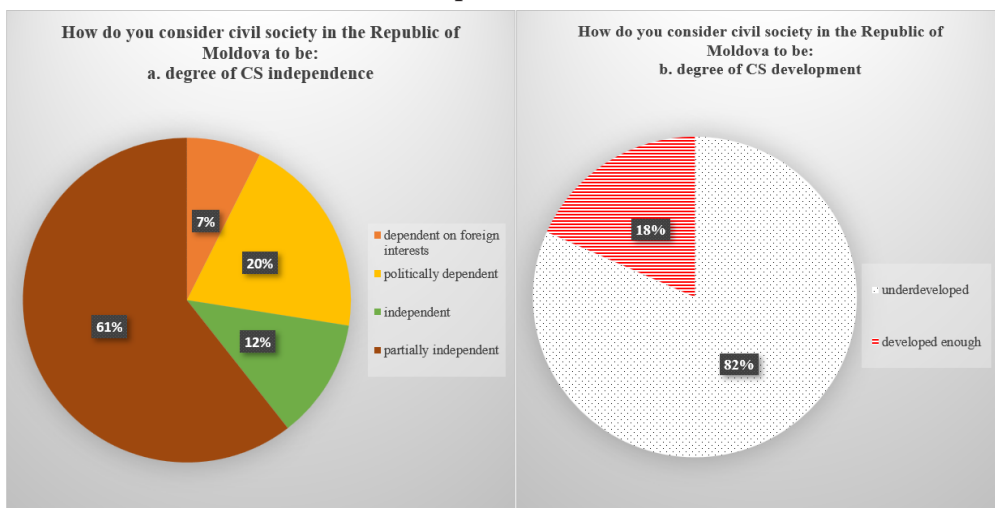


Source: Authors' own research.

Additionally, the majority of the respondents, i.e. 61%, see the Moldovan civil society partially independent, while 20% view it as politically dependent, 7% consider

it dependent on foreign interests, and only 12% see it as independent (Chart 11). Furthermore, when asked about the civil society's development level, the majority of the respondents, namely 82%, said that they view it as underdeveloped (Chart 12).

Chart 11 and chart 12 – Questionnaire applied to the active population (18-60 years old) of the Republic of Moldova



Source: Authors' own research.

These results match the European Commission's recent assessment, which concludes that the Moldovan civil society still lacks the necessary tools to engage more in policy dialogues (European Commission, 2023, pp. 16, 86). Thus, we cannot claim that the Republic of Moldova is a resilient state. However, based on relevant statistics and strategic documents analysed herein, we can conclude that the Moldovan civil society wants to become resilient. To achieve this goal, it must develop a resilient society by initially harnessing the power of information and education.

Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to assess the Moldovan society's resilience in the face of cyber threats, by taking into account the European norms and strategies. Firstly, we conducted an analysis of the main strategic cybersecurity documents adopted by the EU and the Moldovan authorities. Secondly, we analysed the institutional and legal frameworks by using statistical data. We highlighted, among others, the importance of measuring the internet connectivity and the digital literacy levels. At the macro level, the Republic of Moldova is just beginning to implement the EU legislation on cybersecurity. Thus, we cannot discuss yet about the convergence of the European and Moldovan legislations in this field, since the latter will enter into force in 2025. Lastly, the survey we carried out focused especially on the young Moldovans' level of awareness of cyber threats. More than 100 Moldovan students responded to a questionnaire to assess their level of awareness of cyber threats. Our poll was targeted at young people (students) because they are the most active online. Additionally, we selected many students with a major in international relations since these ones are certainly more familiar with the European dynamics. Results show that although the authorities in Chisinau have taken

important steps to develop the country's resilience in the cyberspace – by providing the necessary legislation and institutional framework, in partnership with the EU, and we refer especially to the National Information Security Strategy, and the Digital Transformation Strategy 2023-2030 – , their medium- and long-term impacts remain to be seen. Currently, the Moldovan civil society and young Moldovans in general still lack basic knowledge of the cyber hygiene required to protect themselves online. Although the Republic of Moldova is an EU candidate country, its population is not well versed in the European cyber initiatives. The civil society is viewed as an important player, but remains underdeveloped there and partially dependent on political affiliations. It is in its initial stages of development. Thus, we cannot label the Moldovan state as being resilient in front of the current cyber threats. It remains to be seen how steadfast and efficient the decision-makers will be in stepping up the resilience of their country.

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EU's Renewable Energy Targets. An Economic Analysis of Floating Photovoltaic Plants on Inland Waters in Romania

Ioan-Cătălin Murărașu, Gabriela Drăgan, Boglarka Vajda¹

Abstract: *The European Union's (EU) imperative for its Member States to achieve climate neutrality has elevated the role of photovoltaic (PV) parks in the renewable energy landscape. However, the proliferation of photovoltaic (PV) plants presents sustainability challenges, notably in terms of land requirements for installation. This puts a strain on the allocation of the available land, leading to competition with vital economic sectors like agriculture and industry. In response to that challenge, this article proposes an analysis of the viability of the installation of photovoltaic (PV) panels on floating platforms on Romanian lakes. Employing a comprehensive methodology, this study evaluates key metrics including capital expenditure (CapEX), operational expenditure (OpEX), and the levelized cost of energy (LCOE). By examining the profitability and broader implications of floating photovoltaic (PV) installations, this research aims to contribute to the discourse on sustainable energy solutions amidst land scarcity. It underscores the potential of leveraging water surfaces to meet the EU's renewable energy targets, while alleviating pressure on land resources, and informing policymakers and industry stakeholders on the feasibility and benefits of adopting innovative approaches to green and clean energy generation.*

Keywords: *Renewable energy, floating photovoltaic installations, land scarcity, Romania.*

JEL classification: *O13, P18, P48, Q42.*

Introduction

The reform of the energy sector, fundamental to all economic activities, is vital for the transition to a circular and eco-friendly economy. This transition requires gradually replacing conventional energy sources with renewable ones, while also improving their profitability and accessibility. Enhancing energy efficiency is crucial in ensuring a smooth transition without negative impacts on investors and consumers.

¹**Ioan-Cătălin Murărașu** is PhD student at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Faculty of International Business and Economics.

E-mail: murarasu.catalin9@gmail.com.

Gabriela Drăgan is PhD Professor at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Faculty of International Business and Economics, Romania.

E-mail: gabriela.dragan@rei.ase.ro.

Boglarka Vajda is PhD student at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Faculty of International Business and Economics, and project manager at Green Energy Innovative Biomass Cluster.

E-mail: vajdaboglarka@gmail.com.

While the evolution of renewable energy technologies and the decline in their costs support the EU's envisioned transition, **the targets set by European leaders sometimes appear too ambitious for the proposed timeframes.** As investments in new energy production technologies are gaining momentum, negative externalities of their use and new challenges arise, fuelling concerns within the business community about the viability of the clean economy model.

For the last two decades, the European Union has been the main promoter of renewable energy worldwide. Especially relevant in this sense was the promulgation of Directive 2001/77/EC, at the proposal of the European Commission, which supported the promotion of the use of renewables throughout the Union. That moment marked the beginning of the decarbonisation process of the energy sector and of the economy. Later, the legislative framework in this field was supplemented and clarified by Directive 2009/28/EC, Directive (EU) 2018/2001, and Directive (EU) 2023/2413, which ensured an efficient and prompt adaptation of the European regulations to the reality of the market.

The paradigm shift in the European Union has created new opportunities, but also new challenges from the economic and legislative points of view. The implementation of green energy production projects has not been uniformly done in the community space, as Member States differ in terms of their promotion capacity. To counter the potential distortions of the energy market triggered by these differences, the European Parliament issued Regulation 2024/1735, one of its objectives being the standardisation of the way in which the authorities regulate the development of energy production from renewable sources (European Parliament, 2024).

Under these conditions, it is vital to identify solutions to improve the efficiency of green investments and reduce their negative effects (e.g., the harsh competition for extra-urban land that might be used for the development of photovoltaic parks). A solution currently promoted in the academic environment is the installation of photovoltaic (PV) panels on floating pontoons to harness the lake water gloss. This method allows to cut back on costs for the purchase or rental of land dedicated to PV. In addition, in the case of reservoirs, the short distance to the electricity transmission infrastructure considerably reduces the costs of connecting the park to the grid.

Despite the international trend that promotes floating photovoltaic parks, there is little research focused on testing their viability on Romania's lakes. Simulations are necessary due to the strategic importance of the agricultural sector (which competes for land with the renewable energy producers) and due to the fact that many lakes are in mountainous areas, where shading and meteorological phenomena can significantly impact the panels' productivity.

In Europe there are already power generation companies that have built or designed floating photovoltaic plants. For example, Q Energy has started the construction of such a solar plant with a capacity of 74.3 MW (134,649 panels) in the Haute-Marne region of north-western France. It will be put into operation in 2025, on the site of a former quarry (Q Energy, 2023). ECOwind has also carried out a similar project north of the town of Grafenwörth, Austria, with an installed capacity of 24.5 MW, which will be able to supply 7500 households (BayWa r.e., 2023).

The main purpose of this article is to analyse the profitability of such investments in Romania, based on a case study in a mountainous area. The work also aims to ascertain the probability of costs increasing due to unforeseen factors or circumstances – changes in the legislation, rising prices of raw materials and construction services – that cannot be accounted for in a preliminary analysis of the investment and, thus, to formulate recommendations to address these challenges.

After an overview of the most relevant studies that tackle the possible installation of floating photovoltaic panels, we describe the research methodology used to calculate the levelized cost of electricity (LCOE) and to analyse the results obtained. Subsequently, we present our opinions on the research carried out, the study's limitations, some recommendations for future research, and finally, the conclusions that can contribute to the development of the photovoltaic energy sector in Romania.

Literature review

At the end of 2023, during the United Nations Conference on Climate Change in Dubai, the need for a global emissions reduction of 43% until 2030 and of 60% until 2035, relative to figures from 2019, was reiterated as critical in order to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Moreover, the leaders of the participating states agreed that by 2030 they will triple the production of energy from renewable sources and double energy efficiency (European Commission, 2023). Even before COP28, EU's Member States had proposed, through the European Green Deal, that by 2030 they would reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 55%, increase energy efficiency by 32.5%, and ensure that at least 32% of the final energy consumption comes from renewable sources. In response to the disruption of the global energy market caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the European Commission launched the REPowerEU Plan (2023), which, among other measures, comes with a more ambitious target for renewables (i.e., 45% by 2030), designed to reduce substantially the dependence on classical fossil fuels and pave the way to climate neutrality by 2050.

How realistic the previously set targets are (Institute for Energy Research, 2023) is hard to determine, but the significant technological progress of the last decades is unquestionable. If less than 20 years ago, renewables were not competitive, they have recently become not only profitable, but also extremely attractive to investors. This transformation is largely due to anti-pollution measures promoted globally by the EU (Miciuła *et al.*, 2020; Włodarczyk *et al.*, 2021).

The developed states, adhering more or less willingly to the global energy goals established to combat pollution, are looking for solutions to replace with renewables the conventional energy that has been ensuring their economic growth over the past two centuries (Kammen, 2004). The most illustrative example of this transition is the rise in the global production of photovoltaic energy, from 100 GW in 2012, to 1000 GW in 2022. This market's growth is just beginning, with an estimated production of 2300 GW in 2025 (Guchhait *et al.*, 2023).

The construction of onshore photovoltaic and wind farms could rapidly increase the percentage of renewable energy in the European energy mix. However, this would require large areas of land that are equally necessary for other economic

activities, such as agriculture, industry, or biodiversity conservation (Tölgyesi *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, if European states want to achieve the objectives mentioned in the European Green Deal (and, subsequently, climate neutrality), without affecting other land-intensive economic sectors, they should identify other solutions onshore or offshore, and increase the profitability of the renewable power plants (Lee *et al.*, 2014; Ramasamy and Margolis, 2021).

The installation of offshore wind turbines has already become a global trend because their efficiency is higher than that of the onshore ones (Chen *et al.*, 2022). However, the popularity of offshore photovoltaic plants varies due to the high costs of construction and installation. Thus, offshore photovoltaic islands are still in the testing stage, but there are good chances for their development in the coming years, provided the existing technology evolves so that the marine environment no longer represents a danger for them (Wang *et al.*, 2022). On the other hand, the reduction of prices for photovoltaic panels and the evolution of available technologies make floating photovoltaic parks a very effective solution for fresh and calm waters (Cazzaniga *et al.*, 2018).

Among the renewables, the photovoltaic energy has the cheapest production costs, which is reflected by its attractiveness to European investors. According to Kougiyas *et al.* (2021), the EU's photovoltaic energy market must grow 5 times, compared to 2020, to meet the targets proposed for 2030. During 2023, an additional 56 GW of photovoltaic energy production capacity was installed in Europe – of which 14.1 GW in Germany, 8.2 GW in Spain, 4.8 GW in Italy and 4.6 GW in Poland (SolarPower Europe, 2023). At the end of 2023, the installed photovoltaic energy production capacity in the European Union was roughly 260 GW, of which only 1.9 GW were generated in Romania. Although it has a larger territory than its neighbouring states that are EU members, Romania has much smaller photovoltaic energy production capacities than them, i.e. Hungary produced 5.8 GW in 2023, and Bulgaria 2.9 GW, whereas Ukraine, which is not yet an EU member, generated 8 GW that same year (International Renewable Energy Agency, 2024). The latter have developed their energy sector more than Romania.

The main benefit of installing photovoltaic panels on water is the fact that the costs with land purchase, which sometimes represent more than half of the money invested in photovoltaic farms, are largely reduced. Moreover, covering with floating panels a significant part of lakes also contributes to reducing evaporation during dry periods (Mittal *et al.*, 2017, Ferrer-Gisbert *et al.*, 2013).

Micheli and Talavera (2023) demonstrated that projects of this type in Turkey, Romania, Italy, Spain, Bulgaria, and Greece would be profitable. Besides, the installation of floating PV panels brings further benefits to the investors, as the surface temperature of fresh and calm waters is quite constant and thus diminishes the wear and tear of the installation, improving not only its lifetime but also its efficiency (Skoplaki and Palyvos, 2009; Kamuyu *et al.*, 2018; Dörenkämper *et al.*, 2021). Reducing the temperature of the installation and the amount of dust deposited on the the panels increases the efficiency of the entire photovoltaic farm and, implicitly, its productivity (Tina *et al.*, 2021).

Jamal and Muaddi (1992) demonstrated that if PV panels are covered with a

thin layer of water, their lifetime and efficiency increase due to water cooling. However, this might not apply for PV panels in maritime areas because salty water is particularly corrosive and therefore substantial investments in materials and resistance structures are needed (Ghigo *et al.*, 2022).

Methodology

Data Collection:

The authors of this paper consulted analyses conducted by Romania's power transport and system operator Transelectrica, to assess the available capacity of the national network. Additionally, the Global Solar Atlas software was used to determine key characteristics of the photovoltaic energy production in the selected location.

Analysis:

The analysis involved calculating monthly and annual panel production, as well as total production over a 25-year lifetime. This calculation considered the equipment's efficiency and wear based on the manufacturer's specifications.

Calculations

The LCOE formula was used to estimate the cost, with components including capital expenditure (CapEX), operational expenses for the year t (OpEX t), annual electricity production (P_{el}), and a discount rate (r):

where: CapEX: capital expenditures on fixed assets necessary to realise the photovoltaic park, OpEX t : operational expenses for each year, P_{el} : annual

$$LCOE = \frac{CapEX + \sum_{t=1}^n \frac{OpEX_t}{(1+r)^t}}{\sum_{t=1}^n \frac{P_{el}}{(1+r)^t}} \quad (1)$$

electricity production, and r : discount rate (assumed as 0 for this study).

Estimation of components

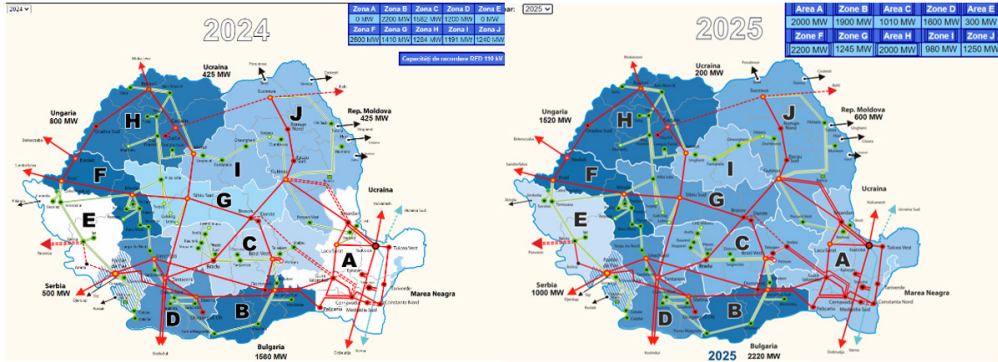
CapEX was determined by analysing online market offers for materials used for platform structure, panels and installation components (screws, cables, and inverters). Estimates from previous studies, available in the specialised literature, were used to determine the costs of the anchoring systems and of the equipment installation services. Operational expenses were estimated at 15 euros/kW/year, with an additional annual depreciation of 0.2%, based on wear analysis for photovoltaic parks in Spain (Micheli, 2021). Due to the proximity of the envisaged installation project to the water's edge and the normal weather conditions, maintenance costs were presumed to be similar to those of the land-based parks.

Results

Available Capacity Analysis:

The available capacity to accommodate electricity production in the Romanian grid was examined in collaboration with Transelectrica, as depicted in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1. Available capacity to take over electricity production in the Romanian grid in 2024 and 2025



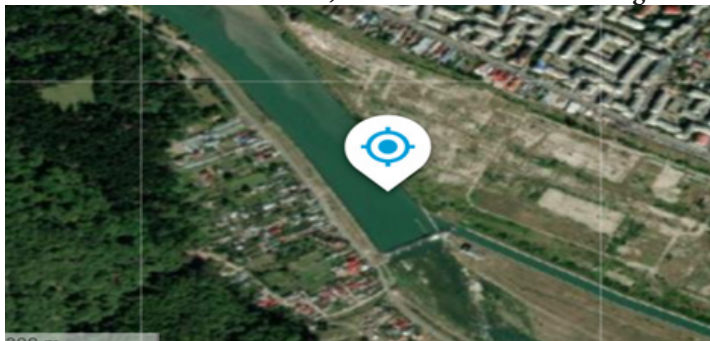
Source: www.transselectrica.ro.

According to the planning carried out by the Romanian power transport and system operator, represented in *Figure 1*, in the North-East region (marked with the letter J) there is sufficient capacity to absorb the electricity produced in the system, both in 2024 (1240 MW) and in 2025 (1250 MW).

Location Selection Process

The location for the installation was determined based on a solar radiation analysis conducted using the Global Solar Atlas software. *Figure 2* displays the chosen coordinates (46.917793°, 026.373119°) within the region J (*Figure 1*), which benefits from favourable solar radiation levels conducive to competitive photovoltaic park performance. Furthermore, the site is not designated as a protected area and this fact simplifies the approval process for PV panel installation without incurring additional environmental documentation costs.

Figure 2. The coordinates 46.917793°, 026.373119° for the envisaged installation



Source: www.globalsolaratlas.info.

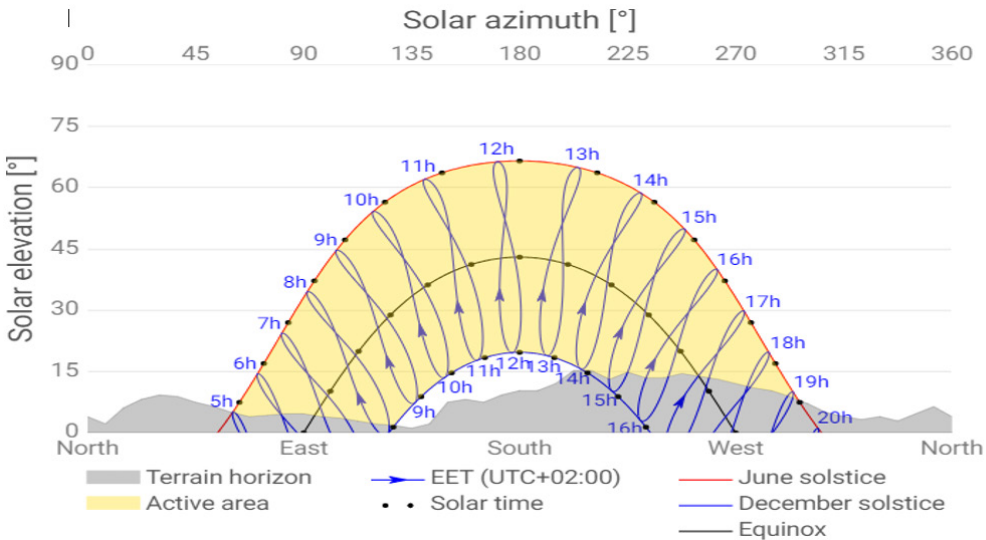
Simulation Results

To conduct the simulation, the chosen installation site, depicted in *Figure 2* and situated in region J, was selected. This location was deemed optimal due to favourable solar radiation levels, as evidenced by the analyses presented in *Figure 3*,

Figure 4, and Table 1. Moreover, the absence of protected status for the lake would ensure streamlined approval processes for solar project development, minimising the associated environmental documentation costs.

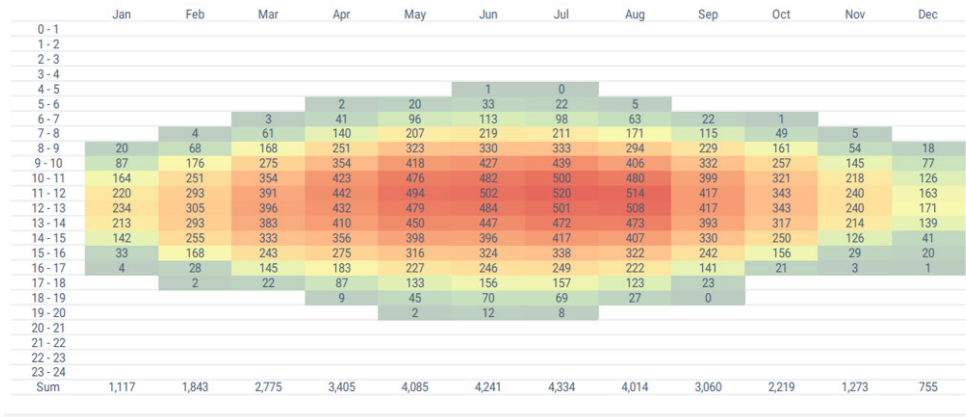
The solar azimuth, solar elevation angles depicted in Figure 3, and the total photovoltaic power output (Figure 4) were analysed to assess their impact on panel performance. Previous studies – including those carried out by Yang *et al.* (2011), Stanciu *et al.* (2016), and Hafez *et al.* (2017) – have already highlighted the importance of the solar azimuth and solar elevation angles for photovoltaic farms. The terrain horizon is also illustrated in Figure 3, because it determines the hours of the daily exposure of PV panels to solar radiation. The horizon line plays a very important role in photovoltaic energy production, as it influences the exposure of solar panels to sunlight. High landforms, forests or tall buildings, can block sunlight during the day, especially at sunrise and sunset – when the sun is lower, reducing the period of exposure to sunlight and implicitly the energy production (Vega-Garita *et al.*, 2023). These calculations were performed using the Global Solar Atlas software for the coordinates referenced in Figure 2.

Figure 3. Solar azimuth and solar elevation



Source: www.globalsolaratlas.info.

Figure 4. Total photovoltaic power output (kWh) of the envisaged installation



Source: www.globalsolaratlas.info.

Figure 4 illustrates the monthly production structure of the analysed photovoltaic island, segmented by hours throughout the year. It reveals that the peak production period is from May to August, and coincides with the dry season when energy output, especially from hydroelectric plants, declines.

Table 1 summarises key site characteristics, including irradiance levels and panel specifications. For the selected location, each 1,000 kWp capacity could generate 1,009 GWh annually.

Table 1. Site characteristics

Site analysis indices	Value
Direct Normal Irradiance (DNI)	1153.8 kWh/m ²
Global Horizontal Irradiance (GHI)	1240.8 kWh/m ²
Diffuse Horizontal Irradiation (DIF)	591.9 kWh/m ²
Global tilted irradiation at an optimum angle (GTI _{opta})	1459.1 kWh/m ²
Optimum Angle (OPTA)	38/180°
Temperature	9.3 °
Elevation	303 m
Total photovoltaic power output for 1000 kWp	1.009 GWh/year
Global tilted irradiation	1335.6 kWh/m ² per year
Panel's tilt	10°
Panel's azimuth	180°

Source: www.globalsolaratlas.info

Panel Characteristics

The Aiko N-Type ABC Black Hole Series PV Module was chosen for its high efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Table 2 outlines its specifications. Each panel is capable

of producing 615W at an efficiency of 23.8%.

Table 2. Panel characteristics

Aiko N-Type ABC Black Hole Series PV Module	Value
Rated power	615 W
Efficiency	23.8%
Width	1,134 mm
Height	2,278 mm
Occupied area	2.583252 m ²
Mass	28.3kg
TEMP coefficient	-0.29%
Annual degradation from second year	0.35%
Minimum product warranty	15 years
Price	110 euro per piece

To achieve the desired capacity of 1,037 MW, a total of 1,632 Aiko N-Type ABC Black Hole Series PV Module panels are required. With this configuration, the system would produce an estimated 1,047 GWh annually.

CapEX Analysis

The total capital expenditure (CapEX) for the installation (including the materials for the platform structure, the photovoltaic panels, and associated components) was calculated. *Table 3* details the breakdown of costs, totalling €705,173.

Table 3. CapEX

		Total costs (euro)
Materials used for the structure of the platform		
Aluminium 5005 structure		41,600
Aluminium 6061 plates		27,487
Stainless Steel 301 rectangular bars		11,365
HDPE floating docks		17,219
Total		97,671
Photovoltaic panels		
Aiko N-Type ABC Black Hole Series PV Module		179,520
Clamping screws		9400
Connection cables		12515
Invertors		207,400
	200 euro/kW	
Installation & labour	139.5 euro/kW	144,661
Anchor system	33.48 euro/kW	34,718
Transport	18.6 euro/kW	19,288
Total		607,502
CAPEX		705,173

Structural Design and Material Requirements

The installation area required for the panels is calculated at 2.583252 m² per panel, including an additional 0.567 m² for maintenance access. Therefore, 1,632 installed panels would occupy a total area of 5141 m². Structural materials include aluminium bars (5005 alloy) and stainless-steel bars (301 alloy) for support and anchoring, as

well as corrugated aluminium sheets (6061 alloy) for access ways. Detailed quantities and costs of these materials are outlined in *Table 3* and more detailed calculations for material requirements and costs are provided in *Appendix A*.

Floating Platform Design

The floating platforms supporting the panels are designed to withstand the weight of installation. Each platform has a floating capacity of 360 kg per square meter, with an area of 0.25 m². Thus, 805 high-density polyethylene (HDPE) floating docks are required to support the entire system.

Fastening System and Electrical Components

Screws and fastening systems are used to secure the panels to the aluminium structure and platform. Additionally, electrical components such as cables are required for connecting the panels. Detailed lengths and costs of these components are provided in *Table 3*.

Labour and Installation Costs

According to Baptista *et al.* (2021), the costs of installation and labour - converted from US dollar to euros at the time of this analysis - were estimated at 139.5 euros/kW, those of transportation at 18.6 euros/kW, and those of anchoring the system at 33.48 euros/kW. These costs are crucial for determining the overall investment required for the project.

OpEX and LCOE Calculation

The OpEX for the floating PV farm were estimated at 15 euros/kW/year. The operational costs are similar to the calculations made by Micheli (2021) for photovoltaic plants in Spain because the operation and maintenance of panels on inland waters are light activities (similar to those for onshore PV parks) due to the proximity to land and the favourable weather conditions. The above-mentioned costs increase by 0.2% every year due to the natural wear and tear of the panels. The lifetime of the installation was estimated at 25 years, with an annual production reduction of 0.35%, according to the characteristics provided by the manufacturer. Hence, for that period, the **total OpEX would be 498,231.3 euros**.

The total production, with a reduction of 1% in the first year and 0.35% /year starting from the second year, would amount to 24,947.9 MWh. In this context, the LCOE for the analysed installation is 48.237 euros/MWh. The result of the calculation proves that the photovoltaic island would be cost-effective for the European market, where the LCOE of photovoltaic installations varies between 20 and 60 euros/MWh and the electricity market prices vary between 200 and 650 euros/MWh (International Energy Agency, 2023).

Discussion

The case study's findings show a competitive LCOE of 48.237 euros/MWh, better than the European average of 56 euros/MWh in 2023 (Schmela *et al.*, 2023). This outcome underscores the viability of the PV park project within the Romanian energy landscape. It's noteworthy that the forecasts for 2030 indicate that the average LCOE

for solar energy in Romania will range from 54 euros/MWh to 58.6 euros/MWh, and the average LCOE for wind energy will range from 52.6 euros/MWh to 54.4 euros/MWh (Deloitte, 2019). Additionally, the inclusion of storage capacities raises the LCOE to 111.6 euros/MWh. As technology continues to advance, global LCOE values are expected to dip below 30 euros/MWh by 2050 (Det Norske Veritas Group, 2023).

However, the study has **certain limitations** owing to the evolving legal framework in Romania. Notably, it is difficult to estimate the costs associated with the concession procedure and the investor royalties without receiving further clarifications from authorities. Moreover, determining the royalties payable to the National Administration “Romanian Waters” for installing PV facilities on water bodies presents a similar challenge. Other costs might be triggered by the possible requirement to reconfigure or resize the electricity transmission network in some areas. Such costs are usually minimal when the photovoltaic park is located on reservoirs, considering the short distances to the network connection point. However, proactive engagement with the regulatory authorities and stakeholders can mitigate these uncertainties and streamline the project development processes.

On the other hand, cost optimisation strategies play a pivotal role in the economic viability of such projects. Thus, possible discounts from suppliers for the wholesale purchase of equipment can significantly reduce project costs. Furthermore, securing financing from European funds represents a viable avenue for these investments. The RePowerEU programme, initiated by the EU under the Next Generation EU facility, allocates approximately 200 million euros for new renewable energy production capacities in Romania (Ministry of Investments and European Projects, 2023). Leveraging such funding opportunities can alleviate financial burdens associated with project implementation and enhance overall project feasibility.

The profitability of renewable energy investments is boosted by their inherent versatility. Renewable energy sources offer greater flexibility in power generation, as they can be switched on and off much more easily than conventional ones. Moreover, they enable producers to capitalise on peak demand periods and command higher prices in the balancing market. Renewable energy producers can participate in the balancing market when they can reserve a quantity of their energy output to balance the system in line with the orders issued by the transmission operator. For example, the solar and wind energy can balance the deficit of hydropower during dry periods, wind power plants can compensate for the lower energy output of photovoltaic plants during cloudy periods, just as the high productivity of photovoltaic installations can sometimes balance a low energy production of wind power plants. In Romania, this practice is not yet common, as the operator of the electricity transmission network generally relies on conventional energy sources, due to their stability. However, this situation will certainly change with the growth of renewable energy sources and storage capacities. The adaptability not only enhances profitability but also contributes to improving LCOE values, making renewable energy projects increasingly competitive within the energy market landscape.

Conclusions

As this study argues, the competing demands for land necessitate innovative solutions for expanding the renewable energy infrastructure. By capitalising on underutilised water bodies, such as lakes and reservoirs, the floating PV installations offer a promising avenue for addressing land scarcity while concurrently enhancing renewable energy capacity. Our research underscores the viability of the floating PV farms, offering a sustainable alternative to traditional land-based solutions.

The low investment costs of floating PV farms, in terms of LCOE, prove their economic feasibility. This solution appears to be a strategic alternative to traditional land-based installations because it eliminates the need for land acquisition and it capitalises on the proximity to existing electricity transmission networks. The potential royalties payable to surface water management authorities are insignificant in comparison to the costs associated with land acquisition.

This floating PV parks are a niche sector that could bolster Romania's renewable energy portfolio. However, it is imperative to introduce simplified procedures for obtaining permits and to have standardised royalty frameworks to catalyse investment and foster industry growth.

Looking ahead, future research endeavours should delve into cost comparative analyses of floating photovoltaic parks in diverse geographic contexts. Furthermore, investigating long-term performance metrics will be pivotal in optimising the efficiency and sustainability of floating PV installations.

In conclusion, by harnessing the power of water surfaces and through concerted efforts to streamline regulation and incentivise investments, Romania could position itself as a front-runner in the burgeoning field of floating PV farms and thus contribute significantly to the EU transition towards cleaner energy.

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Appendix A

The installation area required for the panels is calculated at 2.583252 m² per panel, including an additional 0.567 m² for maintenance access. Therefore, 1,632 installed panels would occupy a total area of 5141 m². Structural materials include aluminium bars (5005 alloy) and stainless-steel bars (301 alloy) for support and anchoring, as well as corrugated aluminium sheets (6061 alloy) for access ways.

In this context, 1632 installed panels would occupy 5141 m². One panel weighs 28.3 kg, which means that 1632 will weigh approximately 46.2 tons. Each panel requires 3 horizontal aluminium bars 5005 (AlMg1) each measuring 1,134 m long to which they must be fixed and one vertical aluminium bar 2,278 m long. In total, for the whole island, rectangular aluminium bars (width 40 mm, height 60 mm, thickness 4 mm) with a length of 9270 m are required. Similar bars with lengths of 1224 m (0.25 m x 2 for the high part and 0.125 m x 2 for the middle part) are needed to achieve the 10% slope of the panel installation. Thus, in total, rectangular aluminium bars with a length of 10,494 m are required. The presented rectangular pipes have a specific mass of 1.98 kg/m, resulting in a total mass of 20.8 tons/platform. Their price at the time of the analysis is 2 euros/kg. This results in a cost of 41,600 euros for the entire aluminium structure of the island.

For the construction of the access bridge for maintenance, 301 stainless steel bars in "L" profile (2 for each aisle, with a width of 0.04 m, a height of 0.06 m and a thickness of 4 mm) with a length of 3,702 m are also required. They have a specific mass of 3.07 kg/m, resulting in a requirement of 11,365 tons/platform. The cost for these is 1 euro/kg, which means a total of 11,365 euros/platform.

To make the access ways, 1,851 m of corrugated aluminium sheet (aluminium 6061) with a width of 0.5 m and a thickness of 0.5 cm is also needed. The specific mass of this sheet is 6.75 kg/m, so 12,494 tons are needed. The price at the time of the analysis was 2.2 euros/kg. Thus, it results in a price of 27,487 euros/platform.

According to the specifications of the chosen floating pontoons, the floating

capacity is 360 kg/m^2 , so a pontoon, which has an area of 0.25 m^2 , can support 90 kg and costs 21.39 euros. The total weight of the platform is 70.1 tons. An additional mass of 5% of the mass of the panels was considered for cables and screws, resulting in an additional 2.31 tons. Thus, the pontoon must support 72.41 tons, requiring 805 HDPE floating docks. At the time of this analysis, such a dock costed 21.39 euros, so the total price was 17,219 euros/platform.

The price of the screws needed to fasten the aluminium bars to the platform was estimated at 0.77 euros/piece, according to the average price on the market, resulting in a cost of 7,540 euros. For fastening the panels to the aluminium bars, the price of the necessary systems was considered 0.19 euros/piece, resulting in a cost of 1,860 euros/platform. In total, the cost of fastening the system amounts to 9,400 euros. The length of the necessary electric cables was considered similar to that of the rectangular bars on which the panels are attached, namely 9,270 m, to which 50% was added for flexibility, resulting in 13,905 m. The average price for these is 0.9 euro/m, so the total cost is 12,515 euros/platform.

European Climate Pact Ambassadors as New Organic Intellectuals: Neo-Gramscian Analysis of EU Climate Hegemony and Just Transition

Mihail Caradaică¹

Abstract: *Using a neo-Gramscian theoretical framework, this paper assumes that European Climate Pact Ambassadors (CPAs) play an essential role in the European green transition, thus contributing to defining new climate hegemony within the EU. The research question answered by the present paper is whether these climate ambassadors can be understood as “organic intellectuals” (in the sense forwarded by Antonio Gramsci) for their participation in the construction of a counter-hegemonic discourse and their determination to challenge the traditional modes of a fossil fuel-based economy. As such, these ambassadors will be ideally placed to develop a new narrative for climate action based on the just transition to the ambitious objectives of the European Green Deal. From this perspective, the article contributes to the broader debate on climate governance by sharply underlining the necessity of grassroots involvement and the possibility offered through a neo-Gramscian analysis to understand the dynamics of climate hegemony in the EU.*

Keywords: *Climate change, Climate Pact Ambassadors, just transition, neo-Gramscianism, organic intellectuals.*

Introduction - A neo-Gramscian theory of just transition in the European Union

The European Union (EU) has been among the critical central players in preventing global climatic changes since the beginning of the 1990s, and its leadership has adapted to new challenges in this respect. The period's model and context conditions inform the EU's strategy, characterised by the tendency to negotiate and effectively implement international agreements, like the Paris Agreement (Oberthür and Dupont, 2021). According to this, the European Union has adopted the European Green Deal (EGD) to help realise the Paris Agreement. The European Green Deal is an ambitious and powerful strategic initiative aimed at ensuring climate neutrality by 2050. It provides us with energy efficiency targets, calls for increasing of renewable energy sources, and promotes a transition to a circular economy (Andrei, 2023). The “Fit for 55 Package” proposes laws that would lower net emissions by at least 55% by 2030 from 1990 levels. This initiative seeks to transform the EU's economy and society, while acting as a model for other regions switching to low-carbon economies (Fleming and Mauger, 2021; Ossewaarde and Ossewaarde-Lowtoo, 2020; Bonciu, 2023).

¹Mihail Caradaică, PhD, is Lecturer in European studies at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration from Bucharest, and European Climate Pact Ambassador in Romania for 2024.
E-mail: mihai.caradaica@dri.snspp.ro.

Such an ambitious plan also requires a solid commitment to social justice and the protection of vulnerable communities (Pianta and Lucchese, 2020). To achieve social consensus and stability, all the social categories should be convinced that a green transition is the right way toward a prosperous future and that all the transition policies encompassed in the Green Deal are fair and work for all's benefit. As this paper is focused on the European Union as a polity, a consensus among the European citizens should be reached. The European Climate Pact, an element of EGD, was created as a forum for people, groups, and communities to participate in climate action across all societal sectors. It encourages a wide range of actions and commitments to support the climate objectives of the EU (Tosun, Pollex, and Crumbie, 2023). The theoretical framework that will be used is the neo-Gramscian approach to the European just transition, as this can provide a clear image of the social forces involved in the green transformation process and its ideological background.

Neo-Gramscianism provides a critical theoretical approach to understanding European integration. It emphasises the role of ideas, culture, and material capacities in determining the social relations of production and the governmental policies within the European Union (EU). In line with the larger neo-Gramscian perspective that sees European integration as a project driven by the interests of dominant economic groups, neo-Gramscian scholars argue that European integration can be understood through the lens of hegemony, and the role of transnational capitalist classes and their influence on the integration process (van Apeldoorn, 2004). This perspective highlights the significance of transnational classes and the conceptual and material underpinnings of their power, implying that the EU's institutional frameworks and policies are designed to perpetuate the interests of a transnational capitalist class as well as the dominance of neoliberal economic principles (Bieler and Morton, 2001; Bieler, 2002). Furthermore, neo-Gramscianism critically analyses how European integration has affected state-society relations on a socio-political level, arguing that the process has helped to reconfigure state power and create a new European governance framework that cuts across traditional nation-state boundaries. This reconfiguration is made possible by the emergence of a transnational historic bloc that unites various social forces around a neoliberal agenda, including state actors, corporate interests, and some segments of civil society (Cox, 1983; Gill, 1998).

Through this lens, European integration is seen as a political project that reinforces capitalist hegemony at a transnational level, influencing all aspects of EU social norms and identities, including economic policy. However, given the impact of climate change and the necessity to reform profoundly the European Union to become a net-zero society, another hegemonic project needs to be reinforced. Harald Winkler comes with a reshaped neo-Gramscian theory on just transition and European integration, understanding the dynamics between development pathways, climate change mitigation, and social equity. Winkler's (2020) work builds on neo-Gramscian concepts, such as hegemony, ideology, and the roles of change agents, putting forth a framework that would allow coalitions of various players to unite behind the principles of a just transition. According to Winkler, to allow humans to flourish alongside a healthy planet, this coalition must establish a new cultural hegemony that promotes just transitions and modifies the fundamental conditions of the 21st century. By

invoking Gramsci, Winkler emphasises the significance of ideological conflict and the development of a collective will, arguing that changing minds and cultural norms is just as crucial to a transition as changing policies and business practices (Winkler, 2020).

Therefore, the neo-Gramscian theory focuses on the concept of just transition to understand how the European Union is trying to build a large consensus on the transition policies by creating a new hegemonic discourse. The main features of the theory are centred on incumbent actor resistance, elite-backed policy institutes, and the role of coalitions of change agents. Incumbent firms contribute to regime stability and change through strategies of resistance and accommodation, using material, institutional, and discursive forms of power (Ford and Newell, 2021), while elite-backed policy institutes are seen as influential actors in shaping the discourse and policies related to the just transition (Winkler, 2020). The theory also posits that to achieve a just transition, an alliance of change agents must coalesce around the ideological element of this transition (Winkler, 2020). This alliance may include labour unions, social movements, non-state actors, some firms, and international organisations.

As a continuation of Harald Winkler's research, this paper will mainly focus on understanding how the European Union is actively working at all three levels mentioned above. Changing the hegemonic order implies mobilising a critical number of actors at local, national, and supranational levels to legitimise the EU's climate change actions. Meanwhile, the European Commission is already recruiting on a voluntary and non-remunerated basis key national figures (Climate Pact Ambassadors) involved in climate and environmental actions and willing to spread the message and objectives of the European Union's climate transition. Hence, this research paper analyses whether the Climate Pact Ambassadors, seen through neo-Gramscian lenses, appear as "organic intellectuals" actively building a hegemonic climate discourse in the European Union.

Methodology

The role of Climate Pact Ambassadors (CPAs), as organic intellectuals facilitating a just transition towards sustainable development in the EU, is examined in this research paper using a neo-Gramscian theoretical framework. The study aims to reveal how these ambassadors contribute to the hegemonic climate change and sustainability discourse, promoting a collective will that drives environmental action and policy shifts. The research aligns with Antonio Gramsci's theory by identifying Climate Pact Ambassadors as organic intellectuals. It focuses on individuals and groups that emerge from the social structure to articulate and disseminate counter-hegemonic ideas on climate transition, thus crucial in convincing society to embrace a net-zero emissions future.

The methodology employs qualitative content analysis to systematically evaluate the Climate Pact Ambassadors' public profiles, statements, and responsibilities, available on the European Climate Pact website in February 2024 ("Meet Our Ambassadors," n.d.). This method involves collecting data on CPAs from the official EU sources based on the frequency of specific keywords and phrases related to their responsibilities and then representing these frequencies in percentages. The analysis aims to uncover the distribution of these ambassadors across EU Member States, assess

gender balance, identify thematic areas of focus, categorise jobs or occupations, and highlight the CPAs' stated priorities and areas of action according to the data provided in the description. A coding scheme will be created by the author to categorise the information into relevant themes, such as geographical distribution, gender, thematic focus, professional background, and declared priorities for climate action. In February 2024, when this research was conducted, 912 ambassador profiles from all EU Member States were uploaded on the official website. The number of ambassadors varies over time because they may lose their status (due to lack of activity, or faulty communication with the Commission or with the national partner), or withdraw from this voluntary mission.

Shaping EU climate hegemony: A neo-Gramscian perspective

Antonio Gramsci introduced the concept of “hegemony” to describe how ruling classes maintain their dominance not merely through coercion or force but also through consensual acceptance of their values and norms by the subordinate classes. In his 2019 work, Mark McNally shows how hegemony, viewed from a Gramscian perspective, involves mobilising mass consent through ideological and political alliances formed within civil society. In actuality, hegemony is a new kind of politics adopted by a class that is at the pinnacle of its evolution and yet has to give up its narrow sectarian interests in favour of a broader and more complex political strategy of the national alliance to gain state power and establish a new economic order (McNally, 2019).

Scholars in the field of international relations and European integration have turned to Gramsci to introduce a more ideological and consensual dimension to relations of domination. In contrast to the realist power politics, Gramsci's “entrance” into international relations aims to stress the necessity of an ideological, consensual, value- and understanding-based explanation of the world order (Joseph, 2008, pg. 101). As Robert Cox explains, he used hegemony as “a structure of values and understandings about the nature of order that permeates a whole system of states and non-state entities. In a hegemonic order, these values and understandings are relatively stable and unquestioned (...). Hegemony derives from the ways of doing and thinking of the dominant social strata of the dominant state or states” (Cox, 1996, pg. 151). Thus, for Gramsci, hegemony is a form of power exercised through persuasion rather than force. This form of power involves obtaining the consent of diverse social forces through political and intellectual struggle within civil society.

In Gramsci's view, civil society became an ideological arena in which hegemony is secured. Therefore, civil society's relative autonomy transforms the ideological realm into a crucial arena of political contestation between different social groups and ideas (Levy and Egan, 2003, pg. 806). On this premise, Harald Winkler began to develop the neo-Gramscian perspective on just transition. He identified just transition as a critical ideological element around which alliances of social forces coalesce, forming a clear vision and set of values that mobilise support for this cause, namely the green transition. Following the Gramscian logic, just transition will be hegemonic in the European Union when it gains broad support and becomes a common cause and common sense (Winkler, 2020, pg. 5). To achieve this, fundamental conditions need

to change. Establishing a counter-hegemony, such as the “just transition”, enables the transformation of the fundamental conditions for development and climate.

Nevertheless, for a counter-hegemony to be successful, broad support must be gathered, in this case including from those not initially inclined to support the just transition. “Building an alliance requires political, cultural, socio-economic, moral, transformational, collective leadership by an alliance. Forming an ‘organic ideology’ is practical work, carried out by institutions, with collective leadership by some individuals – not necessarily the leaders of organisations, Gramsci’s ‘organic intellectuals’” (Winkler, 2020, pg. 6). Institutions and people do this work, but a community or group fundamentally generates ideology. This is where Harald Winkler limits his research, as his objective was to draft a neo-Gramscian theoretical approach to just transition.

Following the aim of this paper, namely to identify the organic intellectuals acting at the European level to enforce a climate hegemony in the European Union, the analysis will further develop this concept and deepen Winkler’s research.

Organic intellectuals in Gramscian thought

The concept of “organic intellectuals” is central to Antonio Gramsci’s writings. The organic intellectuals’ role is to conceptualise a particular class’s problems and goals and to forge its advancement. Thus, they provide leadership through their work as organisers of social hegemony (Evans, 2005, pg. 27). Unlike traditional intellectuals, who originated in a previous mode of production and persisted in their sphere of influence and organisation despite the radical change in production and political and social organisation (Silva, 2022), organic intellectuals are deeply embedded in the class structure and actively involved in shaping the consciousness and direction of their respective classes (Pijl, 2005).

In explaining who the organic intellectuals are, Gramsci argues that all individuals possess the capacity to be intellectuals, though not all perform the intellectuals’ social function. For him, the organic intellectual is inextricably linked with his role within the complex system of social relations. In his view, intellectuals are not just individuals engaged in mental labour but also organisers, leaders, or everlasting convincers, who actively participate in the real world and use, their moral and intellectual leadership to shape public opinion and social structures (Gramsci, 1971). Various scholars came up with different examples of organic intellectuals. Among them, we mention: Friedrich Hayek – identified by Andrew Morrison (2020) as a leading organic intellectual in transparent neoliberalism, members of policy institutes and think tanks that rationalise the development of neoliberal regimes and legitimise their worldviews in the press (Neubauer, 2012), management cadre in advanced capitalism (Pijl, 2005), social assistants working with social groups deprived of fundamental rights (Jacinto, 2017) or senior managers in big corporations (Evans, 2005).

The idea of “organic intellectuals”, as defined by Antonio Gramsci, is essential to his writings. Gramsci describes their dedication to expressing the goals, concerns, and tactics for class advancement and sets them apart from traditional intellectuals due to their active participation in social leadership and class structures (Getman *et al.*, 2021, pg. 278). While anyone can be intellectual, according to Gramsci, only a select

few can carry out the social role of organic intellectuals who shape public opinion and social structures. On the same model, the role of the climate ambassadors could become central in the new European climate project, which appears to be hegemonic. In the following section, a deep analysis of the CPAs will be conducted to clearly show their role, objectives, occupation, and European representativeness.

The role of Climate Pact Ambassadors as organic intellectuals in the EU's climate policy

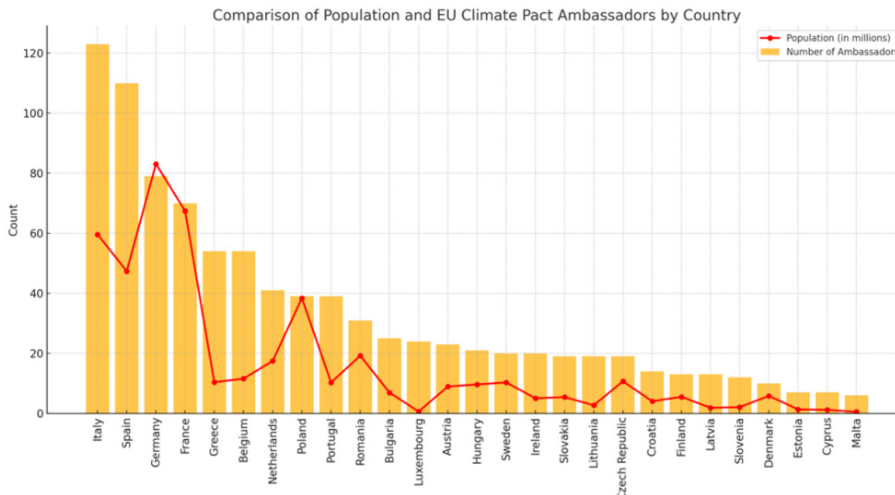
European Climate Pact Ambassadors (CPAs) are volunteers from all the EU's Member States who actively contribute to the European Union's climate action efforts. CPAs are pivotal in advocating for participatory governance and constitute an essential element of the EU's approach to sustainable development. The ambitious agenda of the European Green Deal calls for CPAs to be key players in this transformation (Tosun, 2022). Within their networks and communities, their contribution to raising awareness and stimulating climate action is crucial. They are chosen based on their commitment to climate action and are expected to lead by example, inspire others, and foster connections to amplify the impact of their climate advocacy (Tosun, Pollex, and Crumie, 2023). Involving communities, exchanging information, and enabling initiatives that lead to a greener, more sustainable Europe, are all important aspects of their work, highlighting the significance of the cooperation between citizens, civil society, and policymakers, in combating climate change and achieving SDG 13 - Climate Action (Jevtic and Bouland, 2022).

The activities of Climate Pact Ambassadors (CPAs) and their potential impact on different policy cycle stages, as detailed by Jale Tosun (2022), include facilitating participatory governance and enhancing the implementation of the European Green Deal. By educating the public to support climate action, CPAs can have a major influence on agenda setting. They can offer grassroots perspectives and feedback during policy-making, ensuring that policies are effective and inclusive. In the implementation stage, CPAs serve as crucial actors in mobilising communities and promoting local solutions (Tosun, 2022). In another paper, Jale Tuson, Lucas Geese, and Irene Lorenzoni analysed the public profiles of Climate Pact Ambassadors to better understand their commitment to climate action. They found out that CPAs belong to both older and younger generations and have very different outlooks on climate action and ways of advocating for it. Younger ambassadors are more likely to directly involve their peers in climate initiatives, whereas older participants frequently mention their concern for future generations as a strong motivator (Tosun, Geese, and Lorenzoni, 2023).

Besides the role assigned to them by the European Commission to raise awareness, support climate action, inspire and engage communities, by sharing knowledge and facilitating actions to influence public policies, further analysis of the public profiles of the CPAs is required for a more accurate understanding of their commitments, functions and representativeness at the EU level. For this purpose, a qualitative content analysis of the public profiles of the CPAs – made available on the European Climate Pact website – was conducted (“Meet Our Ambassadors,” n.d.). After collecting and analysing all these data, we can note a close correlation between the ambassadors' role and Gramsci's “organic intellectuals” concept.

The Ambassadors to the Climate Pact (CPAs) have almost balanced representation in terms of gender, with 49.34% being men and 50.66% women. This fair distribution emphasises how inclusive the programme is. It guarantees a broad range of viewpoints and methods for encouraging and carrying out climate action in local communities. *Figure 1* provides a clear picture of the distribution of CPAs in relation to the population of EU Member States: Italy – 13.49%, Spain – 12.06%, Germany – 8.66%, France – 7.68%, Greece – 5.92%, Belgium – 5.92%, Netherlands – 4.50%, Poland – 4.28%, Portugal – 4.28%, Romania – 3.40%, Bulgaria – 2.74%, Luxembourg – 2.63%, Austria – 2.52%, Hungary – 2.30%, Sweden – 2.19%, Ireland – 2.19%, Slovakia – 2.08%, Lithuania – 2.08%, Czech Republic – 2.08%, Croatia – 1.54%, Finland – 1.43%, Latvia – 1.43%, Slovenia – 1.32%, Denmark – 1.10%, Estonia – 0.77%, Cyprus – 0.77%, Malta – 0.66%. The percentages were calculated based on the number of ambassadors per country, out of a total of 912 ambassadors at the European level. Considering this distribution in percentages, a matching rate between the proportion of climate ambassadors and the population in EU countries can be identified with slight variations in the cases of Germany, France, Belgium, Portugal, Greece, and Luxembourg. In its assessment of the ambassadors’ applications, the European Commission does not take into account only the proportional representation, but also the CPAs’ involvement and motivation, and these can vary from state to state. For this reason, some Member States may have more or fewer ambassadors than others compared to the size of the population.

Figure 1. Proportion of Climate Ambassadors vs population in EU countries



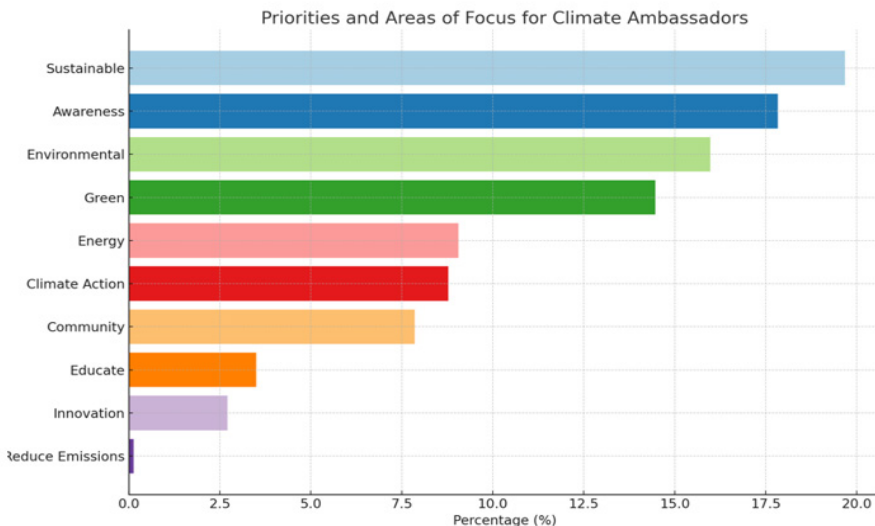
Source: Author’s own research.

The thematic focus areas, which are actually predefined domains that Climate Ambassadors address, cover a wide array of environmental issues. The majority of CPAs’ efforts are directed toward Climate Education & Awareness Raising, i.e., 54.28%. Thus, they highlight the significance of disseminating knowledge and increasing awareness in the fight against climate change. Much attention is also given to Circular Economy / Sustainable Consumption: 37.83% of Climate Ambassadors support the adoption of

these practices in production and consumption, as they are essential for lowering the environmental impact. Less prominent focus areas the ambassadors chose are Energy – 3.18%, Biodiversity – 1.21%, Sustainable Food – 0.55%, and Oceans and Just Transition – 0.11%, while 1.64% did not spot any central theme.

Based on the Climate Ambassadors’ profile description and understood as their main responsibilities (as *Figure 2* illustrates), the CPAs’ priorities and focus areas show a strategic emphasis on “Sustainability” with 19.68% of the discourse revolving around this idea demonstrating a widespread dedication to long-term ecological balance. With 17.83% of keyword mentions referring to “Awareness,” the CPAs’ commitment to enlightening the public about the realities of climate change is evident. At 15.98%, “Environmental” concerns come third, indicating a focused strategy for preserving ecosystems and encouraging environmental stewardship. With a 14.46% share, “Green” is probably connected to supporting eco-friendly practices and technologies. 9.05% of the public profiles analysed mentioned “Energy” as a topic for further engagement, which means a focus on cleaner and more efficient energy. At 8.78%, direct “Climate Action” is another crucial area of focus, denoting proactive steps to address climate change. 7.86% of the CPAs’ mentions stressed the significance of “Community” involvement and group initiatives, indicating their recognition of communities’ critical role in climate efforts. Though less common, at 3.50%, “Educational” initiatives are acknowledged for their contribution to the development of climate literacy. A push for imaginative and practical solutions to climate-related problems is evident in the focus of 2.71% on the keyword “Innovation”. Finally, 0.13% of the cases explicitly mention “Reduce Emissions”, highlighting that lowering greenhouse gas emissions to lessen the effects of climate change is a crucial goal on the global agenda. These numbers collected from CPAs’ public profiles, and subjected to a qualitative analysis, indicate a high diversity in priorities and focus areas, which mirrors the very different social and professional backgrounds of the Climate Ambassadors.

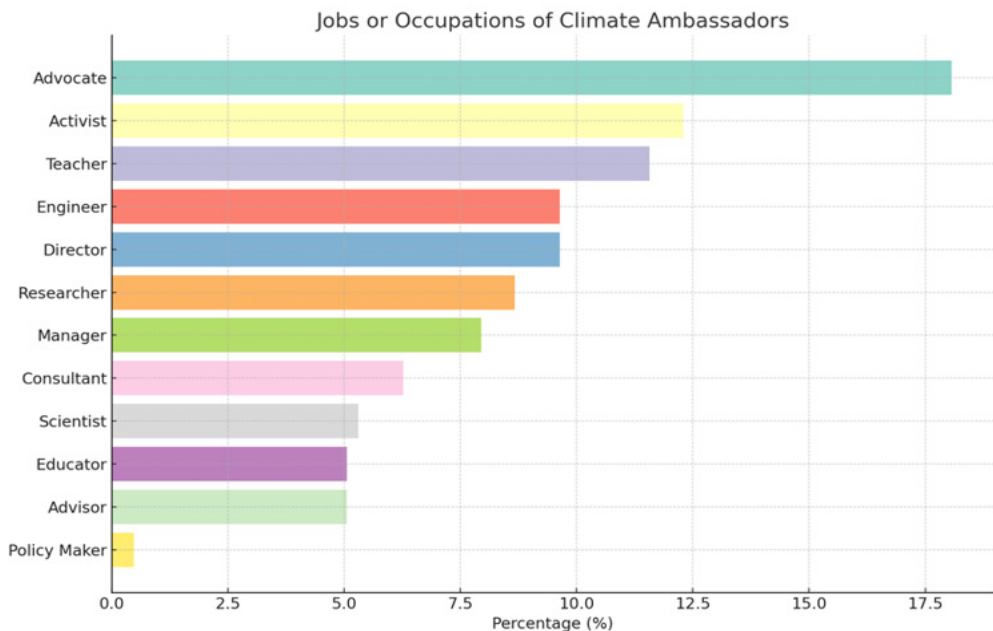
Figure 2. Priorities and areas of focus for Climate Ambassadors



Source: Author’s own research.

The diversity of Climate Pact Ambassadors' jobs or occupations, as *Figure 3* shows, offers a mosaic of responsibilities intricately linked to environmental action and advocacy. Advocates constitute the majority (18.07%) and are the main representatives of the movement for change in climate-related issues. Activists, who represent the practical and frequent grassroots engagement with climate challenges, come in second at 12.29%. Teachers, who comprise 11.57% of the workforce dedicated to these objectives, emphasise education's value in creating an informed and ecologically aware public. Directors and engineers separately constitute 9.64% of CPAs, which indicates a sizeable presence of organisational and technical leadership among ambassadors. To address climate change, 8.67% of researchers emphasise the need for ongoing research and evidence-based strategies. The operational and strategic abilities necessary for implementing climate strategies are reflected in the percentages of Climate Pact Ambassadors who are managers (7.95%) and consultants (6.27%). Advisors, scientists and educators (each of these professional categories accounts for above 5% of CPAs) provide their specialised knowledge and instructional expertise to the climate cause. Though policymakers make up a smaller percentage of CPAs (0.48%), they demonstrate the heartfelt involvement even of people with direct influence over laws and regulations. Hence, we can note that there is a robust professional network committed to advancing the public dialogue and action on sustainability and climate change.

Figure 3. Jobs or occupations of Climate Ambassadors



Source: Author's own research.

Overall, the Climate Pact Ambassadors can be credited with excellent gender and national representation at the EU level. However, several thematic areas that are highly underrepresented (e.g., energy, biodiversity, sustainable food, the just transition) require increased attention. Although the current CPAs have good coverage of climate

advocacy and education, there is room for more diverse professional backgrounds and general priorities to intensify climate action across the European Union.

Conclusions

This research paper examines, from a neo-Gramscian viewpoint, the roles of Climate Pact Ambassadors (CPAs) concerning the European Union's climate policy. To become a critical global actor and adequately implement the Paris Agreement, the EU has adopted the European Green Deal as a new transition mechanism to a net-zero economy. As this transition implies profound economic and social changes, a form of consensus must be reached at the society level. European citizens should understand and support this process to avoid social and political instability. To tackle this, the European Commission has established a Climate Pact and has selected, on a voluntary basis, Climate Pact Ambassadors from each Member State. The CPAs are supposed to organically spread the EU's messages and achieve a consensus on the transition process. Based on this, the research paper explored the possibility of considering the Climate Pact Ambassadors "organic intellectuals" in the Gramscian sense. In the framework set by this paper, organic intellectuals would be those seeking to build a counter-hegemonic discourse on climate transition.

The role assigned to the CPAs by the European Commission has placed them in a vital position. Their activity could form a collective will regarding environmental action and policy shifts, crucial in the neo-Gramscian theoretical framework for developing a new hegemony. The Climate Pact Ambassadors work with local communities, enabling grassroots initiatives, developing educational activities, and influencing agenda-setting. To go beyond their formal role, the qualitative content analysis conducted in this paper – based on 912 public profiles of CPAs – revealed the degree of representativeness, as well as thematic focus areas, commitments, priorities, and occupations of Climate Ambassadors. Therefore, with few variations, the number of CPAs distributed per country is commensurate with the EU population, while their thematic focus is mainly on education and raising awareness – 52.28%. In conclusion, the CPAs ensure a good representativeness of various occupational categories at the EU level, and their paramount mission is to change mentalities and spread the European message. This evidence overlaps with Gramsci's idea of shaping consciousness. The wide variety of occupations and priorities of the CPAs show that they immerse themselves in the social structures and have the organic ability to shape public discourse and foster a new hegemonic discourse. These are powerful arguments in favour of the hypothesis that Climate Pact Ambassadors can be considered "organic intellectuals".

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***Social Europe: From vision to vigour*, Björn Hacker, Brussels, 2023, Publisher: Foundation for European Progressive Studies, ISBN: 978-3-8012-3105-7**

Book Review by **Klára Fóti**¹

This book, authored by Björn Hacker, was published by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), within its *Primer Series*, in November 2023. It came out well ahead of the European Parliamentary elections – with the obvious purpose of contributing to public debates before the election campaigns. Therefore, its publication was well-timed. Its explicit aim, however, is actually more ambitious: to offer “guidance for those who would like to understand better how social policy at the EU level is made, what are the main tools, who are the most important actors, and when this policy field has been more or less successful in recent decades”. This “pedagogical” aim fits well the requirements of the Primer Series whose educational purpose is explicitly expressed.

As regards the methodology, the author has adopted a largely descriptive approach. Yet, the way he presents the development of the social policy at the EU level brings additional insight into the topic – and this is especially true for the analysis of the lines of conflict.

The first chapter, entitled “Social Europe: model or promise?”, describes the initial approaches to the concept of “social Europe” in the early years of European integration. It presents the visions of influential politicians, including Willy Brandt, who had suggested that the economic and social integration should go hand in hand. Thus, the economic and social issues would have been given equal importance. The socialist and social democratic parties of the other Member States of the European Economic Community (EEC) have embraced this vision, and so the concept of what Willy Brandt called the “European Social Union” was developed. This approach has contributed to elaborating the Community’s first Social Action Programme, adopted in 1974. The latter has failed due to the collapse of the Bretton Woods system and the economic disruptions triggered by the first and second oil crises that led to a rising unemployment rate. These developments and the ensuing neoclassical and monetarist ideas, which praise the potential “self-healing powers of the market”, are also briefly described in the first chapter of Hacker’s book. In this context, the author highlights Jacques Delors’ presidency and his role in enhancing the Single Market with a social dimension. Hacker clearly explains the economic and political reasons for the gradual expansion of the social dimension, which has included issues like occupational health and safety, more funding for social cohesion, and the consolidation of the social dialogue. Later, however, important developments enabled the broadening of the supranational social policy competencies: though the United Kingdom did not

¹Klára Fóti, is Lecturer at the ELTE University, Budapest, Faculty of Social Sciences.
E-mail: klara.foti@tatk.elte.hu.

sign the Social Protocol of the Maastricht Treaty, “a high level of employment and of social protection” was introduced among the existing objectives of the then European Community. Moreover, the Social Protocol has been instrumental in enhancing the social partners’ role in shaping social policy at the European level, by empowering them to elaborate directives.

Additionally, in the first chapter, the author provides a clear and concise overview of the different interpretations assigned to such a complex theoretical concept as the European Social Model (ESM). The different perspectives on the ESM are also illustrated in a graph. Subsequently, Hacker explains briefly other important terms: the European Social Union, the European Social Dimension, and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR).

The second chapter focuses on the lines of conflict that emerge between social policies at the national and European levels. After describing various welfare models, the author points out the first line of conflict: the diverse pathways of the national welfare states do not tally with the need to integrate common European elements into the national social policies. The author emphasises the Member States’ efforts to retain control over their social policies (as part of preserving their national sovereignty). The second line of conflict is linked to these efforts, which go against the deepening of the economic integration that requires more social policy regulations at the EU level. The third line of conflict is the outcome of the asymmetry of the European integration where economic issues, supported by “constitutional specifications” (i.e. Treaty provisions), prevail over social ones. The progress in economic aspects has always preceded that in the social field. Therefore, a controversy surrounding the supremacy of market freedom and the different welfare state arrangements emerged. The evolution of the EU Directive for posted workers is a case in point: when the free movement of services was applied in the Single Market, the issue of social dumping surfaced due to wide disparities in welfare state arrangements in the countries of origin and the host countries. Consequently, the Directive had to be changed, and the fact that its change has taken such a long time reflects the sensitivity of the issue. The fourth line of conflict is connected to the solid bias towards the austerity measures in the aftermath of the financial and economic crisis that triggered the Euro crisis (2009/2010-2015). Instead of adopting a Keynesian approach to regulate the markets in a socially useful way, the EU leaders have preferred the neoliberal doctrine, which depicts the European Union as a big market, where interference is not acceptable. The fifth line of conflict underlines that social and spatial disparities have persisted, and inequalities have increased in the wake of the recent economic crises, despite the importance of the EU’s cohesion policies meant to ensure economic, social, and territorial convergence at the EU level.

The presentation of the lines of conflict between the social policies at the national and EU levels is convincing: Hacker’s arguments are clear, and his approach seems innovative. However, the individual sections do not go into much detail and lack necessary updates. For instance, when the different welfare models are discussed, there are no examples that might explain why certain countries of the “post-communist welfare world” (e.g., Slovenia and the Czech Republic) can be regarded as conservative. As for the data provided, it is useful, but it should have been updated: *Figure 4* illustrates the social protection expenditure as % of GDP in 2019, but the book was published

towards the end of 2023. It would have been more interesting to capture its evolution between 2019 and 2022, to see whether the COVID-19 crisis had any impact on the social protection expenditure. The map showing the regional variations in terms of GDP per capita (*Figure 5*, pg. 42) suits the text, but is difficult to read; more colours should have been used – not just black, dark grey, and light grey, when the legend lists 7 different options.

The third chapter presents the various social policy competences at the EU level and describes how they are exercised. It provides an overview of the legal foundations of those competences (with a special focus on the primary legislation, i.e. the relevant Treaty articles). Then it elaborates on the regulatory social policy and lists those social policy fields, that have EU competences to enact legislation. Subsequently, the author presents the various funding instruments, then deals with the social policy coordination, and details the evolution of the annual European Semester. This chapter depicts briefly the social dialogue envisioned at the EU level in 1985. It details how the social dialogue was developed out of the “Val Duchesse process”, and mentions the steps taken to obtain information and consultation rights, which helped shape the European social policies. Thus, two sorts of agreements between social partners have been made possible. Moreover, this “instrument [the social dialogue] gives the social partners legislative power in social policy matters covered by Article 153 TFEU [Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union]. In 1998 this was expanded to the sectoral level”. To provide a complete overview, the chapter ends with a systematic list of all the important actors (partially mentioned before) that also describes concisely their tasks and role in shaping the European social policy.

The fourth chapter lays out the various stages of European policy development from the start of the European integration process (1958) up until today. Understandably, this chapter includes some facts already mentioned in the previous chapters. However, the summary of the major developments is useful and so is the author’s decision to include one or two milestones for each of the five stages listed below (with the milestones of social Europe in brackets):

1. Accompanying economic integration: 1958-1972 (1st milestone: The European Social Fund).
2. Implementing labour law and occupational safety: 1972-1989 (2nd milestone: Improvement of living and working conditions).
3. Initiating social dialogue and majority voting: 1989-1997 (3rd milestone: Information and consultation; 4th milestone: The European Social Dialogue).
4. Embarking on the policy coordination track: 1997-2010 (5th milestone: Gender and antidiscrimination rights; 6th milestone: The Open Method of Coordination).
5. Torn between austerity and collective solidarity: 2010-today (7th milestone: The European Pillar of Social Rights).

The longest and most detailed section is the last one. It points out that the Europe 2020 Strategy, with its aim to achieve “smart, sustainable and inclusive growth”, tried to strike a balance between economic and social progress (an idea

already considered during the 1990s). The Member States, however, preferred an open coordination setting to binding legal regulations, obligatory pressures, and sanctions. Consequently, the employment and social policy coordination became looser than the coordination of budgetary policies. The Euro crisis reinforced the emphasis on budgetary concerns, and, despite the proposals that stressed the importance of the social objectives, within “the European Semester social policies were viewed through an economic lens. They had a role, but as a cost factor that supposedly hindered consolidation and competitiveness”. Nevertheless, later on, the importance of the social dimension of the EU was acknowledged. In 2014, Jean-Claude Juncker, the then President of the European Commission said: “I would like a Europe with a social ‘triple A’ rating. A social triple-A is just as important as an economic and financial triple-A”. The proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in 2017 is indeed an important milestone: with its 20 principles it has served as a reference point in the EU’s legislation concerning social affairs. Moreover, many subsequent developments (for example, the revision of the Posted Workers Directive in 2018, the adoption of the Work-life Balance Directive in 2019, etc.) also demonstrate a reinforcement of the EU’s social dimension. The EPSR plays a vital role in the distributive part of the EU’s social policy “through its incorporation as an objective in the funding period 2021 to 2027. But its principal application is via its integration in the European Semester as a policy coordination tool” (pg. 88).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU chose a course of action entirely different from that pursued during the financial and economic crisis that affected the Eurozone. It decided to “rais[e] capital on the financial markets with a long repayment period until 2058”. This has allowed the EU “to provide a total of 750 billion euros in financial transfers and loans. The bulk of this will be allocated to Member States through the newly established Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)” (pg. 89).

Although the fifth chapter is not the last one of this book, the author draws important conclusions when outlining the key challenges to a social Europe. For example, he underlines that “the social framing of economic integration is not sufficiently developed”. The lines of conflict, explained in the second chapter, underpin this statement. Each socioeconomic crisis augments the risk of reversibility of the positive developments meant to facilitate convergence. To attain convergence, the author recommends “a renewed focus on cohesion”; the integration of EU’s economic and social policies, also considering the social impact of the austerity measures before deciding to adopt them; more emphasis on minimum standards guaranteed partly by new regulative instruments in EU law, partly by giving the Member States “some leeway in implementation, as with the recent directive on adequate minimum wages”. Another important challenge is the social framing of the twin transition. Several questions should be raised and addressed to reduce the social costs the twin transition (green transition and digitalisation) entails. The most affected groups and regions have to be identified to address their needs. Additionally, the social consequences of labour reallocation between the “old” and “new” sectors should be tackled, etc.

In the last chapter, after summarising the attempts “to give Social Europe more substance”, the author concludes that a breakthrough was possible due to the proclamation of the EPSR with its Social Scoreboard in 2017. The EPSR has been

strengthened by the adoption of an action plan for its implementation, with social headline indicators and quantitative targets to be achieved by 2030. The chapter ends with the key results of an opinion poll on the importance of social Europe, which suggests that “European citizens both desire and need more Social Europe” (pg. 107).

This book may serve indeed as a useful guide to those who want to learn more about social Europe. A final editorial review would have been useful to improve the presentation: some typos and small mistakes could have been avoided (e.g., on pp. 39, 82). Nevertheless, the aim of the publication was achieved, so we highly recommend the book to students, academics, policy experts, and other people interested in the subject.

Rien ne se crée sans les hommes. Rien ne dure sans les institutions.

Jean Monnet



European Institute of Romania

7-9 Regina Elisabeta Blvd., Bucharest 030016, Romania
ier@ier.gov.ro, ier.gov.ro

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