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Moldova State University

THE SUSTAINABILITY OF DEMOCRACY UNDER CONDITIONS OF REGIONAL INSECURITY

International Collective Monograph

Coordinator – Ludmila ROȘCA

Chișinău, 2025

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The international collective monograph is published within the framework of the Jean Monnet "Centre of Excellence" Project Strengthening Democratic Sustainability through Civic Education, Project 101085234 — SDSCE.

The authors of the monograph's chapters present the results of their scientific investigations into various dimensions of the resilience of democratic institutions under conditions of regional instability, as well as the factors influencing regional security. The monograph contributes to an informed assessment of the current stage of societal development in European states facing instability, particularly those included in the Eastern Partnership Programme. Understanding the challenges affecting the lifestyle, mindset, and values of Europeans is essential for identifying viable solutions at all levels – individual, national, and community – and for supporting the preparation of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine for accession to the European Union.

The international collective monograph was recommended for publication by the Scientific Council of the Moldova State University, No. 1 of 26 November 2025.

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DESCRIEREA CIP A CAMEREI NAȚIONALE A CĂRȚII DIN REPUBLICA MOLDOVA

The sustainability of democracy under conditions of regional insecurity: International Collective Monograph / Moldova State University; coordinator: Ludmila Roșca; editor and translator: Ana-Paula Lazar. – Chișinău: [S. n.], 2025 (Print-Caro). – 239 p.: tab.

Rez. paral.: lb. rom., engl. – Referințe bibliogr. la sfârșitul art. – Funded by the European Union. – [50] ex.

ISBN 978-5-85748-279-7.

321.7:327
T 49

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https://doi.org/10.59295/sdcri2025

The views and opinions expressed are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the European Union.

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CHAPTER 1.

CONSOLIDAREA REZILIENȚEI DEMOCRAȚIEI – ETAPĂ IMPORTANTĂ ÎN DEZVOLTREA DURABILĂ A SOCIETĂȚII CONTEMPORANE[1]

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https://doi.org/10.59295/sdcri2025.01

Rezumat*: În acest studiu sunt corelate fenomenele: reziliența democrației și dezvoltarea durabilă a societății moldovenești. Fiind definite ca scopuri ale guvernării, ale activității social-utile a cetățenilor, acestea vor contribui la integrarea Republicii Moldova în Uniunea Europeană. Obstacole serioase în traseul integrării europene produce războiului din regiune, războiul hibrid care își multiplică permanent formele și amenințările. Capacitatea instituțiilor statului și a actorului principal al vieții sociale – cetățeanul, să răspundă la timp și adecvat la numeroasele provocări, demonstrează reziliența democrației și a statului de drept. Analiza conceptelor fundamentale pentru înțelegerea fenomenelor și proceselor în plină desfășurare în Republica Moldova: supraviețuirea, coeziunea socială și economică, unitatea națională, dezvoltarea participativă, democrația participativă, responsabilitatea, ne-a permis să conchidem: societatea moldovenească și-a demonstrat capacitatea de a consolida reziliența instituțiilor democratice, de a susține dezvoltarea durabilă a economiei la alegerile parlamentare din 28 septembrie 2025.*
Cuvinte-cheie: supraviețuire, dezvoltarea durabilă, reziliența democrației, asociere la Uniunea Europeană.

STRENGTHENING THE RESILIENCE OF DEMOCRACY – A KEY STAGE IN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Abstract: *This study examines the correlation between two major phenomena: the resilience of democracy and the sustainable develop-*

[1] Study conducted within the framework of the project "Strengthening the Socio-Economic and Legal Mechanisms for Ensuring Citizens' Well-Being and Security" (CONSEJ), code 01.05.02.

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ment of Moldovan society. Defined as objectives of governance and of socially beneficial civic engagement, these phenomena are expected to contribute to the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the European Union. Serious obstacles along the European integration path arise from the ongoing regional war and the hybrid warfare that continuously multiplies its forms and threats. The capacity of state institutions and of the main actor in social life, the citizens – to respond promptly and appropriately to numerous challenges demonstrates both the resilience of democracy and the rule of law. The analysis of fundamental concepts necessary for understanding the phenomena and ongoing processes in the Republic of Moldova – survival, social and economic cohesion, national unity, participatory development, participatory democracy, and accountability – has allowed us to conclude that Moldovan society has demonstrated its ability to strengthen the resilience of democratic institutions and to support the sustainable development of the economy during the parliamentary elections of 28 September 2025.

Keyword: survival, sustainable development, resilience of democracy, association with the European Union.

Introduction

Sustainable development and the resilience of democracy are phenomena that, through their interaction, mutually reinforce their constructive potential. "An inscription from the time of King Ashoka states: *all people are my children. Just as I desire the best for my own children, so too do I wish for them all that is good and all happiness in this world and in the next*" [20, p. 90]. This illustrates that even the ancients had already articulated and pursued the ultimate purpose of governance: maintaining peace and preventing wars, and resolving all conflicts through peaceful, political, and diplomatic means

At present, the Republic of Moldova is in an active process of consolidating its democratic institutions. The concept of state resilience, introduced by the European Council in the "European Union Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy", and applied within the European Neighbourhood Policy to the states included in the Eastern Partnership Program, offers new opportunities for scholars in the Republic of Moldova to assess the manner and pace at which socio-political processes unfold across all spheres of social life. The transition to democ-

racy in the Republic of Moldova has been lengthy and defective, largely due to the low level of political culture among citizens and even among members of the political elite. Over the 34 years of independence, the political culture of citizens has remained fragmented, and society has remained divided according to the geopolitical development vector of Moldovan society. Two development directions dominate this division: European integration and orientation toward the Eurasian Customs Union—regarding which the supporters of the Russian Federation's imperial policy disseminate numerous false statements. By outlining these options, the author highlights the importance of civic education among the citizens of the Republic of Moldova, whose vote on 28 September 2025 was decisive for the course of European integration.

The war initiated by the Russian Federation in Ukraine has had significant repercussions on the lives of citizens of the Republic of Moldova. On the one hand, state institutions implemented the necessary measures to shelter refugees; on the other hand, Moldovans became actively involved – opening their homes and, from the little they had, offering food, clothing, and other essential items. As a result of these actions, our country received strong appreciation from Europeans as a "small country with a big heart". In other words, we were rediscovered as diligent, wise, and engaged people who are aware of the effects of regional crises. Throughout the three years of war, we observed the maturation of governing authorities, of some leaders of extra-parliamentary political parties, and of certain civil society organizations, which expanded their activities to support the government in advancing the process of European integration. Thus, we completed the path from submitting the application for accession to the European Union (on 3 March 2022, when the Republic of Moldova signed its request to join the EU) to obtaining the status of EU candidate country.

These substantive changes formed the basis for the decision to hold the national constitutional referendum of 20 October 2024, conducted on the same day as the regular presidential election. The majority of participating citizens answered "YES" to the question: "Do you support amending the Constitution in view of the Republic of Moldova's accession to the European Union?" – 749 719 votes (50,35%), out of the – 1 531 392 voters present (50,72%). On 31 October 2024, the Constitutional Court issued a ruling confirming the results of the

referendum. The text of the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova was amended by:

- introducing two new paragraphs reaffirming the European identity of the people of the Republic of Moldova and declaring EU integration as a strategic objective of the country;
- introducing a new Title VI, entitled "Integration into the European Union", which stipulates that the Republic of Moldova's accession to the constitutive treaties of the European Union, as well as to their revision acts, shall be regulated by an organic law adopted by Parliament.

This title also specifies that the provisions of EU treaties and other legally binding acts of the European Union shall take precedence over conflicting provisions of domestic legislation, in accordance with the provisions of the accession act.

Purpose of the investigation: Given the major importance of understanding the phenomenon and concept of democratic resilience, we aim to analyze several interpretations found in the decisions of European institutions and the definitions provided by scholars, with the purpose of increasing awareness of socio-political life among the citizens of the Republic of Moldova, regardless of the place or country in which they live and work. Achieving the objectives of this research will enable us to promote European values, contribute to "bringing Europe home", and demonstrate the practical significance of the phenomenon of "belonging to European culture".

An important dimension of the investigation consists in deciphering the relationship among the phenomena of "sustainable development", "resilience of democratic institutions", "resilience of the rule of law", and "resilience of the market economy". A correct understanding of the content of these phenomena will allow us to design and implement action plans through which we will contribute to achieving the strategic objective of the Republic of Moldova for the period 2025–2030: integration into the European Union.

The methodology applied is specific to the analysis of complex social phenomena. Given that the investigated phenomena place the human being at the center of their processes, we begin our analysis with Aristotle's reflection in Politics: "Nature, to make man a political animal, endowed him alone, among all animals, with the gift of rea-

soned speech… The true difference between man and other animals is that only humans possess the perception of good and evil, of right and wrong, of justice and injustice. And the sharing of these perceptions is what creates the family or the polis" [3, p. 265].

Methodological pluralism and the principles of interdisciplinarity and complementarity enabled us to capitalize on the cognitive potential of universal methods – dialectics and synergetics – alongside theoretical methods such as content analysis, capacity analysis, comparative analysis, as well as empirical methods. All the phenomena examined were analyzed in their dynamics, which allowed us to identify the specific features of each stage of the association and integration process into the European Union, and to assess the impact of technical assistance, cooperation, and the implementation of European projects on the development of the national economy and on the social infrastructure of both the urban and rural environments of our country.

The normative-prescriptive method guides the scholar, political analyst, or decision-maker to create formally optimal normative models. In this process, the sphere of political decision-making is interpreted as a phenomenon subject to reconstruction through the ideal model, regarded as a universal benchmark. Within this paradigm, political actions are optimized using formal rules, norms, and procedures. The central object of investigation is the "problem of choice", correlated with the creation of a formal algorithm and the optimization of decision-making. From this perspective, the mode of adopting political decisions is interpreted within the boundaries set by a non-contradictory model formalized at the logico-mathematical level, which enables the decision-maker to adopt decisions concerning the realization of operations in accordance with fixed criteria. The very procedure of decision-making appears as the legitimate, rational, and regulated processing of information and documents, carried out by impartial administrators. The advantage of this method derives from the conditions of rationalization and optimization of the decision-making process. It allows a clear specification of leadership criteria and rules and makes it possible to quantify gains and losses in situations involving alternative decisions.

The descriptive-explanatory method is more frequently used by psychologists, political scientists, administrators, and sociologists.

Here, the emphasis is placed not primarily on "imagined" or formalized norms and procedures, but on the hidden mechanisms and informal rules of the game. The quantitative processing of data is complemented by their qualitative analysis, with emphasis placed on the study of the "accidental" or the "precedent". In analyzing the process of political decision-making, multiple factors are taken into consideration: from individual networks and personal motivation to macroeconomic conditions, hierarchical structures, cultural stereotypes, and others. The results of such investigations are often generalized into theoretical models that can be tested in social practice. The strengths of this method stem from its orientation toward the analysis of empirical material.

By utilizing the potential of both methods, scholars in collaboration with public officials responded to changes in the socio-political reality and developed various programs for reorganizing state institutions, which significantly increased the influence of social organizations on decision-making processes. The principle of humanization and democratization of the civil service became the foundation of personnel policy. These transformations in the governance system correspond to the methodological principles of the following conceptual frameworks: public political management, political networks, and "governance". The methodological principle of the conception of public political management is the separation of governance from politics. By capitalizing on this principle, leaders of several states and public officials across various social institutions succeeded in improving the quality of services delivered to the population. However, in times of crisis, the "economization" of administrative activity faced opposition from those who viewed management in the public sector differently from management in the private sector. Misunderstanding these differences led to distortions in the results obtained.

The conception of political management was implemented by several states and resulted in the rejection of traditional postulates in this field, as well as the incorporation of market mechanisms into the organization of state institutions. The crisis of social administration – reflected in the stagnation of governance mechanisms, inefficient use of tax revenues, declining quality of public services, increasing manifestations of bureaucracy and corruption, and the rapid erosion of public

trust in state institutions – led to a reconsideration of the concept of the state. The role of the state as an administrator was replaced by that of the state as a manager, efficient from an economic standpoint. The shift in conceptual principles regarding the functions and priorities of the state intensified interest in financial management and increased the value attributed to public funds. Whereas previously each bureaucratic organization sought to obtain as many resources as possible from the state budget, in the new system it is motivated to save resources by increasing efficiency and optimizing its own activity. A new principle for remunerating civil servants was adopted—namely, payment based on work performance.

The Strategy of Survival: Essential Instruments for the Development of Democratic Societies

Regrettably, Europe—which for seven decades provided a viable model of cooperation in the name of stability, democracy, and the prosperity of its citizens—has, since 2022, been drawn by the Russian Federation into a war that has generated and continues to generate threats to the European way of life, thought, and values. By supporting Ukraine through various means, European states have reevaluated their survival strategies and redefined their national and community-level priorities. Being during the pre-accession process to the European Union, the institutions of the Moldovan state are obliged to meet the Copenhagen criteria and to prepare society and the country for EU integration. In this regard, it is essential that every individual, every social group, society, and all institutions become fully aware of their position in relation to the processes unfolding within their social environment.

The strategy of survival is a document—a conceptual framework—through which the individual and the community understand what must be done to eliminate dangers that lead to the premature death of a person, to prevent the disappearance of a people, or the extinction of human culture and civilization [11]. "The study of survival is a priority objective of scientific knowledge and philosophical reflection, and it requires the elaboration of theories in which the following dimensions are clearly highlighted: methodological, conceptual, ontological, epistemological, instructive-educational, economic-pragmatic,

and political-social" [21, p.4-5]. The analysis of survival under current conditions directs our attention to the importance of correlating the phenomena of survival, security, and sustainable development.

Under conditions of instability and war, life itself loses its status as a supreme value. Central, regional, and even local authorities in Ukraine have succeeded in convincing citizens that the central objective is the defense of the country. Ukrainians endure and survive under the harsh conditions of uncertainty. While some members of the academic community in European states express concern regarding environmental pollution caused by bombings or the climate changes which generate natural disasters across various regions of the world, scholars in Ukraine focus on the possibility of preserving their identity and their country. They seek the means and instruments necessary to satisfy the primary needs of the population: food, clothing, and housing. In practical fields – from public servants to division managers and employees – we observe how annual or semi-annual plans are continually adjusted depending on the situation on the front.

Only within the academic community do certain traditions persist: the organization of scientific conferences, thematic seminars, and public lectures. This conclusion is drawn from our collaboration with professors at Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University and the Chernivtsi Regional Center for Advanced Training of Public Servants in Ukraine. On 24–25 September 2025, the XIIth edition of the International Scientific Conference "Anton Kokhanovskyi Municipal Readings" was organized by the Chernivtsi Regional Centre for Advanced Training and the Department of Political Science and Public Administration of Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University, in cooperation with the Chernivtsi Regional Council and the Chernivtsi City Council. A characteristic feature of the scientific events organized by our colleagues in Chernivtsi is their rigorous attitude toward the analysis and processing of empirical data, and toward substantiating conclusions and recommendations in relation to the phenomena and processes under study. The conference emphasized the scholarly and administrative activity of Anton Kokhanovskyi, whom I recommend as a model for public officials and mayors in Moldova, especially for the current mayor of Chișinău.

Our strategic partner – Romania – is also currently facing difficulties that affect the capacity of its state institutions to remain resilient. For many years, Romanian state authorities failed to fulfill their functions adequately, governing the country "from one day to the next", without understanding the laws or the requirements of the market economy. Only after the 2024 and 2025 elections did the governing coalition, led by Prime Minister Ilie Bolojan, present to the public the real situation of the national economy and propose radical adjustments to state expenditures. As noted by Dan Motreanu, liberal Member of the European Parliament: "Through the measures adopted, the Bolojan Government has chosen the difficult but correct path: balance instead of derailment, stability instead of crisis". Correcting the deficit is not a popular short-term decision, but it is the only path that can guarantee a stable economy and a state capable of investing in development rather than merely surviving from month to month". This conclusion is of major importance for the authorities of the Republic of Moldova.

In the Republic of Moldova, the concept of survival is equally relevant, because under the conditions of hybrid warfare we are witnessing misunderstandings, provocations, contradictions, and conflicts which, in turn, generate uncertainty, insecurity, and even hostility. Such phenomena were observed and analyzed during the pre-electoral period of 2025. Those who shouted the loudest were often individuals with a fragmented, subordinated political culture—one that does not allow them to understand the authenticity and significance of the processes taking place around them, nor the profound transformations that have occurred in our lives in recent years. For scholar's familiar with political system theory and political processes, it is difficult to comprehend the behavior of former state leaders who did not contribute to the country's development, to the strengthening of state institutions, or to the promotion of national interests. Synthesizing information accumulated during the pre-electoral period and conducting content analysis of the statements made by candidates and party leaders, we have found that:

- the political class in our country does not distinguish between what is important/priority and what is secondary, nor between the national interest and party or personal interests;

- there is a growing gap between substantive statements and falsehoods;
- candidates for the office of Member of Parliament in the Republic of Moldova exhibited, in expressive form, cynicism, dishonesty, intolerance, and an inability to provide an accurate description of the situation.

All these and many other flaws already revealed by the political class indicate to us – scholars, university staff, and educators – that we have substantial work ahead in the field of education, including civic and moral education for all social groups. Only through such efforts do we see the possibility of reducing corruption, including attempts to "buy" citizens' votes or falsify electoral results—practices incompatible with participatory democracy, the model we aim to implement in our country.

Regarding the behavior of public officials, members of parliament, and ministers, we note that responsibility presupposes a distinction between the conscious and the unconscious, the voluntary and the imposed. Conscious choice refers not to the objective itself, but to the means employed to achieve it. In the works "The Principle of Responsibility" (Jonas) and "The Ethics of Responsibility: The Theory of the Morality of the Future" by V. A. Kanke, the concept of responsibility is developed and integrated, arguing the thesis that human beings require new skills to assess the usefulness of their own knowledge, to act with regard to the consequences of their activity, and to understand their influence on the future of universal and national culture and civilization [20, p. 245-257].

To be responsible in all forms of socially useful activity, it is important to understand the nature of the action–consequence relationship. In political activity, every actor involved in the political and decision-making process is obliged to provide behavioral models in which the dominant values are dignity, honor, honesty, integrity, and correctness. For this reason, we suggest that leaders of political parties and non-governmental organizations rise to the level required by public office and by the social groups with which they interact. The essential conclusion is that national interest must take priority in public activity. At present, it is incorporated into the strategic objective of both the domestic and foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova:

European integration. All other desires, intentions, and individual or interests cannot be pursued once a person assumes a public office. We consider the concepts of social cohesion and national unity to be essential for civic education planning. Economic, social, and territorial cohesion represents an expression of solidarity among EU member states, as it directs the largest share of available funds toward the less developed regions of the Union and is implemented through the EU's cohesion policy [5, pp. 46–50]. The Maastricht Treaty defined the goal of cohesion policy as achieving balanced socio-economic development throughout the EU by reducing economic, social, and territorial disparities.

The concept of national unity, developed by modern states in the process of forming nations as relatively homogeneous political and cultural entities, constitutes today "a fundamental pillar of any state, defined by territorial cohesion, sovereignty, and shared identity. Its value lies in being a principle that ensures cohesion and solidarity within the political body composed of individuals with potentially diverse identities, and therefore lacking homogeneity" [12, pp. 5–31]. In the Constitution of Romania, Article 1 stipulates the national, sovereign, independent, unitary, and indivisible character of the state. Professor Gabriela GOUDENHOOFT emphasizes that the principle of national unity "influences public policies, inter-institutional relations, and political discourse, playing an essential role in maintaining social stability and cohesion" [12, p. 5].

Moldovans find it difficult to define their ethno-cultural identity, and political identity can be discussed only with reference to a group of intellectuals who possess and recognize authentic knowledge and information about the stages of development of the modern state – the Republic of Moldova – and who can explain the origins of certain social phenomena that have often hindered the development of Moldovan society. Throughout the past three decades, as witnesses to public debates on the spoken language and historical events of the Moldovan state, several ambassadors have drawn our attention to the necessity of knowing our identity, a process that would allow us to correctly define the directions for Moldovan societal development. In the chapter "Civic Education in the Republic of Moldova in the Context of European Integration", the authors note: "In the context of the Republic of Mol-

dova, a priority objective of personal development is the awareness of national belonging, the appropriate interpretation and assessment of the national–regional–global correlation, and the dialectic between tradition and innovation in the development of a people's culture and civilization. The formation of legal consciousness among the citizens of the Republic of Moldova is an indispensable condition for the healing of Moldovan society, and for eliminating absenteeism and indifference from social life. By rehabilitating the perennial values of national culture – patriotism and humanism – we will succeed in meeting the conditions imposed by the strategies of survival and sustainable development in the contemporary world...". [22, p. 297–298].

The importance of consciously defining the political identity of Moldovans is also emphasized by the Polish scholar Valenty BALUK in his article "Nation State Consolidation: The Cases of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova" [4, pp. 57–72]. In this study, we find answers to questions concerning the political confrontations between the governors and the governed in our country. The author notes that Ukraine and Moldova have acknowledged the significance of nation-building as an ethno-cultural community and as a political entity, but they failed in fulfilling this objective at the same pace as the states that joined the European Union during the period of the Great Enlargement. A stable structure of state institutions constitutes a fundamental premise for the consolidation of democracy. The formation of the nation-state under conditions of coexistence among multiple ethno-cultural groups is a complex task, the resolution of which requires the conscious involvement of citizens in the decision-making process. According to the view of scholars Linz X. and Stepan A., presented in their work "Statehood, Nationalism, and Democratization", consolidation entails radical transformations at three levels: behavioral, axiological, and structural [25]. Such transformations support the model of participatory democracy, to which we shall return. We share the opinion of the Polish scholar, and in several of our studies we have observed that Moldovan society shows significant shortcomings in this area, though we also acknowledge the presence of objective difficulties that explain the numerous challenges faced by pro-European parties. The low level of political culture among the leaders of pro-Russian parties, their inability to understand the mission of parliamentary opposition

parties, and their service to the geopolitical interests of the Russian Federation negatively affect the state's capacity for resilience. For this reason, educational institutions and the academic community must assume the mission of providing civic education to all social groups. Civic education programs emphasize "the citizen's attitude toward the socio-political reality in which they operate. Awareness of belonging to the cultural heritage with which one identifies sustains the creative imagination of each citizen in the quest for knowledge of their own identity".

At the foundation of civic education programs, we place the theses advanced by Ilie Prigogine in his work "*Address to the Generations of the Future*" These include:

- Human decisions are determined by the memory of the past and expectations for the future;
- The transition from a culture of war to a culture of peace, cooperation,and communication must be valued;
- Future generations are obliged to take a stance against policies oriented toward supporting military strategies.

These theses are exceptionally relevant today, as war manifests itself aggressively in the neighboring country, and regional actors – traditionally adherents of peace, dialogue, and cooperation – are increasingly concerned with developing military strategies that would allow them to defend their region/country, values, and way of life from an advancing aggressor. On 27 January 2022, during a seminar in Chernivtsi, I attended for the first time an academic session in which a professor from Belarus described the image of the "enemy", recounting strange yet massive movements of national army units. At that time, the narrative promoted by the authorities was that Western states were preparing to attack Russia and Belarus. Throughout these four years of war, we have heard numerous falsifications, and regrettably, not all citizens are able to distinguish between truths and falsehoods. This is precisely why civic education targets the individual's responsibility, which encompasses the entirety of values internalized, respected, and promoted by the person.

In the context of the objectives undertaken by state institutions and civil society in the Republic of Moldova during the opening of accession negotiations with the European Union, the relevance of Fou-

cault's assertion regarding the responsibility and historical mission of intellectuals becomes even more pronounced. According to Foucault, intellectual activity has meaning "only if it is oriented toward transforming one's own thinking and that of others". The scholar argues that the intellectual must assume responsibility for upholding moral tradition. Foucault warns us that not every ethical–political choice is equal to another. In this context, the scholar insists on "the elaboration of the self through a diligent, gradual transformation that requires continuous effort for change, manifested through a permanent care for oneself" [26, p. 321].

The scholar's message remains highly relevant today, exerting a significant impact on the lives of individuals who are aware of their social status and role. Equally illuminating is Foucault's characterization of the moral world, structured into three layers of reality: the discursive formation, which encompasses both all and each individual; the small group in which the subject feels almost at home; and the subject themselves—the center of moral activity—who is not identical with themselves, since through the process of problematization they become someone different. The influence of an actor in social life who has undergone problematization is reflected in the small group and, to a lesser extent, in the broader discursive sphere. Foucault concludes that the responsible individual is the one who problematizes themselves and, in doing so, moves toward danger. This is not an entirely original thesis; on numerous occasions, within ethical discourse, we have emphasized the importance of problematization for the success and self-sufficiency of the person—understood as a priority objective of human existence. The value of Foucault's theses lies in their capacity to compel the individual to step out of their comfort zone and assume their social roles with responsibility.

The Resilience of Democracy

The EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2021–2027) addresses the five long-term objectives of the post-2020 Eastern Partnership policy, placing emphasis on recovery, resilience, and reform as essential components of the future agenda. The long-term objectives include: the development of resilient, sustainable, and integrated economies; the strengthening of accountable institutions,

the rule of law, and security; the enhancement of environmental and climate resilience; the advancement of a resilient digital transformation; and the creation of resilient societies based on gender equality, fairness, and inclusiveness. These objectives are accompanied by an ambitious regional Economic and Investment Plan valued at EUR 2.3 billion to support socioeconomic recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic and to reinforce long-term resilience by accelerating the green and digital transitions.

European leaders have committed to strengthening resilience by focusing on fortifying rule-of-law institutions; establishing an efficient, transparent, and accountable public administration at all levels of governance; combating fraud, corruption, and economic crime; countering organized crime; and enhancing security and cyber-resilience, including against hybrid threats. The leaders have called for reinforced joint ownership of responsibilities and reaffirmed the importance of inclusive engagement of all community members. They emphasized the need for deeper cooperation with civil society, particularly with youth, and for the promotion of gender equality, tolerance, and intercultural dialogue. Cooperation with civil society – through the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, broad information outreach, and dedicated support for local civil society organizations and social partners – remains an integral component of the Eastern Partnership.

The resilience of democracy is reinforced by political and socio-cultural institutions. Social institutions assist individuals in addressing fundamental problems arising from the need for fair exchange, collective decision-making, collaboration, and the pooling of resources and means to achieve common goals. Confronted with numerous challenges, institutions provide solutions that reduce uncertainty or promote stability in interpersonal relations. A current issue highlighted by economists and political scientists is the problem of rational choice. Scholars emphasize the role of institutions in resolving the problem of rational choice faced by actors in economic, political, and social relations. The principal actor in social life – the everyday individual – is compelled to choose from among multiple options. A correct choice is influenced by numerous factors; at the same time, it represents a responsible and conscious act, marking the social status of the person. Socio-cultural institutions, particularly those responsible for the

education and training of younger generations, hold this mission in contemporary society.

The world we live in is dynamic and overloaded with numerous tensions and crises, characterized by multiple influences and confrontations. This complexity led scholars to develop the concept of resilience, which we define as the capacity of a system to respond to existing challenges and risks while simultaneously fulfilling its functions and preserving its core structure. The concept of resilience is applicable at all levels of social organization. At the individual level, it denotes a person's capacity to manage life rationally, establishing and fulfilling various objectives and priorities. By demonstrating our ability to survive even under difficult conditions, we succeed in giving meaning to our own existence. It is more complex to define the resilience of political, social, or economic institutions, as their capacity for preservation and reproduction depends on multiple factors. Regarding political and administrative institutions, whose functioning determines the resilience of social groups and citizens of the Republic of Moldova, the following is noted: public administration reform must be implemented; examples of institutional resilience should be consolidated and multiplied; and the experience of developed European states should be leveraged in this regard. "In a societal context, resilience transcends mere stability, becoming a measure of the capacity to respond and adapt to complex and unpredictable changes. We observe how resilience thinking, developed as a response to the need to understand how systems can manage resources and risks in an increasingly interdependent world, has become a performance test for democratic institutions" [13, p. 8-33].

This thesis deserves the attention of politicians and public officials who have assumed the responsibility of preparing the Republic of Moldova and Moldovan society for integration into the European Union. The notion of "resilience thinking" is particularly valuable. It is not merely a logical construct; it represents a necessity which, when addressed, can lead to crucial decisions and actions for the functioning of institutions and for the sustainable development of Moldovan society. Empirical material collected during the pre-electoral period provides evidence supporting the conclusion that, in the months leading up to the parliamentary elections of September 28, 2025, state institu-

tions fulfilled their obligations responsibly. Those who believed they would evade punishment for their misdeeds were brought to justice, while the electorate demonstrated support for the country's European trajectory.

The Association of the Republic of Moldova with the European Union

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the federal state – the USSR – the European Union signed association agreements with the former communist states of Central and Eastern Europe, an act that marked a significant leap in the quality of relations between the parties, moving practically from cooperation to association. Whereas cooperation agreements previously covered the commercial aspects of relations between the parties, association agreements concern the alignment of candidate states with European policies. The political basis of the Association Agreement is established by Article 310 TEC (238 EEC), which provides the European Community with the right to conclude agreements with third states establishing an association, joint actions, and special procedures for cooperation. The specialized literature identifies three types of association agreements:

1. Association as a special form of development assistance. This category includes 69 agreements signed by the EU with states from Africa, the Caribbean, and the Mediterranean Basin.
2. Association as a preliminary stage to accession.
3. Association as an alternative to EU membership. This was initially the model for the European Economic Area, established through agreements between EU member states and EFTA countries on 1 January 1984. Some EFTA states – Austria, Finland, and Sweden – later joined the EU.

Deep and sustainable democracy includes free and fair elections, efforts to combat corruption, the independence of the judiciary, democratic control over the armed forces, and the freedoms of expression, assembly, and association. The EU has also emphasized the role played by civil society in the democratic process and has introduced the principle of "more for more", whereby the EU develops closer partnerships with those neighboring countries that make greater progress toward democratic reform. The principal objective of the Eastern Partnership

is "to accelerate political association and deepen economic integration" between the EU and its eastern neighbors. The level of integration and cooperation reflects each partner country's commitment to European values, standards, and structures, as well as the progress made in relation to them. The Eastern Partnership, of which the Republic of Moldova is a part, aims to promote democracy and good governance, to strengthen energy security, to support sectoral reforms (including in the field of environmental protection), to encourage interpersonal contacts, to support economic and social development, and to provide additional funding for projects aimed at reducing socioeconomic disparities and enhancing stability. In the governing programme of Prime Minister Alexandru Munteanu, the flagship initiatives are also reflected. These include: an integrated border management programme; an instrument dedicated to small and medium-sized enterprises; regional electricity markets; efforts to improve energy efficiency; increased use of renewable energy sources; the promotion of good environmental governance; and measures for prevention, preparedness, and response in cases of natural or man-made disasters. A priority position in the Programme of the Government of the Republic of Moldova is occupied by the five objectives guiding cooperation between European institutions and the states of Central and Eastern Europe:

- A partnership that creates: The EU and partner states will cooperate to build resilient, sustainable, and integrated economies.
- A partnership that protects: The EU and partner states will renew their commitment to the fundamental principles of the partnership, in particular to responsible institutions, the rule of law, and security.
- A green partnership: The EU and partner states will cooperate to ensure a sustainable and resilient future.
- A partnership that connects: The EU will continue to invest in the digital transformation of partner countries and will seek to extend the benefits of the digital single market.

A partnership that empowers: The EU and partner states will cooperate to build resilient, equitable, and inclusive societies.

In 1994, at the European Council in Essen, the Pre-Accession Strategy was presented, defining the mechanism and the Community support provided to candidate states as they progressed through the

pre-accession process. During the pre-accession phase, EU–CEEC (PECOS) relations unfolded along three axes:



PHARE was established in 1998 as a financial support instrument for Hungary and Poland, later extended by the Essen Council to the remaining candidate states. Through Agenda 2000, PHARE was oriented toward institutional reform in the CEECs, industrial and infrastructure adaptation, and related priorities. The annual value of the Programme amounted to 1.56 billion euros.

The Pre-Accession Strategy was complemented by the Accession Partnership, which brought together into a single document all forms of assistance offered by the European Community to the Central and Eastern European states, with the aim of adapting the national preparation programmes of the candidate states. The Accession Partnership establishes:

• The concrete commitments of each candidate state regarding democratization, macroeconomic stabilization, nuclear safety, and the development of a National Programme for the Adoption of the Community Acquis (NPAA), according to a timetable based on a list of country-specific priorities, aligned with the Commission's Opinion for each state.

• The EU's decision to mobilize all available Community resources to ensure better preparation of the candidate states for accession.

Each year, comprehensive analyses of the association agreements are conducted, leading to the identification of the measures necessary for achieving the final objective: accession to the EU. All documents—the Pre-Accession Strategy, the Accession Partnership, and the Consolidated Pre-Accession Strategy—are of great importance in the context of political integration, but the principal legal document remains the Association Agreement. Cooperation between the European Union and the Republic of Moldova focuses on the development of resilient, sustainable, and integrated economies; accountable rule-of-law institutions and security; resilient digital transformation; resilient, equitable,

and inclusive societies; the strengthening of democratic institutions; and the guaranteeing of human rights: freedom, security, and justice.

The Association Agreement between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union promotes political association and dialogue, economic integration—including through expanding Moldova's participation in EU policies, programmes, and agencies—and contributes to strengthening peace and stability in the region and globally. It also supports cooperation in the fields of freedom, security, and justice, with the aim of reinforcing the rule of law and ensuring respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Furthermore, it seeks to consolidate democracy, the rule of law, and political, economic, and institutional stability in the Republic of Moldova; to support Moldova's efforts to develop its economic potential through international cooperation, including by aligning its legislation with that of the EU; and to achieve progressive economic integration into the EU internal market, particularly through the establishment of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA)

Compliance with the commitments undertaken by Moldova's political institutions is monitored by: the Association Council, at ministerial level, responsible for supervising and monitoring the implementation of the Agreement; the Association Committee, composed of senior officials assisting the Council of the European Union; the Parliamentary Association Committee, comprising members of the European Parliament and members of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova; the Civil Society Platform, which facilitates meetings and exchanges of views.

The Association Agenda is based on shared principles: it promotes political association and economic integration, in full accordance with the AA/DCFTA; it emphasizes the responsibility of both the European Union and the Republic of Moldova to fully implement the provisions of the Association Agreement; it ensures full respect for the principles of accountability, transparency, responsibility, and inclusiveness; it entails Moldova's involvement in ongoing dialogue regarding reforms related to the association process; and it highlights the need for concrete and sustainable results that contribute to societal development, including within Moldova. Both parties will ensure that all legislative acts and strategic documents prepared under the Association Agenda

are drafted and implemented accurately, through an inclusive, transparent, and evidence-based process involving civil society and other relevant stakeholders.

Implementation of the Association Agenda is subject to monitoring, annual reporting – including on overall progress – and evaluation, using recognized indicators and data generated by EU-funded projects. Thus, in the EU Enlargement Report of 4 November 2025, it is noted that the pace of reforms, particularly in areas such as democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights, has a direct impact on the speed of the accession process. These advancements benefit both candidate states and EU member states, strengthening prosperity, democracy, security, and stability while opening new opportunities for citizens and businesses, such as strategic investments and access to the Single Market.

In the context of ongoing hybrid threats and attempts to destabilize the country, Moldova has advanced significantly on its accession path, successfully completing the screening process. The first EU – Moldova Summit, held in July 2025, marked a new stage of cooperation and integration. Moldova adopted roadmaps on the rule of law, public administration, and the functioning of democratic institutions, all positively assessed by the European Commission. The Commission considers that Moldova has fulfilled the necessary conditions to open the following clusters: Cluster 1 (Fundamentals), Cluster 6 (External Relations), and Cluster 2 (Internal Market). The Commission expects Moldova to meet the conditions for opening the remaining three clusters and is working to ensure that the Council can advance the opening of all clusters before the end of the year. The Government of the Republic of Moldova has announced its objective to provisionally conclude accession negotiations by early 2028. The Commission is determined to support this objective, which is ambitious yet achievable, if Moldova accelerates the current pace of reforms. Maintaining the reform momentum is essential, reinforced by strong parliamentary support for the country's European path following the September elections [18].

Statements from European institutional leaders emphasize that the European Union will support the Republic of Moldova in achieving the objectives and priorities established in the Association Agenda. To this end, the Union will make all available EU-level support instru-

ments accessible, provide expertise and advice, facilitate the exchange of best practices, know-how, and information, and support capacity-building and institutional strengthening. The European Union will also encourage and monitor the coordination of support from Moldova's other partners and will reinforce the coordinated Team Europe approach, which combines resources from the EU, its Member States, and financial institutions. The Union will use the relevant financial instruments at its disposal to help implement the Association Agenda. However, this support will continue to be strictly conditional and will depend on concrete progress in the reform programme agreed with the EU, particularly in the areas of democracy, justice, and the fight against corruption. The priorities defined in the Association Agenda are fully aligned with the long-term policy objectives set out in the Joint Communication entitled "The Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all", which, together with the contributions of Member States and partner countries, forms the basis of the Joint Staff Working Document on the Eastern Partnership.

Interconnections between the strategies of survival, security, and sustainable development

The survival of humankind calls for a new interpretation of security, viewing it as a rational deviation from the path of natural development and as a transition toward sustainable development. Sustainable development requires meeting the vital needs of current and future generations while preserving the environment. The preservation of the biosphere and its dynamic stability constitute the foundation of ecological security and the sustainable development of society. European institutions have contributed to achieving sustainable development objectives through the development and implementation of various instruments, including: the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020, the Clean Air Policy Package, continued implementation of the corporate social responsibility strategy, the European Health Insurance Card, regulations on the sustainable use of pesticides, and EU rules on tobacco products, among others. A revision of Europe's sustainable development concept was undertaken by the Juncker Commission, which integrated sustainable

development into the main agendas covering multiple policy areas, as well as into sectoral policies and initiatives, using better-regulation tools. Every impact assessment carried out by the Commission before presenting a legislative proposal includes an analysis of the social, economic, and environmental impacts, with the purpose of ensuring proper consideration of sustainable development aspects. Moreover, all recently concluded EU trade agreements include a chapter on sustainable development, aiming to promote sustainable growth and development, as well as decent working conditions for all. The Juncker Commission defined the core values of European policies of major importance for Europe's sustainable future, such as the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Consensus on Development, and the EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy [6].

The Commission has also proposed strengthening the link between EU funding and the rule of law, assessing the social and environmental impact of all EU-co-funded research and innovation activities, and setting a more ambitious climate-spending target under the future EU budget. Recently, the Commission presented a long-term strategic European vision for a prosperous, modern, competitive, and climate-neutral economy by 2050 – a vision that lays the groundwork for a structural transformation of the European economy.

For central and local authorities in the Republic of Moldova, the European Pillar of Social Rights – adopted in November 2017 holds major significance. Based on its 20 principles, it directly supports upward convergence aimed at improving working and living conditions across Europe. It contributes to combating poverty in all its dimensions and to ensuring equitable, adequate, and sustainable social protection systems. The Pillar promotes equal opportunities and access to the labour market, including gender equality and fair working conditions, and fosters social inclusion and protection. The Pillar is accompanied by a Social Scoreboard, which, together with other instruments, contributes to its monitoring.

The concept of *sustainable development* is elaborated in the Sustainable Development Strategy and in the United Nations Millennium Declaration, which identifies human development as a priority objective and was signed by 147 states. The Millennium Declaration reaffirms the international community's commitment to the fundamental values of humanity: freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect

for nature, and shared responsibility. It highlights the importance of addressing challenges related to peacebuilding, human rights, sustainable development, and environmental protection. The interconnections between development and security are particularly relevant for the sustainable development of Moldovan society. Researcher Natalia ALBU, in her article "*External Assistance in the Security Sector: Background and Areas of Cooperation*", underscores that efficient social security systems are powerful levers for ensuring income security, preventing and reducing poverty and inequality, and promoting social inclusion and dignity. As an essential investment in the well-being of workers and of the population, social protection increases productivity and employment rates and supports sustainable economic development, thereby contributing to a more equitable globalization with decent living standards for all [2, p. 232-255].

Security is understood as a condition in which no individual is threatened by manifestations of danger, including the threat of extinction. The object of security includes the individual; human rights and freedoms; society; its material and spiritual values; the state; constitutional order; sovereignty and territorial integrity; the political system; and other fundamental components. The main challenge of the transition toward sustainable development concerns the creation of conditions in which the market economy can be "aligned" with the biosphere and develop in accordance with the goals of the new civilizational strategy. Prior to the formulation of a sustainable development strategy, security was interpreted as a means of protection against danger, deviation, or anomaly in relation to sustainable development [21, p. 31].

An analysis of the first years of existence of the sovereign Republic of Moldova provides concrete data on the active manifestations of risk factors affecting economic security. In order to improve living conditions for Moldovan citizens, the Strategy for Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction (SCERS) and the Millennium Development Goals were adopted. SCERS includes three objectives: sustainable and socially oriented development; reintegration of the country; and European integration. Sustainable and socially oriented development is understood as "continuous and stable" development aimed at "increasing the quality of life and well-being of the population, especially of the

poor, and eliminating social inequality". The practical implementation of sustainable development objectives is based on several principles: improving governance in political and economic terms; developing the private sector through ensuring a favorable business environment; and redefining the role of government so that all its actions serve the benefit of society. The social orientation of development implies eradication of extreme poverty; ensuring access to primary education; promoting gender equality; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS; and ensuring environmental sustainability [21, p. 32].

For comparison, the updated objectives for Sustainable and Socially Oriented Development for 2005–2007 include: economic growth, reduction of poverty and inequality, and development of human resources. To achieve these objectives, the Government of the Republic of Moldova adopted programmes encouraging investment in small and medium-sized enterprises, in the manufacturing sector, and in infrastructure. In 2025, the European Commission adopted a Growth Plan for the Republic of Moldova worth EUR 1.8 billion, supported by a Reform and Growth Facility for the period 2025-2027. The Growth Plan will stimulate the economy, bring the country closer to EU membership by accelerating reforms, and provide substantial financial assistance. The Moldova Growth Plan is structured around three pillars aimed at:

1. Increasing financial assistance over the next three years through a Reform and Growth Mechanism for Moldova. The mechanism could support, for example: new roads, bridges, and railway infrastructure, such as the Chișinău bypass road; advancement of the Odesa – Chișinău – Iași connection; bridges over the Prut River; energy security through the completion of a new power line and initiation of construction on two more, connecting the Republic of Moldova to the EU electricity grid; energy subsidies; healthcare assistance through the construction of two new, well-equipped hospitals in Cahul and Bălți; integration of the Republic of Moldova into the EU "roam like at home" area and the expansion of broadband Internet to remote regions of the country; improved access to financing and support for 25,000 enterprises, including small family businesses.

2. Improving access to the European Union's Single Market. The Growth Plan for the Republic of Moldova proposes immediate measures that our country can take to benefit from the advantages of the Single Market in five key areas, once the necessary standards are met: free movement of goods and integration into supply chains; trade facilitation and improved transport connections; integration into the EU energy market and decarbonization; integration into the Digital Single Market; and access to the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA).
3. Supporting the Republic of Moldova's socio-economic and fundamental reforms. Moldova is undertaking reforms aimed at socio-economic development, building upon the key drivers of economic growth: economic competitiveness; economic resilience, including infrastructure and energy; economic governance; social capital; and the green transition. These reforms will attract foreign investment, improve the business environment, support small and medium-sized enterprises, enhance skills and qualifications, strengthen trade and exports, thereby stimulating economic growth and increasing economic convergence with the EU. Payments will support the implementation of pre-agreed reforms [8].

The National Development Plan for 2024–2026 is the main document that sets the Government's public policy priorities and contains the priority directions and measures for implementing the country's strategic objectives. This document ensures the operationalization of the provisions contained in the National Development Strategy (NDS), the Government's Programme "Prosperous, Secure, European Moldova", and the country's international commitments, including those deriving from the Association Agreement between the Republic of Moldova, on the one hand, and the European Union, the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, on the other hand; the RM–EU Association Agenda 2021–2027; commitments arising from Moldova's status as an EU candidate country; and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda [19, p.4].

A comparative analysis of sustainable development objectives and the strengthening of the economies and rule of law's resilience in the Republic of Moldova allows us to conclude that, over its 34 years

of existence, Moldova has developed and implemented government programmes focused on survival strategies, such as SCERS, and on the Sustainable Development Strategy. Despite the efforts made by some governing teams – while others became entangled in senseless "debates and discussions" of little relevance to the country's development, such as the definition of the spoken language – we observe that only in recent years, with the political and financial support of European states and institutions, the Republic of Moldova has achieved noticeable results in poverty reduction, improvement of living conditions, education, and personal development.

For central and local authorities in the Republic of Moldova, the European Pillar of Social Rights – adopted in November 2017 – holds major significance. Based on its 20 principles, it directly aims at promoting upward convergence to improve working and living conditions across Europe. It contributes to combating poverty in all its dimensions and to ensuring equitable, adequate, and sustainable social protection systems. The Pillar supports equal opportunities and access to the labour market, including gender equality and fair working conditions, and it promotes social inclusion and protection. The Pillar is accompanied by a Social Scoreboard which, together with other instruments, contributes to its monitoring.

Activities focused on promoting social values have enabled the authorities of our country to achieve visible results in preparing society for accession. At a meeting with Marta COS, the European Commissioner for Enlargement, Prime Minister Alexandru MUNTEANU stated: "The progress we have made on our European path motivates us to continue working at an even higher pace. Our home is Europe, and we are bringing Europe home. Our objective is to finalize the negotiations and sign the Accession Treaty in 2028" [9].

At the conference "The 2025 Enlargement Report: Progress and Future Priorities of the Republic of Moldova", Marta COS highlighted that Moldova had made the greatest leap in its level of preparedness for EU accession. Significant progress has been recorded in several areas, including justice, energy, education, digitalization, and regional development. Marta COS expressed admiration for the way Moldovans have resisted attempts by the Russian Federation to take control of the country. "You have won the fight against Russia. The Kremlin has

spent between three and four hundred million euros to pull you away from the EU. But Moldovan citizens have shown that they are stronger than the pressures coming from the East. And we, the EU Member States, have stood by you" [7].

The results achieved in the area of EU accession reflect the support of our strategic partners, particularly Romania. The governments of both Romanian states have moved toward "a pragmatic partnership with regional stakes, at a time marked by security tensions and by Chișinău's growing proximity to Europe's decision-making centres". At a meeting with Prime Minister Alexandru MUNTEANU, Romanian Prime Minister Ilie BOLOJAN discussed accelerating interconnection projects, such as the Suceava–Bălți power line, the rehabilitation and electrification of the Iași–Ungheni railway, the new road bridge at Ungheni, and reducing border waiting times. He emphasized that Romania has been, is, and will remain the strategic partner and closest supporter of the Republic of Moldova. Thus, by 2027 the authorities plan to modernize the Sculeni – Sculeni, Cahul – Oancea, and Leușeni – Albița bridges, while work on the Ungheni–Ungheni bridge is underway and preparations for the construction of four additional bridges over the Prut-Costești-Stânca, Leova–Bumbăta, Leca–Fălciu, and Bărboieni–Răducăneni – are being accelerated to strengthen the connection between the two states. Ilie BOLOJAN assured that the two cabinets will maintain "an extremely dynamic dialogue" and will continue joint projects related to energy interconnection, road infrastructure development, increased bilateral trade, as well as intensified cooperation at local level, in security, education, and culture.

President Nicușor DAN, at his meeting with our country's Prime Minister, stated that Romania remains the most sincere and strongest supporter of the Republic of Moldova, at all levels, especially regarding state modernization, reforms, and European integration [17].

Youth Policy – a Premise for Strengthening Participatory Democracy in the Republic of Moldova

The EU Youth Strategy, adopted in May 2018, is of particular significance, with its central objective being "engaging, connecting, and empowering young people". The Youth Strategy provides a framework for objectives, principles, priorities, as well as key areas and meas-

ures for cooperation in the field of youth policy, considering Member States' competences and the principle of subsidiarity. Cooperation at the EU level stimulates young people's participation in democratic life, in accordance with Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. It also supports social engagement and civic participation. Youth policy is grounded in the principles of equality, non-discrimination, inclusion, and participation [10].

Within the context of the new cooperation framework for youth (2019–2027), the strategy aims to bring the EU closer to young people and to identify solutions to their major concerns. The new EU Youth Strategy seeks to encourage young people to participate in civic and democratic life (engage), to build connections among youth within and beyond the Union in order to foster volunteer engagement, study mobility, solidarity, and intercultural understanding (connect), and to empower young people by fostering innovation and by improving the quality and recognition of youth work (empower) [23]. The instruments proposed for achieving the objectives of the Youth Strategy include a renewed dialogue with young people, the use of planning tools for national activities, as well as a Council Work Plan on Youth for the period 2019–2020.

Inclusion: Recognizing that young people do not represent a homogeneous group and therefore have different needs, living situations, interests, and backgrounds, the EU Youth Strategy supports and promotes activities that are attractive and accessible to all young people. It aims to ensure meaningful participation of youth in civic, economic, social, cultural, and political life.

Participation: Based on the premise that young people constitute an important resource for the functioning and development of society, youth policies and activities guarantee the right of young people to participate in the development and implementation of policies that affect them, through mechanisms ensuring meaningful involvement of youth and youth organizations.

Connection: To ensure a lasting impact on young people, it is important that EU youth policy be implemented with attention to its connections to actions undertaken at local and regional levels. Policymakers in the field must take into account young people's ideas and proposals. It is essential that the approach to youth-related issues in-

tegrates initiatives from different policy areas, complemented by specific youth-sector initiatives. Opportunities for young people regarding exchanges, cooperation, and cultural and civic engagement within a European context must be accessible to all youth. Such opportunities enable them to develop and strengthen personal, social, and civic competences, to cultivate critical and creative thinking, to increase their employability, and to become active European citizens. Youth exchanges and projects under Erasmus+, the European Solidarity Corps, and their successor programmes serve as key sources of intercultural learning and empowerment, particularly for young people with fewer opportunities.

The components of the EU Youth Strategy aim at empowering young people and encouraging them to take their own destinies into their hands. Today, young people across Europe face various challenges: among others, they experience difficulties in accessing their social rights, confront social exclusion and discrimination, and are exposed to threats generated by fake news and propaganda. The European Commission has called on EU Member States and EU candidate countries to:

- Develop and implement a programme for youth activities focused on quality, innovation, and the recognition of youth work. To harness the full potential of such initiatives, it is necessary to integrate the expertise of youth representatives, youth organizations, youth workers, and researchers. New synergies with activities carried out by the Council of Europe in this field should be encouraged.
- Support the development of activities at local, regional, national, and community levels, including policy development, training for youth workers, establishing legal frameworks, and allocating sufficient resources.
- Support and recognize youth organizations as drivers of competence development and social inclusion through youth work and non-formal educational activities.

Young people in the Republic of Moldova participate in the implementation of several European projects—activities through which they assimilate European values and learn to distinguish between different models of socio-political organization: representative democ-

racy and participatory democracy. As noted by I. Grădinaru, "theorists of the political sphere have supported and promoted conceptions of politics as a rational participatory activity of the citizen, characterized by rules, public opinion, the media, and other social sciences" [14].

A concept that encompasses citizens' participation in public life is that of participatory democracy, according to which individuals, communities, or social groups engage in decision-making and resource management processes [24, pp. 50–58]. Participatory democracy is a continuous and dynamic process that involves risks and requires organization, collaboration, and the identification of common goals within a group. It is viewed as a balance between citizens' rights to be responsible for societal life and the necessary support that certain representative citizens can offer to ensure the rapid and effective implementation of specific measures. A balance must be found between the leadership and management of state institutions, on the one hand, and citizens and their elected representatives, on the other. Power belongs to the citizens, while the authority of representatives should not be interpreted exhaustively but rather declaratively. The effectiveness of participatory democracy requires the simultaneous and obligatory observance of the principles of information, consultation, and transparency in the decision-making process [16].

Participatory democracy is exercised through participation, which presupposes that all involved parties exchange views honestly and sincerely, ensuring that the positions of civil society are effectively considered by public authorities endowed with decision-making power. Thus, the conditions for the effective participation of citizens include:

a) Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, the rule of law, adherence to fundamental democratic principles, political commitment, clear procedures, shared spaces for dialogue, and favourable general conditions for a vital, pluralistic, and sustainable civil society.

b) The creation and maintenance by Member States of an enabling environment – comprising political, legal, and practical frameworks – that guarantees individuals, NGOs, and civil society the rights to free association, freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, and freedom of information.

c) Recognition, protection, and support of the role of civil society in a pluralistic democracy, including its functions related to advocacy,

monitoring public affairs, and contributing to the development of a dynamic society.

Through all activities carried out within the Jean Monnet Project "Centre of Excellence: Strengthening Democratic Sustainability through Civic Education", Project 101085234 — SDSCE, we have sought to fulfil the priority objectives of European policies so that young people in the Republic of Moldova can progress in their processes of socialization and Europeanization, assimilating and promoting European values. We consider that, in this way, the academic community and intellectuals in our country contribute to the sustainable development of Moldovan society and to strengthening the resilience of its political and sociocultural institutions.

Conclusions

A systemic approach to the phenomena of survival, sustainable development, and the resilience of democracy has allowed us to reassess theoretical theses on these issues and to observe that they are interdependent, representing different stages in the development of contemporary democratic states. The concepts of security and regional insecurity have enabled an adequate understanding of the post-February 24, 2022, regional reality, a date that has significantly impacted and continues to influence the lives and activities of citizens across all European states. Thus, it can be observed that Ukraine, at present, is updating and, through diverse means, following the logic of theses concerning the survival of the nation, social groups, and individual citizens. The Republic of Moldova combines the implementation of the Survival Strategy, which focuses on poverty reduction and ensuring minimum living conditions for all citizens, with the objectives of the Sustainable Development Strategy. We have analyzed both the positive and negative factors influencing the operational plans of policymakers and presented results that have been recognized by leaders of developed European states. Additionally, the importance of implementing the participatory democracy model, which creates favorable conditions for the development of young people, has been highlighted.

The significance and weight of participatory democracy for community life are substantial. Institutions regulate access to scarce and

valued resources, establish standards for their legitimate use, define interests, and determine how these interests should be pursued. By definition, the limitation of resources generates contestation and conflict. Institutions regulate the interaction of interests, defining the rules and the potential gains that can be achieved in the "game" of governance. However, to practically apply the constructive, formative, and managerial potential of institutions, it is necessary to assimilate scientific research results. Before drafting proposals, submitting initiatives, or delivering speeches to European authorities or citizens, state leaders must integrate the experiences accumulated by other countries in the European integration process and recalibrate the outcomes of actions aimed at Europeanizing their own citizens. With each action—however modest—focused on strengthening the rule of law, the Republic of Moldova will gradually achieve its primary objective: integration into the European Union.

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CHAPTER 2.

REZILIENȚA DEMOGRAFICĂ A POPULAȚIEI REPUBLICII MOLDOVA – NECESITATE INDISPENSABILĂ A POLITICILOR DEMOGRAFICE ÎN PARCURSUL SPRE UNIUNEA EUROPEANĂ

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https://doi.org/10.59295/sdcri2025.02

Rezumat: *Cadrul demografic se află în etapa de post tranziție demografică ce au determinat incursiuni ale tendințelor și structurii demografice. Procese de durată, apreciate în timp, ce necesită o abordare detaliată scrupuloasă și profundă științifică prin intermediul rezilierii politicilor demografice existente. Adițional este crucial de a reseta mecanismele de influențare, scopul scontat de pe urma politicilor demografice, precum și modalitățile de abordare prin prisma criteriilor de gen.*
Cuvinte cheie: *reziliență demografică, probleme demografice, politică demografică, politică familială, declin demografic, îmbătrânire demografică, inegalitate demografică, dimensiune optimă a familiei.*

DEMOGRAFIC RESILIENCE OF THE POPULATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA – INDISPENSABLE NECESITY OF DEMOGRAFIC POLICIES DURING EU INTEGRATION

Abstract: *The demographic framework is in the stage of post-demographic transition, which has determined incursions of demographic trends and structure. Long-lasting processes, valued over time, that require a detailed, scrupulous and deep scientific approach through the termination of existing demographic policies. Additionally, it is crucial to reset the influencing mechanisms, the expected goal of the demographic policies, as well as the ways of the approach through the lens of gender criteria.*

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Keywords: Demographic resilience, demographic issues, demographic policy, family policy, demographic decline, demographic aging, demographic inequality, optimal family size.

Introduction

The demographic transformations observed over the past decades represent the manifestation of a large-scale, long-term phenomenon with profound implications for the Republic of Moldova. The state's resilience lies in its capacity to adapt to rapid demographic shifts, which have become increasingly pressing. The accelerated demographic transition—bearing a dual impact on both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the population—underscores the disproportions between the mechanisms of influence and the anticipated sustainability of demographic development. These dynamics must be assessed both in relation to the current stage of modernization and from a forward-looking perspective. Demographic trends are becoming ever more significant and irreversible, a fact substantiated by the findings of the 2024 Population Census in the Republic of Moldova.

The demographic vision of the Republic of Moldova, including the formulation of evidence-based demographic policies and their integration into national development programs, would enhance the country's demographic resilience.

The Concept of Demographic Resilience

Demographic changes represent a fundamental element that will determine the anticipated progress of society. People are the ultimate spatial resources, and human capital—through its economic and social quality—generates added value that we risk losing if not properly developed and retained.

Demographic resilience refers to the capacity of a society to withstand demographic changes and to transform these shifts into opportunities for development. It involves the formulation of policies and programs that address factors such as population ageing, emigration, declining fertility, and other transformations associated with demographic transition, as well as new challenges dictated by the requirements of a market economy.

As a concept, demographic resilience emphasizes the importance of population dynamics for socio-economic development, individual well-being, political stability, and security. Demographically resilient

societies understand and anticipate the population dynamics to which they bear witness.[4]

Demographic resilience is an aspiration that entails the ability to predict demographic changes, to understand their implications, and to design policy interventions based on evidence and human rights. This means moving beyond narrow, short-term approaches focused solely on population size, toward comprehensive, inclusive policies aimed at ensuring the prosperity and well-being of all members of society.

Demographic resilience must become an integral component of the new strategic planning framework. It is grounded in three key pillars—adaptation, mitigation, and adjustment—which operate in parallel with the reform of the institutional framework.[5] These requirements emerge from the accelerating pace of demographic trends, the necessity of new interventions, and the realities of the national demographic context.

The resilience of demographic systems also reflects the core objectives established by the World Population Conference (Bucharest, 1974), which addressed population growth, morbidity and mortality, fertility, migration, and population structure. Later, the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994) placed human rights—particularly reproductive rights—at the center of sustainable development, emphasizing the empowerment of women and the promotion of gender equality as essential elements of demographic resilience.

Interconnected factors of demographic changes: Demographic decline

The demographic decline experienced during the period **1990–2025** threatens the long-term viability of the state and undermines both economic development and the overall well-being of society. Economic growth currently lacks a demographic foundation in the long run. The ongoing demographic downturn in the Republic of Moldova can be attributed to several interrelated factors:

- *Political factors:* The transition from a centralized to a democratic system generated significant political instability.

[4] *https://moldova.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf /rezilienta_demografica.pdf*

[5] *https://moldova.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/teoria_schimbarii_pentru_rezilienta_demografica_-_adaptare_ atenuare_ajustare.pdf*

- *Economic factors:* The prolonged and burdensome transition to a market economy, accompanied by ill-conceived economic reforms under an indecisive political system, instilling uncertainty and widespread poverty among the population. The absence of political will and the indifference of decision-makers to design effective, long-term, evidence-based policies further deepened the crisis.
- *Social factors:* The collapse of the social security system, healthcare services, and public service delivery at all levels contributed to a substantial decline in living standards.
- *Demographic factors:* Profound transformations in core demographic processes, coupled with the deteriorating economic and social context, have exacerbated the demographic situation.

The combined effects of these interconnected factors have produced catastrophic consequences for the country's demographic evolution and outlook, leaving substantial negative impacts in both the medium and long term. Political and economic actors at all levels—upon whom the resolution of these issues depends—often fail to recognize that, while social and economic errors can be mitigated relatively quickly, demographic transformations and their sustainable management constitute a complex and long-term process. *(Table 1).*

The numerical evolution of the population of the Republic of Moldova

Year	Total population (thousand persons)	Increase or decrease over the five-year period (thousand persons)	Average growth (decline) in the Republic of Moldova	
			Thousand persons	%
1990	4319,4	-	-	-
1995	4347,9	-11,5	-2,3	-0,1
2000[1]	4291,5	-703,8	–	-
2000[2]	3044,1	-66,4	-13,3	- 0,4
2005	3600,4	-43,7	- 8,7	- 0,2
2010	3563,4	- 37,0	-7,4	-0,2
2014(R)	3557,6	- 5,8	-1,2	-0,1
2024(R)	2,4	-1,157,6	-1,15	- 32
Total		-167,4	-	-

Source: [2 p. 178]:

[1] – Population number with the eastern districts and Bender municipality.

[2] – Population number without the eastern districts and Bender municipality.

The reproductive crisis reflects the advanced degradation of the reproductive gene pool. Several key aspects can be highlighted:

- For three decades, the Republic of Moldova has been in a state of free fall in terms of population reproduction, under conditions of demographic transition. Mortality fully offsets the birth rate, with only about 24,000 births annually and a total fertility rate of 1.2 children per woman of reproductive age. Unofficially, the number of annual births occurring abroad is estimated at over 16,000.
- More than 50% of families have only one child. Marriages occur later in life, and approximately 20% of families of reproductive age experience infertility.
- Family instability diminishes reproductive potential. Young people enter marriage later and dissolve it more easily. Half of marriages end in divorce during reproductive age.
- For the past two decades, the country has experienced negative natural population growth. Generational replacement no longer occurs within the demographic cycle. Younger generations are numerically twice as small as the older ones, and the total fertility rate remains below the replacement level.
- The share of the young population has fallen below sustainable demographic thresholds. Age and gender disparities have become increasingly pronounced, both among mature and elderly population groups.

Rapid demographic ageing generates consumption and economic and social dependence:

- The population of the Republic of Moldova is ageing rapidly and continuously. By 2050, every second citizen will be over 50 years old. As of 2024, older persons accounted for 22.5% of the total population, representing over 584,000 individuals. Among the elderly population, one in three people is between 60 and 64 years of age.
- Over the past five years, the share of the elderly population aged 70–74 has increased the most, now constituting 19% of all older people. Of the total number of households composed solely of elderly individuals, 62.3% are located in rural areas, and in some administrative units, the proportion of people aged 60 and above has reached 30%.
- According to the Index of active ageing in the Republic of Moldova (2020), one-third of the population aged 55 years and older possesses the capacity and opportunities for a healthy ageing.

- Individuals aged 55–64 exhibit a high inactivity rate (57.8% in 2018), which is among the lowest employment rates in Europe for this age group. Economic growth is not generating tangible benefits for the elderly population.
- Employment beyond the statutory retirement age is largely unattractive, with only 20% of pensioners remaining formally engaged in the labour market.
- Demographic ageing exacerbates gender disparities and asymmetries. The pronounced feminization of older age groups increases the risk of marginal poverty among women, particularly in rural areas.
- COVID-19 restrictions intensified both physical and social isolation among older people, heightening their vulnerability to illness and pushing many closers to the poverty threshold. During the pandemic, the inactivity of the elderly population, especially in rural regions, became more evident, while healthcare needs continued to rise. The health system has struggled to adapt effectively to these new demographic and social challenges.

Excessive and Prolonged Emigration of the Population

- The number of emigrants has reached exorbitant levels, estimated at approximately one million people, according to unofficial data. Furthermore, an additional 15% of the population of the Republic of Moldova intends to move abroad within the next three years, with a higher proportion among young men.[6]
- According to the statistical analyses conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), a new long-term trend has emerged, marked by increased female labor migration during the period of independence, which has jeopardized family stability and gender balance.
- Every third person planning to emigrate is under 35 years of age and within the reproductive age group. The likelihood of emigration among individuals aged 20–29 is 3.8 times higher than among those aged 50 and above.
- The average age of a migrant is 35 years. Where male migrants tend to be younger, with an average age of 34, compared to 37 among female migrants. The majority of emigrants—22.4%—belong to the age groups with the highest reproductive potential, namely 15–24 and

[6] *https://ggs.gov.md*

25–34 years. Consequently, in the short term, the country faces the loss of one reproductive generation, and in the long term, the loss of two generations of migrants.

- For the first time in recent years, citizens of the Republic of Moldova express an intention to emigrate not primarily for financial reasons, but rather for social ones—related to the quality of public services, infrastructure, and overall living conditions.
- The economic factor is no longer a strong predictor of emigration. The intention to emigrate is higher among urban residents and individuals with higher education and income levels. Those with higher incomes have also raised their expectations regarding quality of life, lifestyle, and the public environment in which they wish to live.
- The intention to emigrate is 8.2 times higher among persons planning to change their residence within the country or move to another address. This trend reflects a broader desire to improve one's living environment, seeking better employment opportunities, higher-quality public, educational, and healthcare services, as well as improved infrastructure and public transportation.

Population – A Reflection of Administrative, Social, and Economic Inequalities

Periods of economic growth are generally accompanied by an increase in inequalities, while demographic processes cannot be entirely separated from these dynamics. Development and innovation strategies are inherently dependent on the population factor, in which both quantitative characteristics and the growing significance of qualitative aspects play a decisive role. Disparities within this domain have widened to such an extent that they have affected fundamental demographic processes and the sustainable existence of the demographic framework across time and space, as well as the broader socio-economic context. Demographic inequalities are, in essence, gaps created by systemic imperfections that threaten development [1].

Demographic Inequalities in Spatial and Administrative Distribution (Urban/Rural)

The territorial distribution of the population of the Republic of Moldova reveals significant spatial and administrative disparities. Natural conditions, alongside historical factors and socio-economic

priorities, have determined an uneven settlement pattern across the national territory—even within the relatively small geographical space of the Republic of Moldova. During the post-independence period, the population distribution has become increasingly disproportionate along the center–periphery axis. This unevenness has been further intensified by internal migration directed toward the central region [7].

The country comprises 65 urban localities and 1,549 rural localities, with the average commune consisting of approximately 2,234 inhabitants per administrative unit; however, this figure is underestimated due to extensive migration. The rural population is dispersed over 92.3% of the national territory, while the largest share of the total population is concentrated in the Central Region (including the municipality of Chișinău), where 50% of the population resides on only 34% of the country's area.

Along the Bâc River valley, more than 60% of the country's population is concentrated. The territorial distribution of the population indicates that approximately 30% of the total population lives in both the northern and central regions, where population density is highest—over 100 inhabitants per km^2, with an average national density of 91 inhabitants per km^2 (2025), compared to 111.4 inhabitants per km^2 (2004), and reaching up to 126 inhabitants per km^2 in certain districts. Although the average density masks regional disparities, these imbalances have become increasingly pronounced in recent years, despite gradual spatial shifts over time.

The average rural density stands at 68.6 persons per km^2, and 85 persons per km^2 in the central region [2]. Slightly more than 15% of the population resides in the southern region, with only 465,000 inhabitants, where population density is below 68 persons per km^2, the lowest level nationally. In contrast, the maximum density is found in Chișinău Municipality, with 1,380 persons per km^2— more than ten times the national average, and over twenty times higher than the lowest density. Urban density disparities are enormous between city categories, in smaller towns, population density approximates the national average *(Table 2).*

Urban Density in Selected Cities of the Republic of Moldova

City	Population	Area, km²	Population Density, persons per km²
Chişinău	671,800	123	5 461
Bălţi	149,700	78	1 191
Criuleni	7,887	7	11

Data source: *Calculations based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS)*

In the ATU Gagauzia, up to 5% of the population of the Republic of Moldova resides. The inhabitants of the municipality of Chişinău account for one-fifth (20%) of the country's total population and approximately half (50%) of its urban population [3]. Together with the city of Bălţi, these two urban centers comprise about 60% of Moldova's urban population, leaving only around 40% of urban residents distributed among the remaining 63 towns.

The demographic ambivalence—between "too little" and "too much"—is much deeper. The city of Chişinău exceeds the demographic size of the country's medium-sized cities (Bălţi, Tighina, Tiraspol, and Cahul) by more than four times, and the small towns by over forty times. The numerical disproportion between the smallest and the largest urban administrative units is more than sixtyfold (Chişinău with 674,500 inhabitants compared to Slobozia with only 14,600 inhabitants).

The extent of depopulation generates politico-administrative inequalities, as evidenced by the local elections of 2015, repeated in 2025. For example, in the commune of Salcia (Taraclia), only 81 votes were cast; in Otac (Rezina), the mayor was elected by 174 residents; in Coghilnicei (Rezina) – 167 residents; and in Marianca (Ştefan Vodă) – 151 residents. Consequently, administrative costs per resident are three to five times higher, averaging about 230 lei in communes with populations between 1,500 and 3,000 inhabitants. According to EU assessments, the sustainability threshold for local administrations providing adequate public services lies between 4,500 and 50,000 inhabitants.

The territorial distribution of rural settlements is relatively uniform, owing to favorable natural conditions (climatic and orographic). In 2016, the rural population totaled 2,042,005 people [5], most of whom were concentrated in large and medium-sized villages of over 2,000 inhabitants each, accounting for 57.4% of the rural population. A further 26.9% lived in medium-sized villages with 1,000–

2,000 inhabitants, 15% resided in smaller villages of 500–1,000 inhabitants (415 villages), and only 4.6% in 104 villages with fewer than 500 residents. At the opposite end of this inequality are the districts of Fălești, Ungheni, Orhei, and Rezina, which include small and very small rural settlements. These categories of rural localities are the most vulnerable to depopulation and are projected to disappear in the forthcoming demographic period.

At the 2004 census, 56 rural settlements each had fewer than 50 inhabitants (for instance, Elenovca, Dondușeni – 8 persons; Podul Lung, Călărași – 13 persons). This inequality changes gradually from north to south, from larger to smaller settlements. Notably, large rural localities are predominantly located in peri-urban areas, particularly those surrounding Chișinău, many of which have been absorbed into the municipality in recent years.

The largest rural locality, Congaz, had 14,000 inhabitants in 1989, 12,327 in 2004, and about 11,000 in 2024 five to six times above the national average. The commune of Costești (Ialoveni) has 11,128 inhabitants, while Cărpineni (Hîncești district), with a population of 10,900 (2024), is the largest rural settlement in its district and the third largest nationwide. The inequality between rural and urban settlements is primarily demographic in nature. The difference between the largest commune (Congaz, Costești – 11,000–12,000 inhabitants) and the smallest town (Slobozia – 14,600 inhabitants) is not significant. In fact, some small urban settlements often do not even reach the average size of medium-sized rural settlements (e.g., Bâcovăț).

The number of villages within communes reflects the precarious demographic situation that has primarily affected the rural space, endangered by the phenomenon of depopulation. This process places both villages and communes in a state of existential inequality, both in the present and from a future perspective. It is difficult to differentiate communes[7] from villages[8] based on demographic criteria alone. Ad-

[7] *DEX; COMMUNITY, commune, s. f. I. Administrative unit composed of one or more villages, led by a communal popular council. A commune is an important center of peasant population, composed of one or more villages, with a population of around 3000 inhabitants.*

[8] *Wikipedia, Commune (from the word commune in the French language; plural „communes") is a basic administrative-economic unit, composed of one or more villages and led by a Communal Council headed by a mayor.*

ditionally, depopulation emphasizes in the categories of rural human settlements small villages – hamlets[9] which are in accelerated evolution but demographically devastated.

Demographic inequality is often not highly distinctive among settlement categories. For instance, the commune of Chetrosu has 1,974 inhabitants, and Todireşti 1,843 inhabitants (as of 2004). The demographic differences are negligible, while the resulting inequality is primarily socio-economic—manifested in administrative capacity, resource distribution, and development priorities—which ultimately induce inequality. From this perspective, inequality arises from the inevitable absorption of smaller settlements by larger ones (especially when the latter surpass them demographically), leading to uneven spatial distribution of the population. Consequently, such dynamics generate new long-term challenges. We may therefore conclude that villages and communes coexist in a state of demographic and administrative inequality, which undermines their balanced development.

Additionally, some communes have populations of fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, undermining their designation as communes due to the absence of a sufficient demographic base, especially when compared with certain villages that are significantly larger. Demographic inequality thus discriminates against rural localities with the status of villages but with populations exceeding 1,000–2,000 inhabitants, both within their administrative units and at the national level. For example, the commune of Ochiul-Roş (Anenii Noi) has 376 inhabitants, while the village of Todireşti (part of the Chetrosu commune) has 1,843 inhabitants—an evident demographic disparity. Similarly, Chioselia Mare (745 inhabitants, commune status) and Frumuşica (859 inhabitants, Cahul district); Lebedenco commune (796 inhabitants) and Ursoaia village (1,263 inhabitants, Cahul district); Ciobalaccia commune (1,008 inhabitants) and Victorovca village (1,322 inhabitants, Cantemir district); Hârjauca commune (747 inhabitants) and Palanca village (956 inhabitants), Tuzara commune (803 inhabitants) and Seliştea Nouă village (1,393 inhabitants, Călăraşi district); Natalievca commune (565 inhabitants) and Popovca village (981 inhabitants, Făleşti district); Bobeica commune (675 inhabitants) and

[9] *Hamlet – group of peasant settlements (sometimes scattered) that do not constitute an administrative unit, having a number of inhabitants smaller than that of a village*

Drăgușeni village (1,286 inhabitants, Hîncești district)—all exemplify double demographic inequality. The number of villages forming a commune varies between one and six—for example, Balatino commune (Glodeni) has four villages, Sarata (Hîncești) – four, Țătăreuca (Soroca) – five, and Natalievca (Fălești) – five.

These administrative units thus combine widely polarized demographic inequalities.

Recent demographic changes have generated increasing disparities. Districts with populations exceeding 100,000 inhabitants include Cahul, Hîncești, Orhei, and Ungheni—each concentrating over 3.0% of the country's total population. In contrast, the districts with the smallest populations are Basarabeasca (29,000 persons, representing only 0.81% of the national population—equivalent to a medium-sized town), Dubăsari (34,000 or 0.99%), Șoldănești (42,000 or 1.20%), and Taraclia (43,000 or 1.23%), all two to three times below the national average. The national average per administrative unit is 111,034 inhabitants, nearly twice below the national mean. Demographic inequalities, when correlated with administrative structuring, diminish demographic equity and balance. Long-term observations confirm that the demographic potential criterion was not taken as a basis in defining certain administrative units.

Depopulation demographically undermines the very foundation and long-term sustainability of the country's territorial-administrative framework, particularly affecting smaller administrative units. The demographic outlook, marked by the intensification of numerical inequalities, requires a thorough revision of the territorial-administrative organization of the state, with the principal argument being the demographic potential of the national space. Additionally, 39 villages are administratively included within cities, 914 villages hold commune status, and 660 villages are subordinate to communes [6]. The number of communes within each administrative unit is disproportionate relative to the number of localities. For example, the Hîncești district includes 38 villages, Orhei and Florești each have 37, Soroca – 34, while at the opposite end Basarabeasca has only 6 villages and Dubăsari – 11.

Rural–Urban Inequalities

Against the backdrop of a highly urbanized Europe, the Republic of Moldova entered the third millennium as the least urbanized Euro-

pean state. During the intercensal period, the rate of urban population averaged a decline of 1.0% per year, while the rural population decreased by an average annual rate of 0.13%, thereby widening the demographic gap between the two environments. Economic growth is largely a derivative of urban development, which tends to concentrate in specific zones or cities of the country. The central region—particularly the capital city remains the primary focus of this concentration. Currently, one in four inhabitants exhibits rural-to-urban mobility directed toward Chişinău. Demographic inequalities consequently generate regional disparities in income and socio-economic development. From a comparative perspective, demospatial and administrative disparities of this kind are present in most Central European states; however, what is particularly evident in Moldova is the disproportionately high number of territorial units relative to a population that is rapidly declining (*Table 3*).

Development disparities in European countries

Country	Territory, thousand km^2	Population, million inhabitants	Number of NUTS II Regions	Average area per region, thousand km^2	Average population per region, thousand inhabitants	GDP per Capita, % of the EU Average, EU-15 = 100		
						Aver.	Min.	Max.
EU Candidate Countries								
Bulgaria	110,9	8,5	6	18,5	1417	22	22	24
Czechia	79	10,3	8	9,9	1288	60	47	115
Estonia	45,2	1,5	5*	9,0	300	37	37	37
Latvia	64,5	2,5	5	12,9	500	31	31	31
Lithuania	65,2	3,7	5*	13,0	740	28	28	28
Poland	312,6	38,7	16	19,5	2419	36	26	53
Romania	238,4	22,5	8	29,8	2813	28	22	40
Slovenia	20,3	1,9	12	1,7	158	69	69	69
Slovakia	49	5,4	4	12,3	1350	49	39	99
Hungary	93	10	7	13,3	1429	49	33	72
Republic of Moldova	**33,8**	**3,6**	**12****	**2,82**	**300**	**10**	**6**	**21**

Source: Regional Development: The Republic of Moldova vis-à-vis the European Union

The Republic of Moldova is characterized by the lowest proportion of urban population (46.4% urban and 53.6% rural according to

the 2024 census), showing only a slight tendency toward increase in recent years. Compared with European countries, this share remains considerably lower. Contrary to global trends, Moldova exhibits a pattern of "ruralization" over short demographic intervals. The southern region has the lowest degree of urbanization—only 26%.

Settlement Categories and Demographic Inequality

Across the different categories of settlements, demographic inequalities are clearly evident. However, in none of the country's territorial-administrative units (with the exception of the municipality of Chișinău) does the urban population exceed 50% of the total. The highest level is recorded in the Bălți district—42%. When compared with the overall national level of urbanization, district centers display significant discrepancies. In most administrative units, rural populations remain dominant, while the urban population is concentrated in a single urban center the district seat.

The lowest share of urban population is observed in the central administrative area, where it constitutes only 24.3%. Of the 66 urban localities, 32 have fewer than 10,000 inhabitants, and 17 towns do not reach the national average population of a rural locality. Furthermore, five towns have fewer than 2,000 inhabitants, with the smallest being Bâcovăț (Strășeni) with only 1,313 residents.

Cities and villages in the Republic of Moldova—except for the municipality of Bălți—regardless of their economic or demographic potential (for example, Orhei with over 30,000 inhabitants, Bucovăț with fewer than 1,313 inhabitants, or the village of Frumoasa, Călărași district, with approximately 700 inhabitants) share the same administrative status, powers, and responsibilities. The municipalities of Chișinău and Bălți possess production factors and infrastructure elements that make them more capable of attracting investment compared to other localities [7].

Gender and Generational Inequalities in Evolution

The roots of gender inequality are demographic in nature, though the patterns of evolution differ across population groups. The gender ratio is a key criterion determining the demographic quality of a population or the broader national demographic framework. Gender equality constitutes a core dimension of human development, emphasizing that when development disregards gender aspects, it becomes inherently fragile.

Gender inequality is a primary concern in demography because it affects population reproduction, generational continuity, and balance, as well as the ways in which men and women interact with economic processes and demographic phenomena. Life expectancy and its evolution have reintroduced gender and generational discrepancies, which are also indirectly influenced by economic and social factors. These gender-based disparities have both biological and socio-economic origins. Biologically, they appear in sex ratio imbalances at birth (approximately 49 girls and 51 boys per 100 live births) and in differences in life expectancy (women live on average 5–7 years longer than men). Social and economic factors, which continue to evolve, amplify these disparities.

Age also has inverse proportional implications relative to gender: as age increases, gender imbalances become more pronounced. In demography, the intragenerational gender dimension is viewed positively from the standpoint of reproduction (youth and male population dominance), where the probability of new generation emergence is high. Conversely, the intergenerational gender dimension affects nuptiality, marriage age, and marital stability. Imbalances within these structures reduce the likelihood of reproduction, thereby weakening the long-term demographic sustainability of the national framework.

Gender and generational inequality give rise to social aggressiveness, particularly in underdeveloped countries—of which the Republic of Moldova is no exception. Male competition becomes especially pronounced during periods of socio-economic transition, when society undergoes a new redistribution of resources and hierarchical positions. The gap between the rich and the poor is expected to widen significantly at local (regional) as well as national levels. Demographic inequality generates economic inequality, and consequently, social inequality.

Population aging further amplifies gender and generational imbalances. While at birth a slight male predominance is observed, by adulthood (around age 20) there is only a brief and theoretical gender equilibrium. In older age groups, however, the female population dominates significantly — at age 70, there are approximately 6–7 men for every 10 women, with the gender gap widening progressively with age. In the 30–34 age group, there are 1,034 women per 1,000 men; in

the 50–54 age group, 1,155 women per 1,000 men; and in the 70–74 age group, 1,623 women per 1,000 men. Longevity is most frequently attained by women, while male overmortality remains high until old age. Thus, longevity increases demographic, gender, and both intergenerational and intragenerational disparities. Population aging disrupts demographic equilibrium by accentuating the proportion of elderly individuals, with pre-retirement and retirement generations becoming dominant in the national demographic structure. For example, at the 1939 census, the gender gap was only 0.8%, considered negligible. By 1959, the maximum recorded difference between sexes had risen to 7.6%. During the postwar period, this imbalance gradually decreased from 7.6% to 3.1%.

Generational inequality reflects the demographic transition from younger to older and numerically dominant cohorts. Demographic aging represents one of the most profound challenges—essentially a "physical crisis" of the population—leading to declining productive capacity, which in turn may generate intergenerational rivalry and conflict. The demographic share of children has fallen below 25% of the total population (while the optimal share is considered around 29%). As demographic aging advances, the share of elderly individuals increases, and over time, the proportion of the *"oldest-old"* continues to grow. Thus, demographic disproportionality is expected to deepen.

Gender structure disparities are also evident according to the environment of residence (urban versus rural). The urban population consistently exhibits a lower (attenuated) degree of gender imbalance compared to the rural population. The primary factor contributing to these differences is the excessive emigration of the working-age population. In urban areas, men tend to migrate more frequently due to the specific nature of economic activities—especially seasonal and industrial employment—which consequently reduces the urban–rural gender gap. Therefore, the gender balance in cities is partially maintained by the availability and attractiveness of industrial employment opportunities for men. However, this effect is observable primarily among younger age groups. *Rural areas*, in contrast, are characterized by a *feminized* population structure, largely due to the limited presence of young adults and the higher proportion of elderly inhabitants. Gender

disparities also vary over time. In 1959, gender disproportions were quite evident—9.6% in urban areas and 7.2% in rural areas. According to the 2024 census, women represent 52.9% of the total population, while men account for 47.1% nationally.

Gender asymmetry serves as a key factor underlying the gradual aging of the population. The share of young people declined from 29.8% to 21.2%, while the proportion of elderly people (aged 65 and above) increased from 6.3% to 7.7%, reaching 16% by 2024 confirming the demographic trend established during the latter half of the 20th century. At advanced ages, gender asymmetry becomes more pronounced due to the higher life expectancy observed in urban populations, which is typically 2–3 years greater than in rural areas. Consequently, the predominance of females remains significant in cities, a trend that is equally becoming evident across rural areas as well.

Life Expectancy Inequalities. Life expectancy is one of the fundamental indicators of population well-being and quality of life, reflecting in particular the general health status of the population. As a consistent demographic pattern, women's average life expectancy exceeds that of men by approximately 5–7 years. In 2014, life expectancy at birth in the Republic of Moldova was 74.8 years for women and 67.1 years for men. By 2024, overall life expectancy reached 72 years, with a gender gap of nearly 9 years, men continuing to experience shorter lifespans.[10] This disparity is largely attributed to the higher rates of premature mortality among men, particularly within the working-age population—only about 50% of men live beyond the age of 60. The differentiated mortality levels between urban and rural populations also generate variations in average life expectancy. On average, urban men live 3.6 years longer than their rural counterparts, while among women this difference reaches 3.8 years.

The demographic framework of the Republic of Moldova is fundamentally characterized by evident inequalities in life expectancy, which continue to evolve, as demonstrated by analyses of National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) data. The average life expectancy of the Moldovan population has shown a contradictory evolution—rising steadily until 1990, when it reached 70 years, followed by a decline to 67 years. According to 2011 data, life expectancy was estimated at 69.5 years,

[10] According to BNS (National Bureau of Statistics data).

with an increase of 0.2 years for men and 3.8 years for women. Over the past five years, life expectancy has increased by approximately 1.6 years for both genders. Life expectancy in the Republic of Moldova reveals multiple disparities—gender-based, intergenerational, and spatial (urban–rural). At present, the increase in life expectancy is slight and modest when compared with global indicators, positioning the country below the world average.

According to the CIA World Factbook (2012), the Republic of Moldova ranked 150th out of 220 countries and regions, while 30 countries recorded a life expectancy exceeding 80 years. Life expectancy is also correlated with the population income index, with rural populations experiencing lower income levels and, consequently, higher mortality at earlier ages. This is further compounded by unequal access to healthcare services [8]. Additionally, one of the most profound inequalities is reflected in life expectancy at retirement age: estimated at 4–5 years for men and 17–18 years for women—a demographic disparity of 4–5 times, which is significant in magnitude.

Retirement Age: A Systemic Gender Inequality

The retirement age represents a diminishing but persistent inequality, one that is systemically imposed and gender based. The current retirement framework in Moldova reflects a form of gender asymmetry, a phenomenon absent in earlier centuries but reinforced by the depth and pace of demographic aging. The national pension system perpetuates demographic and gender inequalities, limiting women's economic and social potential by mandating early retirement (at age 57), thereby excluding them from the labor market and diminishing their economic autonomy both within the family and in society. The system also imposes a shorter contribution period for women. Because of their reproductive role, women face systemic disadvantages, despite their higher life expectancy (74 years). This structure is a legacy of the Soviet administrative model, representing an outdated stereotype in which early retirement is framed as a form of protection but in practice restricts women's participation in productive and social spheres, including access to goods and services.

The inequality deepened further with the increase in the male retirement age to 62.5 years. This creates an artificial income gap—men continue to earn salaries while women receive pensions—producing

disparities both at the household and societal levels. In the long term, this contributes to a rapid devaluation of women's pensions. Within five years, the pension gap between men and women of the same generation exceeds 30%. Equalizing the retirement age for both genders would reduce inequality in both the medium and long term, ensuring proportional recognition of the demographic contributions made by successive generations of women. Moreover, pension indexation practices currently display a deep social and generational inequity, as the valuation of pensions fails to account for intergenerational fairness criteria.

The Social and Economic Impact of Demographic Inequalities

Gender inequality has direct and long-term implications for the national demographic framework. Population aging may become a factor that hinders economic growth, accentuates disparities in living standards, and contributes to demographic stagnation in the labor force, including its quantitative decline. Changes in the population's age structure inevitably transform the overall composition of social needs and affect multiple spheres of life—personal, familial, professional, economic, political, and cultural. Large waves of retirees can generate social tension, reversing the traditional social balance by age and reshaping intergenerational relationships. The public health situation acquires new contours, with chronic illnesses becoming more prevalent and the number of people with temporary or permanent disabilities increasing [9].

The unstable socio-economic situation, underdeveloped labor market, low wages and subsistence-level pensions, combined with opportunities for free movement, continue to stimulate external migration, producing negative socio-economic effects. These processes further distort the demographic structure and income distribution within the population.

Demographic inequality entails multiple negative consequences, such as the slowdown of welfare growth, reduced labor productivity, and overall economic stagnation. The increasing difficulty of maintaining pension fund stability, alongside the rising costs of sustaining these funds, amplifies the need for individuals to remain economically active for longer. However, the high cost of healthcare services severely limits older people's access to essential medical assistance, affecting

the population's overall health status. In practice, demographic aging is accompanied by higher morbidity among large elderly cohorts.

In the coming years, the trend of older individuals remaining in the workforce is expected to intensify, given their growing numbers. Consequently, younger generations—already representing a smaller share of the total population and labor market—will be unable to contribute sufficiently to the pension system. Population aging unfolds amid constant social change: family size decreases, intergenerational relations shift, and the need for elderly care becomes more pressing. Young families, including young adults, bear dual responsibilities—providing care for both parents and children. Thus, the burden on younger generations to support elderly relatives will continue to increase.

Furthermore, the labor market faces a dual challenge: on one hand, declining participation rates among the working-age population and the extension of employment into pre-retirement ages; on the other, rising demand for labor in specific sectors that cannot be met by an aging workforce. The reality is that elderly individuals, as well as those approaching old age, are saving less and spending more, particularly on healthcare and basic needs [10]. Many middle-aged individuals fail to adequately save for retirement, either underestimating or being unaware of the financial resources required to ensure a minimally comfortable old age. As a result, the share of the population aged 0–9 years has decreased by 8.4% overall (nearly halved), including a 7.6% decline in urban areas and an 8.2% decline in rural areas.

Resilience in Demographic Policy – a coherent approach to sustainable development

Depopulation and excessive emigration are eroding the demographic potential of the Republic of Moldova, thereby undermining long-term economic and social development. The country's societal systems remain inadequately aligned with coherent socio-demographic policies. Modernization requires a shift from policies that merely address vulnerabilities toward those that enhance the quality of social and demographic life, an essential condition for the country's alignment with the European Union. Demographic policy must focus directly on the family as a primary social unit, with both medium- and long-term impacts. The outcomes of demographic policies are cumulative and long-lasting; thus, the mechanisms that shape them must op-

erate continuously. In this sense, demographic resilience functions as both a response and an adaptive countereffect to demographic change.

The concept of demographic policy must be understood as a cultural, economic, social, and behavioral component of national development, aimed at improving both the quality of life and the quality of demographic processes. For Moldova, it is crucial to account for the consequences of population decline and demographic aging, as well as for the pressures these trends place on social and institutional systems. Demographic policy must address several interrelated demographic tendencies: the decline in total population, rapidly decreasing fertility rates, persistently high mortality, accelerated demographic aging, large-scale emigration of young people, territorial disparities in population distribution, and factors of economic, social, and geopolitical instability.

The concept of demographic policy on population reproduction should serve as an integral and forward-looking framework for addressing the challenges that affect the sustainability of human capital. Moldova has not yet developed such a concept in practice; instead, it has formally inherited the model from the Soviet period—a model primarily focused on extensive state support for the population. However, these methods and mechanisms are inadequate in the current socio-economic and moral-psychological context, which demands new, human-centered and quality-oriented values. Thus, this concept must be seen as a comprehensive framework of strategies, methods, and mechanisms for the sustainable development of human potential, viewed through the dual lens of socio-economic quality and demographic vitality. Human development constitutes the central objective of this concept, though its implementation must remain multidimensional and complex.

The framework should be grounded in the globally recognized strategy of family planning, which remains the most effective approach. At present, the most sustainable way to address and adapt to qualitative demographic challenges in reproduction is through the institution of the family. All actions in this domain should be guided by the following principles:

a) Recognition of population issues in relation to the environment, spatial distribution, and social development.

b) State legislation must be responsive to real demographic challenges.

c) The ability to formulate and implement coherent, evidence-based demographic policies capable of modifying or adapting to the ongoing demographic crisis of reproduction.

d) Shifting from a quantitative focus to a qualitative paradigm of population development;

e) Replacing the paternalistic state model with a model grounded in social responsibility and solidarity.

f) Protecting the right to have children equally with the right not to have children—families who wish to have a certain number of children should be supported in realizing this choice, without such measures serving merely as instruments to artificially raise fertility rates.

g) Reproductive policies should be directed toward mitigating the vulnerabilities faced by young families, especially during the childbearing and child-rearing stages.

Although certain progress has been made in increasing fertility and reducing child mortality in the Republic of Moldova—through improved healthcare for women of reproductive age, mothers, and children, as well as better socio-economic and environmental conditions—these issues cannot be solved solely through medical interventions. Such measures are necessary but insufficient. Effective solutions require coordinated and coherent action by both the Government and society across diverse fields, including the economy, social welfare, education, and environmental policy.

A fundamental element of reproductive policy is the maintenance of the fertility replacement level. This objective represents the primary stage in the implementation of family-oriented and pronatalist policies. Internationally, the Parity Progression Ratio the balance of the number of children per family is widely applied as a stabilizing element of reproduction, serving as an indispensable indicator for assessing the demographic realities of a national population framework.

At the family level, the concept of reproduction requires a restructuring of both policy measures and social values. As a European country, Moldova must transition from a focus on quantitative demographic indicators to qualitative demographic standards. Modernization demands a higher quality of human capital as an essential component of

global development strategies. Accordingly, opportunities available to the population depend on its qualitative characteristics, which makes the family the central institution in shaping demographic quality. The family embodies two fundamental dimensions of population quality: a) Demographic quality, achieved through reproduction; and b) Social quality, achieved through the education and upbringing of younger generations. These policies—referred to hereafter as family policies—form the core of welfare-state mechanisms associated with childbirth and childrearing. Such policies are often supported by a series of provisions incorporated within other social welfare frameworks. Examples include Childcare credits in pension systems; Free inclusion of children in public healthcare systems; Tax reductions for families with children; Free or subsidized public transport for families with children; and Housing subsidies for families raising children.

Secondly, family policies represent a mosaic of political and social objectives. The primary goal of implementing specific family policy measures has not always been solely related to childrearing. Objectives have also included reducing unemployment and poverty, addressing class or citizenship inequalities, counterbalancing population decline, mitigating labor shortages, and restructuring (or preserving) gender relations. Consequently, family policies often encompass inconsistent or even divergent goals [6].

Within this conceptual framework, it is necessary to determine the optimal family size for the country—both at the current stage of development and for the foreseeable future. Family size serves as the central mechanism within the broader concept of population reproduction. A unified policy framework should be promoted for both rural and urban populations; differentiated approaches would generate social inequality and potentially stimulate new demographic imbalances or speculative interpretations of population trends.

It is evident that the current generation enters marriage 4–5 years later on average than the previous generation. This delay is influenced by extended educational trajectories (the three-year upper secondary cycle, followed by two years of master's studies pursued by the majority of young adults), combined with the lack of stable income and housing opportunities. Consequently, the probability of having children is lower compared to that of their parents or earlier cohorts. Economic

difficulties—such as employment instability and housing shortages—lead many young families to postpone childbearing consciously. This reflects a characteristic pattern among the country's young reproductive-age population. Furthermore, declining trust in family life is evident, as confirmed by rising divorce rates and the growing tendency to delay or avoid formal marriage altogether. In earlier decades, young people traditionally married soon after completing university studies. Today, the situation has changed: due to limited material support from parents, young adults often postpone marriage until later stages of life. This delay has fostered the spread of cohabitation as an alternative to legal marriage, thereby reducing the likelihood of childbirth within formal family structures. Cohabitation has become a preferred arrangement among young people who either have never been married or view it as a flexible and non-binding partnership, even though it is rarely perceived as a durable social institution. A smaller share of couples includes partners who were previously married but choose to postpone childbearing for personal or economic reasons.

The main causes contributing to this trend include:

- Lack of mutual obligations between partners.
- Minimization of family responsibilities.
- Fear of an unsuccessful marriage [6].

It is increasingly necessary to integrate marriage and divorce dynamics into the framework of resilient demographic policies. Divorce exerts a strong indirect impact on reproduction, particularly because it often occurs at a young age, significantly reducing the likelihood of childbirth within subsequent marriages. Therefore, divorce and marriage trends must form part of a comprehensive system of demographic resilience measures. Collectively, these measures should strengthen family cohesion—not only during the reproductive phase but throughout the entire life course—and promote the upbringing of younger generations in complete family environments with both parents, thereby reinforcing family values and social stability.

The Ideal of Reproduction and the Foundations of Family Policy. For most generations within the reproductive age range, the ideal reproductive pattern is that of one child per family. This ideal currently characterizes a large share of Moldovan society—approximately 50% of families have only one child—across both urban populations and,

to an even greater extent, the rural majority. Minimal reproductive behavior is particularly embraced by younger generations, driven by fear of poverty, social insecurity, and the economic pressures imposed by the labor market and employment conditions.

At the family level, several key stages must be clearly addressed within the reproductive policy framework:

- Promoting the conviction throughout society that women hold an equal role to men, regardless of their reproductive function.
- Changing attitudes and behaviors regarding the roles of men and women in the family and in society, closing gaps in knowledge, eliminating gender stereotypes, and promoting the values of motherhood, fatherhood, and gender equality.
- Creating favorable conditions for reconciling family and professional life, ensuring gender equality in all dimensions of employment and care responsibilities.
- Promoting, at the national level, the model family structure of four people (2 + 2), where each adult replaces themselves demographically. Although such a natality model remains below the optimal replacement level, it helps educate future generations toward an awareness of self-replacement, which can become a reliable lever for addressing potential long-term demographic challenges.
- Supporting young families who decide to marry and establish households, through various state incentives that encourage marriage and family formation at demographically young ages.
- Ensuring that family policies reflect coherent approaches to fertility disparities [15].

Currently, it is crucial that demographic policy monitors the patterns and direction of social assimilation through the family institution. Family reunification migration should not exceed the number of returning nationals (repatriations), and such reunifications must be subordinated to the repatriation process. This principal forms one of the core political dimensions of family-level demographic policy.

The goals of **family resilience policy** must become far more ambitious, aiming to: Transform the population reproduction strategy; Modify individual reproductive behavior; Create a supportive environment for maternal employment. Policy measures should address both

direct childrearing expenses and alternative costs associated with delayed childbirth. Only such measures can reshape reproductive plans and long-term demographic perspectives. At the stage of the first birth, financial assistance is the most valuable incentive, whereas for the second birth, the state's guarantee of the mother's reintegration into the labor market—as well as securing her welfare, professional continuity, and pension contributions—becomes the most crucial form of support. The overarching motivation is that every mother should be confident that childbearing does not constitute a barrier to career advancement or professional realization [6]. These principles may serve as the initial pillars of demographic policies aimed at minimizing the demographic crisis amid declining human potential and diminishing demographic capacity.

The establishment of family policy—its principles, objectives, and instruments—depends on the underlying ideological framework and value system. Two primary models dominate in theory and practice, each with various national adaptations and hybrid forms:

a) *The Institutional (Redistributive) Model:* This model regards family policy as a major social domain that delivers universal services, operating outside the logic of the market and guided by the principle of social need. It is based on social equality and aims to extend state responsibility to all dimensions of civil life through the redistribution of resources.

b) *The Residual Model:* According to this approach, there are two "natural" or socially given mechanisms through which individual needs are met: the free market and the family. Only when these fail or collapse does the state or social institutions intervene. Social protection, in this context, targets marginalized families or those in acute need. This model aligns with the liberal ideology of market autonomy and self-reliance, if the nuclear family functions as a self-supporting unit dependent on market forces.

Comparative analyses from the table reveal that the institutional model demonstrates a more active role of the state in family policy compared to the residual model. However, in certain contexts, this activism has produced unintended or paradoxical effects, occasionally counteracting the intended social objectives. Some perspectives suggest that, in the redistributive model, social insurance mechanisms oc-

cupy the primary role, whereas in the residual model, social assistance predominates. *(Table 4).*

Family policy models

Residual Model (U.S.)	Institutional Model (Sweden)
Does not encourage women's participation in the labor market.	Actively promotes women's participation in the labor market.
Family allowances are granted only to very low-income households.	All employees receive family allowances adjusted by income level.
No job security during maternity leave.	Job security during maternity leave is guaranteed.
Taxes calculated at the family level.	Individual taxation ensures separate legal status.
Part-time workers lose major benefits (health insurance, leave days, salary).	Part-time workers receive equivalent protection and benefits as full-time workers.
Mothers interrupt careers to raise children.	Parental leave for both parents; developed public early-childhood care services.

From the comparative analysis, it becomes evident that institutional family policies exhibit a more active character than residual ones. In certain cases, however, this "activism" has generated perverse effects, contrary to the intended objectives. According to some perspectives, in the redistributive model, social insurance plays the dominant role, while in the residual system, social assistance occupies the central position.

In assessing different family policy frameworks and positioning them closer to one model or the other, the following evaluation criteria are typically considered:

- The balance between universalism and selectivity (i.e., programs targeting all families versus those specifically designed for families in difficult circumstances).
- The structure of family benefits, including distribution across family categories, the share of such benefits in the national product, and expenditure per capita.

- The fiscal mechanisms ensuring the resources for family policies, with emphasis on the proportion of public contributions, the share of individual and employer contributions, and the involvement of non-governmental organizations.
- The degree of gender equality, particularly regarding participation in professional activities.
- The taxation system and calculation of tax liabilities.
- The scope and accessibility of family-oriented social services, among other aspects.

At the socioeconomic level, the core objective reflected in the reproductive policy concept must be the promotion and encouragement of fully reproductive families. This goal should serve as a guiding principle at a time when the country faces depopulation, weakened reproductive capacity, genetic vulnerability, and deepening emigration.

In implementing demographic policy as part of broader social policy, the state may employ several resource mobilization mechanisms, including:

- Increasing taxes, pensions, and population contributions.
- Expanding state contributions through transfers from public funds and the activation of philanthropic and non-governmental organizations by economic incentives to enhance their role in social protection.
- Developing early childhood education services to enable women to return to the labor market at their preferred time.
- Raising the retirement age through equalization of contribution periods and retirement thresholds for men and women.
- Expanding youth-friendly infrastructure, such as nurseries, after-school programs, school meal services, and extended childcare options.
- Engaging associative groups and private organizations in financing social insurance schemes.

At the economic level, it is essential that the fiscal mechanism clearly define the age threshold below which young individuals are exempt from responsibilities related to marriage and reproduction. Additionally, priorities should be established for families with two or more children, following practices already implemented in Romania and other EU member states. In Russia, for instance, significant finan-

cial incentives are provided starting with the second child (approximately USD 10,000), whereas in Ukraine, the support is differentiated USD 2,400 for the first child, USD 5,000 for the second, and USD 10,000 for the third [18]. Nonetheless, these measures are often accompanied by underestimations and uncertainties.

A European-style approach to family support would base taxation and benefits not on the minimum wage, but rather on the subsistence minimum. Such a shift would bring Moldovan family policy closer to European social policy standards, offering comprehensive and equitable support for families with children. Across Europe, economic, social, and institutional measures supporting families with children are extremely diverse, reflecting each country's social development history, sociocultural traditions, policy-making styles, degree of decentralization, local governance capacity, and economic resources directed toward family welfare.

In the Republic of Moldova, paternal leave was introduced only recently, on 27 May 2016. According to the legal framework, this leave lasts 14 calendar days and is granted to employed fathers upon written requests within 56 days following the child's birth. During this period, the employee receives a paternity allowance paid from the state social insurance budget. The allowance equals 100% of the insured average monthly income earned at the main place of employment during the three months preceding the child's birth, calculated based on income subject to social insurance contributions. Although the duration of paternity leave remains relatively short, it nonetheless represents a significant step forward toward greater paternal involvement in childcare and promoting gender equality in family life. It strengthens the presence and participation of fathers in raising the younger generation. To further consolidate this direction, it would be appropriate to implement a National Birth Partnership Program, designed to encourage shared parental responsibility and enhance the social value of fatherhood within Moldovan society.

Childcare leave in the Republic of Moldova is granted to insured individuals until the child reaches the age of three, and to uninsured individuals until the age of two. Paid childcare leave may be taken in full or in part until the child turns three years old, and this period is counted toward employment seniority and pension records. Mothers

are also entitled to unpaid childcare leave until the child reaches six years of age, during which their employment position is retained. The period of unpaid leave is included in total work experience, including special service tenure, provided that the individual employment contract was not suspended at the employee's own initiative. However, a form of inequality persists although these years are credited toward pension contributions, the reproductive function of women yields no corresponding social dividends, and the disparities are even greater in cases of premature births. Additional benefits are granted to families with two or more children under the age of 14, such as: four additional days of annual leave, the right to unpaid two-week leave per year, and a guaranteed right to summer leave.

Childcare leave may also be taken by the father or other relatives, in which case it is referred to as parental leave. In Moldova, as in other countries (e.g., the Czech Republic, Germany, Spain, France, Poland, Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, etc.), parental leave is among the longest in Europe—three years. By comparison, in Finland, parental leave lasts four months, and in Italy, six months. In contrast, the financial compensation for parental leave in Moldova is significantly lower. In 2016, the average monthly childcare allowance for insured individuals was 30% of the average income earned during the previous 12 months, provided that the mother either did not work or worked part-time, including from home. The calculation base, however, cannot exceed five times the forecasted average monthly salary for the corresponding year. For uninsured women, the monthly childcare allowance is 540 lei.

Currently, parents are not offered flexibility in choosing the duration of their childcare leave (for example, 1 year or 2 years). Ideally, parents should have the option to select:

- One year at 85% of salary (with a high maximum threshold).
- Two years — the first at 60%, the second at 30%, with the third year unpaid.
- Three years at 30% of salary.

Such options would support faster reintegration into the labor market. Excessively long leaves tend to weaken family income and reduce professional continuity, while uncertainty persists for young families regarding the availability of childcare facilities and nurseries when children are not yet fully independent.

Another factor influencing parents' (especially mothers') decisions to take, shorten, or postpone childcare leave relates to education level, fear of professional regression, loss of position, incomplete studies, or employment discrimination, both during hiring and employment retention. Thus, long-term childcare leave diminishes not only income but also career advancement opportunities, a disadvantage observed equally in the Moldovan context.

Family policy in Moldova has not yet fully succeeded in reconciling family life with professional activity, an equilibrium essential for both well-being and fertility growth. Women's participation in the labor market does not inherently hinder fertility; however, economic pressures often compel them to prioritize financial security. Family policy has so far failed to optimally balance paid employment and unpaid domestic work. As noted by J. V. Cernov, resolving this imbalance requires a three-level approach: The state policy level, through family and employment measures; The corporate level, where enterprises adopt family-friendly policies; The household level, where individual strategies are developed to harmonize work and family responsibilities [10, pp. 297–298].

At the national level, promoting the "2 + 2 family model"—two parents and two children, where each individual reproduces themselves—serves as an educational benchmark. Although this format does not fully address demographic challenges, it helps instill self-replacement reproductive norms in future generations, contributing to demographic sustainability. In demographic terms, for stable generational replacement, families with three children should represent at least 50% of the total. Demographic policy must therefore aim to compensate for maternal and emerging male infertility, both of which increasingly affect reproductive outcomes. In Moldova, maternal infertility has risen from 8% to 16%, significantly influencing family reproduction dynamics. Consequently, the new demographic policy must explicitly prioritize and support three-child families as a cornerstone of demographic resilience.

The overarching goals of family policy must be more ambitious, focusing on:

- Transforming reproductive strategies,
- Modifying individual reproductive behavior, and
- Creating a supportive environment for mothers' employment.

Policy measures should cover both direct childrearing costs and indirect opportunity costs (such as delayed births). While financial support is most valuable for the first child, for the second child, job security and state-backed reintegration into the labor market are even more critical. Every mother should have the assurance that childbirth is not a barrier to career advancement or professional development.

To enhance the effectiveness of pronatalist policies, innovative measures are necessary. One option—applied successfully in France—is to link the family head's salary to the number and age of children, complemented by benefits such as childcare services, maternal schools, subsidized housing, and paid family vacations.

Developing a private kindergarten infrastructure represents both a business opportunity and a social solution to meet rising demand for high-quality early childhood education. Additionally, establishing non-commercial family-based daycare centers (serving 10–15 children in adjacent residential spaces) would provide an effective community-level alternative to public childcare, diversifying support options for young families.

The mathematics of demographic construction leaves no room for conjecture: without a recovery in birth rates, the demographic decline that has persisted for over three decades will inevitably deepen through its own internal dynamics. This process will acquire dramatic proportions as the small generations born after 1989 reach reproductive age. A revival of fertility will no longer be able to stop the demographic decline entirely, yet it can significantly slow its pace and reduce its magnitude.

Intergenerational policies implications

The national demographic framework is in a continuous modeling under the action of internal demographic and socio-economic factors that amplify new demographic qualities of the entire system adapted to current requirements. Generationally, the population has undergone profound changes, both in terms of the number of generations, and the modeling of each generation, the priorities and demographic standards embraced by the generations in reproduction. Deep information gaps leave imprints of uncertainty in decision-making, the use of new resources and evidence for the sustainability of the demographic framework.

The current study eloquently indicates that populations have the resources to adapt to new realities, but these have not always been part of support in demographic policies. Achieving the demographic balance is possible through the generational and individual dimensional training. Every member of society from a generational position can contribute and receive support, care, and comfort for life. As a finality of this study, we establish the following from GGS survey:

- In Moldovan families persist intergenerationally support each other members which can serve as a dividend of intergenerational support demographic policies.
- Late marriages in the case of young people omit the favor of support for childcare assistance from parents (grandparents).
- The GGS study confirms that, between generations of families, there is the ambiance of mutual support in the life cycle.
- It is appropriate that family intergenerational relationships be integrated into demographic policies to give consistency to family and family reproduction.
- The quality and level of satisfaction of intergenerational relations is appreciated as a good one.

Some general policy criteria: Intergenerational learning (IL) is the place where people of all ages can learn together, as well as from each other, traditionally common in families, where knowledge is shared over generations. More recently, however, it is seen as being facilitated by larger social groups outside the family circle. It works well to combat stereotypes, such as age discrimination (targeting young and old), and can help address demographic change and lifelong solidarity, social cohesion, intercultural dialogue (foster dialogue, exchange of values, between local and new citizens, young and old), breaking down barriers and working towards an intergenerational world. As mechanisms are also: national education focused on the traditions of society for the transfer of values and helps, societal dynamics – part of lifelong learning, lifelong active citizenship.

- Policies related to families with children must take on new dimensions for the perspective period, with the intergenerational dimension and be part of social development strategies. Currently, in the Republic of Moldova there are several benefits for families with children, these being focused mainly on young children, lacking the

holistic multi-sectoral vision of providing intergenerational support through the family.

The GGS study confirms that there are wide possibilities to model, influence the reproduction of young families through generational support to achieve the sustainability of reproduction both by family and by generation, which is crucial in moderating major demographic problems of the national demographic framework. The integration of mutual aid in family policies is a dimension that can bring evidence from the demographic and European perspective of the country, it will ensure a new intergenerational quality in the family.

- The eloquent GGS study shows that it is crucial to develop measures of demographic policies to support young people in their intentions (but also their indecision which are for economic reasons) for family affirmation. Demographic policies must give them confidence and certainty that the family is the basic shield against all the risks of the stage through which the generation enters reproduction. Demographic policies, measures and their mechanisms must induce the approach of the age of lasting marriage. The transfer, its modeling through consistent mechanisms induces the solution of the probability of sustainable reproduction of young families (to be decided for 2 children) and additionally, the capitalization of the generational support that their parents can offer to young families. The late marriage age of generations of young families is a basic factor shattering the reproductive expectations for parents and the expectations of grandparents to have grandchildren. This measure would foreshadow medium-term population policies.
- Another valuable element is that in family policies to move from social security policies to family social insurance policies. Social insurance is a mechanism for reducing the risks faced by young families during the reproduction stage, and the care for their children that can be achieved through the support of grandparents (their parents). As this support lasts, the implications of fiscal policies and labour legislation would provide coverage for those involved.

The greatest demand in care, services, protection – young families with children feel it at the age of 0-3 years, 6-7 years, 7-11 years. At the age of 3 the barrier is the fact that children are not yet self-employed and are not accepted for institutionalization in nurseries and kinder-

gartens, and at the age of 6-11 years extended school hours and the need for non-supervision at home while at the work. In the realities of the Republic of Moldova, the Community Centers for Early Development of 3-(6)-7 – year-old Children have solved the problem only partially, but the expectations of young families leave a demand for quality in their activity.

- Intergenerational solidarity and the alignment of the infrastructure of health and care systems to the needs of the older population (diseases), the innovative development of capacities in systems and services adapted for advanced aging with good health conditions and combating loneliness in old age.
- Policies must develop a wide spectrum of services adapted to the needs of the older population with priority for the rural population: easy access to common mobile phone services for all family members who have older people; reduced prices for cable television services for the categories of rural and urban older families, which are the basic source of information in lonely life; adaptation of urban and rural infrastructure to the massiveness and depth of reduced mobility of the aging.

Another reality is that, in urban regions, cases can often be registered when there are 38 and 40 children in a group, as well as in the primary classes. An overload of the number of children, especially in preschool institutions, leads to an increased frequency of illnesses in children, respectively to a higher number of unpaid leave among parents (often taken by mothers with children aged 3–6 years, thus, income reduced parenting, increased drug spending, and reduced quality of preschool education in general.

Resilience in Policies Addressing Demographic Ageing

The Republic of Moldova has reached the end of its demographic dividend stemming from the high fertility rates of previous decades and now faces a limited opportunity to harness the human potential of the post-retirement population for supporting economic development. The prosperity of developed societies is largely determined by the employment rate among the elderly, which in advanced economies reaches approximately 50 percent. Moldova, by contrast, continues to exhibit low participation of the older population in the labor force and an outdated pension framework that hinders social resilience. It

is time to reconsider the principle of universality in the pension system and move toward a multi-pillar structure that combines public, occupational, and private components. The transition from a collective to an individual society must be reflected in modern social protection policies. For more than three decades, pensions in Moldova have remained a form of "poverty compensation" rather than a reflection of a lifetime of contribution. Roughly half of agricultural pensioners receive pensions below the national average, revealing deep inequalities. Moreover, elite pensions, which exceed the average wage by several multiples, perpetuate systemic injustice. Family support policies are insufficient to ensure the replacement level of reproduction, and women remain disproportionately disadvantaged—often facing old-age poverty despite lifelong child-rearing contributions. The child-care period between ages 3 and 6 is not included in pension contribution years, further accentuating gender inequality. The decline of the family unit amplifies demographic transformations with long-term negative effects, while reconciliation of family and professional life remains an untapped mechanism for generating future demographic dividends. The pension system continues to exhibit generational and gender-based discrimination. The new pension law has failed to achieve equity between older and newer retirees. Regular indexation of pensions is essential, particularly during periods of high inflation, as currency depreciation severely undermines the real value of pensions. A sustainable system must ensure that the average pension exceeds the subsistence minimum, thereby motivating continued contribution to the pension fund. Currently, Moldova's replacement rate—the ratio of average pension to average wage—is among the lowest in Europe (27–29%).

A resilient pension system must be adequate, robust, accessible, sustainable, and socially centered—promoting solidarity while preventing marginalization and exclusion.

Principles of a Resilient Pension Policy

✓ "You receive as you worked" – benefits should directly reflect years and levels of contribution.

✓ Pension entitlements must include post-retirement work contributions, with proportional increases for each additional year worked.

✓ The system should shift from universal generosity to targeted social security, ensuring fairness.

✓ The "clean-up" of merit-based or privileged pensions must align with the European "pay-as-you-go" model, eliminating excessive disparities.

✓ Promotion of active and healthy aging, enabling older adults with adequate health to remain economically and socially active.

✓ Late-life education and lifelong learning should be embedded in active aging strategies.

✓ The third pension pillar (voluntary private savings) must be urgently implemented to diversify financial sustainability.

Across European states, gradual increases in the retirement age have become a normal and necessary adjustment to demographic realities. However, unlike in the EU, where most individuals survive well beyond retirement and enjoy longer pension periods, Moldovans experience shorter post-retirement lifespans. Therefore, setting the average retirement age at 63 must be accompanied by careful evaluation to prevent intergenerational disparities. Longevity improvements have not kept pace with the extension of working years, producing inequitable burdens across generations. Raising the retirement age has multiple implications:

- It narrows the gap between pensions and wages.
- It offsets labor shortages, supporting productivity and economic growth.
- It reduces fiscal pressure on active workers and the state budget.

However, without parallel wage reform and pension recalibration, this measure may backfire—prompting skilled labor migration and informal employment. The ratio between contribution and benefit years should approximate 1:3—one year of pension for three years of contribution—while the expected duration of pension receipt should not fall below 12–15 years per individual.

Territorial-Administrative resilience: a demographic context

Territorial-administrative reform should not be viewed as a dismantling of human settlements, but rather as a solution to local population challenges. Moldova's network of 55 urban settlements appears geographically balanced, yet this alone does not guarantee sustain-

able rural development. The administrative organization of the past has heavily influenced urbanization patterns, favoring district centers, particularly those that previously served as county capitals.

Several arguments support the necessity and implementation of territorial-administrative reform: Excessive fragmentation: Moldova's 32 districts are far too numerous for a country of 33,800 km^2 and 2.4 million inhabitants (2024). This fragmentation complicates governance, inflates administrative costs, and reduces service efficiency for citizens. Regional optimization: The creation of 5–6 larger regions would enable decentralized fiscal and social decision-making, strengthen local democracy and improve resource allocation. Rural vitality and equity: To prevent rural depopulation following the consolidation of administrative units, residents of dissolved communes must be guaranteed minimum living conditions, following the model successfully applied in Latvia. Cross-border cooperation: Regionalization would enhance cross-border partnerships with EU countries, a key priority in the EU's cohesion strategy. This approach would also stimulate development in Moldova's border peripheries and align national administrative structures with European regional models.

Historically, Moldovan cities emerged as agro-industrial and administrative centers. Today, industrial functions have declined in importance, while administrative and service roles prevail. As district centers, cities must now allocate sufficient financial and administrative resources to meet the infrastructure and service needs of their surrounding rural populations—ensuring that regional governance remains inclusive, efficient, and demographically resilient.

The Geodemographic Context of the Administrative-Territorial Structure. According to European standards, the Republic of Moldova is a small country geographically, with a total area of 33.8 thousand km^2 and a population of approximately 2,512,800 inhabitants (2021), including the left bank of the Dniester estimated at about 365 thousand inhabitants (6.7%). Despite its modest size, Moldova maintains a relatively high population density—121.9 inhabitants per km^2 (with Strășeni District recording the highest at 131 inhabitants per km^2). At the same time, Moldova remains a predominantly rural country, with the highest rural population share in Europe (53.7%). The average rural population density is 68.6 people per km^2, higher than in neigh-

boring Romania and Ukraine. The Central Region registers the highest rural density (85 inhabitants per km^2), followed by the Northern Region. Administrative units surrounding Chișinău—such as Ialoveni, Anenii Noi, Criuleni, Strășeni, Călărași, and Nisporeni—exceed 85 inhabitants per km^2. These densely populated rural areas are a legacy of the Soviet era. Depopulation has since disproportionately affected the northern and southern extremes of the country. The rural habitat has undergone major changes, both during the Soviet period and under democratic administrations, as the functional linkage between rural and urban environments has been continuously challenged. The average agricultural land per rural inhabitant is 1.08 hectares, being highest in the left-bank districts (1.7 ha/person) and in the Northern Region (1.17 ha/person). The spatial distribution of rural settlements is polarized: there are 5–6 villages per 100 km^2, varying from 1.5 in Gagauzia, 2.5 in Ștefan Vodă, to 6.9 in Fălești. Hence, the unequal distribution of settlements ranges from large, sparsely distributed villages (especially in the center and south) to numerous small settlements in the north. This inequality represents a key issue for territorial-administrative policy modeling, which has been insufficiently addressed in previous reform proposals.

The number of villages within a commune is an early indicator of demographic vulnerability, threatening the vitality of rural spaces. The phenomenon of depopulation places both villages and communes in an unequal position, undermining social cohesion, economic growth, and the sustainable use of natural and human resources. It is often difficult to demographically distinguish communes from villages, as face similar population trends. According to the dictionary definition, a commune is "an administrative unit composed of one or more villages, led by a communal council", with a typical population of around 3,000 inhabitants. By contrast, a village is simply a rural settlement within a commune, while a hamlet refers to a smaller, often scattered rural cluster that does not form a separate administrative unit. Depopulation has particularly affected small villages and hamlets, which are growing in relative number, but shrinking in population. Demographic inequalities are not always reflected in settlement categories—for instance, Chetrosu commune (1,974 inhabitants) and Todirești (1,843 inhabitants) have negligible demographic differenc-

es. However, inequalities arise from socioeconomic capacity, resource distribution, and development priority, which in turn reinforce demographic disparities. The absorption of smaller villages by larger communes—though inevitably creates uneven spatial distribution and new demographic challenges. Consequently, both villages and communes face inequality of coexistence, which undermines local development and population stability.

Some communes now have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, calling into question their very administrative status due to the lack of a demographic base. Conversely, rural localities with "village" status are often administratively subordinated, facing systemic demographic discrimination. Small and medium-sized towns are undergoing a process of de-urbanization and ruralization, losing their economic and social vitality. As a result, Moldova is losing its regional development centers. With few exceptions, no small or medium town possesses the minimal conditions required to attract population or stimulate regional development. Economic concentration has deepened dependence on the capital, Chișinău, widening the center-periphery gap, a phenomenon intensified by market liberalization and the weakening of state regulatory functions. While the overall territorial distribution of settlements appears balanced, their functional structure is excessively polarized around Chișinău. Today, small towns resemble large villages, often with populations of only 4–6 thousand inhabitants (e.g., Cupcini). Many large rural localities are found in peri-urban zones, particularly near Chișinău, some of which have been recently absorbed by the municipality. Small towns have been subordinated to district authorities, losing administrative autonomy, and many of their functions have been transferred to district councils. Thus, de-urbanization reflects the neglect of regional development policies, which marginalize rural citizens' access to public services, both in terms of diversity and quality. In this context, the functional equivalence between small urban and large rural settlements—for example, Bucovăț and other localities of similar size—illustrates their mutual inequality. These communities lack local economic dynamism, which severely limits their capacity for sustainable development.

A fundamental feature of the northern rural habitat is the prevalence of numerous small and very small rural settlements. This catego-

ry includes localities with populations of up to 200 inhabitants. There are 107 such villages, representing 20% of all rural settlements. At the same time, 22 localities have fewer than 25 residents. Among the 295 commune centers (communal seats), there are only 20 small urban settlements (with populations under 20,000), with the city of Bălți being the sole exception.

The average population size of a local government unit (municipality) varies greatly across the world. For example:

- Korea – 220,000 inhabitants per municipality.
- United Kingdom – 155,800.
- Japan – 74,200.

Within Europe, the ranking is led by:

- Denmark – 56,200.
- The Netherlands – 41,100.
- Greece – 34,900.

The OECD average is 9,100 inhabitants, and the EU average is 5,600.

In Romania, the figure is 6,200, while at the bottom of the ranking are Moldova – 2,800, Slovakia – 1,800, France – 1,700, and the Czech Republic – 1,600 inhabitants per local government unit. In Moldova, 94% of all local public administrations (mayoralties) are rural. In 1995, the average size of a rural mayoralty was 2,490 inhabitants. In 1999, during the transition to the county-based system (which reduced the total number of local administrations), the average locality had 3,490 inhabitants. Following the administrative counter-reform of 2003, the average fell to 2,250 residents. At present, a rural municipality in Moldova has an average of 1,700 inhabitants—half the size recorded 20 years ago.

According to current legislation in the Republic of Moldova, a mayoralty (commune) may be established if the locality has a population greater than 1,500 inhabitants. Only in exceptional cases may a commune be created with fewer than 1,500 residents.

However, in practice, what was once an exception has become the norm: a significant number of communes are now established below this demographic threshold.

In 2015, there were:

- 361 mayoralties with fewer than 1,500 inhabitants,
- 353 with populations between 1,500–3,000,

- 158 with 3,000–10,000, and
- 26 with over 10,000 inhabitants.

By 2023, the figures had evolved as follows:

- 469 mayoralties with fewer than 1,500 residents,
- 300 between 1,500–3,000,
- 106 between 3,000–10,000, and
- 23 with over 10,000 inhabitants.

Moreover, 50 localities had populations of fewer than 50 people (2014 Census). In total, the Republic of Moldova has 916 communes (former rural soviets), of which 845 are located on the territory controlled by Chișinău, and 69 are situated on the left bank of the Dniester (Transnistria). Out of the total number of communes, 411 consists of multiple villages (375 between the Prut and Dniester Rivers, and 36 in Transnistria), while the remainder comprise a single settlement.

The share of urban population per administrative unit in the Republic of Moldova is only 22.7%. The lowest levels are recorded in Cantemir (8.6%), Ștefan Vodă (11.2%), and Criuleni (11.3%). At the opposite end of the spectrum, Taraclia (47.7%), Basarabeasca (39.8%), and Soroca (37.7%) register the highest urban shares. This disproportion underestimates the potential and functional role of towns and district centers as poles for providing services to the surrounding rural territories. According to the 2014 Population Census, the smallest district by population is Basarabeasca, with only 23,012 inhabitants. Other sparsely populated districts include Dubăsari (29,271), Șoldănești (36,743), Taraclia (37,357; down from over 43,000 in 2004), and Dondușeni (37,856). In contrast, the most populous districts are Cahul (105,324), Hîncești (103,784), Orhei (101,502), Ungheni (101,064), and Ialoveni (93,151).

Top 10 Rural Localities (2014 Census):

- Congaz, ATU Gagauzia – over 12,000 inhabitants
- Costești, Ialoveni – 11,000 inhabitants
- Cărpineni, Hîncești – 10,000 inhabitants
- Copceac, Comrat – 9,500 inhabitants
- Baurci, Comrat – 8,700 inhabitants
- Băcioi, Chișinău – 8,600 inhabitants
- Corjeuți, Briceni – 7,500 inhabitants
- Trușeni, Chișinău – 7,500 inhabitants
- Pelinia, Drochia – 7,500 inhabitants
- Peresecina, Orhei – 7,300 inhabitants

Recent estimates by the National Bureau of Statistics show that over 40% of the national population resides in just five administrative-territorial units: the municipalities of Chișinău and Bălți, the Gagauz Autonomous Region, and the districts of Ungheni and Cahul.

Statistical data indicate that approximately one-third of Moldova's population spends an average of 1.1 hours daily commuting to and from work, while over one-quarter spend around 50 minutes per day traveling for shopping or services. The average daily travel time in Moldova is comparable to that of other European states[11] 12. Proximity to the Chişinău metropolitan area provides clear socio-economic advantages to the central rural regions, while northern and southern rural zones remain structurally disadvantaged. An analysis of primary socio-economic indicators reveals a decline in the traditional prosperity of the northern districts, driven both by demographic factors (notably depopulation and rapid aging) and geographical distance from Chişinău. Currently, the six cities formally designated as growth poles—Cahul, Comrat, Orhei, Ungheni, Soroca, and Edineţ—face development constraints and do not meet even the minimum legal criteria defining a municipality. For instance, in Cahul and Ungheni, the share of asphalted roads is below 35%, far short of the minimum 60% required by law for urban classification. Except for Orhei, none of these municipalities operate a reliable urban public transport system, undermining the rural–urban service distribution network.

The average population size of a second-level administrative-territorial unit (ATU II) is 74,200 inhabitants, with the largest being: Gagauzia (151,000), Cahul (116,700), Orhei (112,000), Hînceşti (115,500), and Ungheni (106,400). By contrast, the least populated districts include: Basarabeasca (27,200), Dubăsari (35,700), Şoldăneşti (38,400), and Taraclia (39,000) — comparable to the populations of several urban district centers such as Cahul, Ungheni, or Soroca. The average area of an ATU II is 890 km^2, ranging from Cahul (1,545 km^2) — the largest, 5.2 times bigger than Basarabeasca (290 km^2) — the smallest. [5]

Within mayoralties, the ratio of population per administrative employee varies substantially — from 74 inhabitants per employee (minimum) to 1,904 (maximum). In nearly 43% of mayoralties, this ratio falls between 201–400 inhabitants per employee, while 23% have between 401–600 inhabitants per employee, reflecting significant disparities in workload and administrative capacity. To establish a new administrative-territorial unit, the following criteria are necessary:

[11] *https://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/Raport_Habitat_III__ro.pdf*

- a minimum population of 5,000 residents,
- road connections linking all constituent settlements,
- a maximum distance of 25–30 km from the center to the farthest village, and
- the capacity to finance at least 12 employees (the current national average being 5.3 employees per mayoralty).

Administrative-territorial reform and rural accessibility are measured by the geographical distance to the nearest town, a key social and economic indicator. Transport services are often nonexistent in low-density rural areas, where long distances and poor road conditions make them unprofitable, further complicating administrative optimization.

Additionally, many small towns (district centers) are unable to provide the full range of services required by surrounding rural populations, and such gaps persist across large parts of the country. Empirical evidence shows that economic growth periods tend to coincide with widening inequalities, while demographic disparities further exacerbate them. Development and innovation strategies must therefore integrate demographic factors, encompassing both quantitative characteristics and the qualitative potential of the population. Demographic disproportions have become so pronounced that they now threaten the sustainable demographic balance, affecting not only population distribution but also roader socio-economic processes. These inequalities are largely structural deficiencies of the administrative-territorial system, posing risks to long-term development.

Mechanisms for Structural and Administrative Policy Design:

1. *Local Development Strategies.* Instruments such as Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) should be further developed and adopted by local or regional authorities to strengthen territorial planning capacities.
2. *Amalgamation of Localities.* The first stage — voluntary amalgamation — has shown limited results. Across the EU, all countries ultimately transitioned to centrally planned, mandatory reorganization. There is a real risk that voluntary mergers may follow partisan political preferences, leading to inefficient entities with limited administrative capacity to provide services.[12] The second

[12] https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/md/Raport-privind-optiunile-de-reforma-administrativ-teritoriala-a-Republicii-Moldova_24

stage — normative amalgamation — involves centrally directed consolidation, establishing a new administrative map and corresponding competences.

3. *Intercommunal Cooperation.* In search of optimal administrative scales and efficient service delivery, European local governments have undergone continuous transformations through amalgamations (e.g., Denmark in 2007, Latvia in 2009) or via inter-municipal cooperation mechanisms (as in France and other EU states).

Promoting inter-municipal cooperation and participatory mechanisms enhances local governance capacities and enables communities to address their needs autonomously, without excessive reliance on central authorities.

Administrative-territorial reform represents a crucial step toward achieving a more efficient and sustainable management of public resources and services. It is essential to establish both political and community consensus to ensure successful implementation of this process. The creation of adequately sized administrative-territorial units will contribute to the provision of higher-quality public services, resulting in improved individual and collective well-being, enhanced social comfort, and reduced administrative costs. Both rural and urban communities must demonstrate a firm commitment to accepting and supporting this reform by actively participating in its implementation. Only through close cooperation and shared commitment can the objective of establishing an administrative system that effectively responds to the current needs of citizens be achieved.

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CHAPTER 3.

ÎN CĂUTAREA ECHILIBRULUI: STRATEGII DE REZILIENȚĂ ÎN FAȚA AMENINȚĂRILOR LA ADRESA SECURITĂȚII. STUDIU DE CAZ PRIVIND ALEGERILE PREZIDENȚIALE DIN ROMÂNIA

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https://doi.org/10.59295/sdcri2025.03

Rezumat: *Prezenta lucrare examinează alegerile prezidențiale din România din perioada 2024–2025 ca un test critic de presiune pentru reziliența pentru reziliența și legitimitatea instituțiilor democratice, în contextul amenințărilor hibride, al mobilizării populiste și al polarizării sociale profunde. Anularea fără precedent a primului tur de scrutin de către Curtea Constituțională — prezentată ca o măsură de protejare a integrității electorale — a scos la iveală atât potențialul, cât și limitele democrației militante, ridicând întrebări fundamentale privind echilibrul dintre intervenția protectoare și încrederea publică.*

Prin integrarea unui cadru analitic multidimensional, care combină dimensiunile instituțională, simbolică și civică ale rezilienței, articolul urmărește modul în care populismul amplificat algoritmic, excepționalismul judiciar și clivajele politice adânc înrădăcinate au convers pentru a pune la încercare stabilitatea ordinii democratice din România.

O secțiune aparte dedicată analizează „fenomenul Georgescu" ca exemplu ilustrativ de populism hibrid, ce combină narațiuni etno-naționaliste, spiritualism New Age și retorică anti-elitistă, reușind să mobilizeze un electorat eterogen, dezamăgit de politica tradițională. Perspectivele comparative din Republica Moldova – confruntată cu o influență rusă persistentă și implementând reforme direcționate spre transparența electorală, independența instituțională și combaterea dezinformării — demonstrează că strategiile de reziliență nu sunt niciodată definitive, ci necesită o adaptare continuă la amenințări în evoluție. Paralele cu Austria, Ucraina și Bulgaria consolidează relevanța europeană mai largă a acestor constatări.

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Studiul conchide că reziliența democratică nu poate fi redusă la o simplă rezistență procedurală. Ea trebuie înțeleasă ca un proces continuu de recalibrare normativă, adaptabilitate instituțională și refacere simbolică, susținut de guvernanță transparentă, participare civică și un ethos constituțional reînnoit. Criza electorală din România este astfel interpretată nu ca o anomalie izolată, ci ca un moment limită care oferă, deopotrivă, un avertisment privind fragilitatea legitimității și o oportunitate pentru reînnoirea democratică.
Cuvinte cheie: *reziliență democratică, integritate electorală, populism, amenințări hibride, legitimitate politică.*

IN SEARCH OF BALANCE: REZILIENCE STRATEGIES TO SECURITY THREATS. A CASE STUDY OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN ROMANIA

Abstract: *This study examines the 2024–2025 Romanian presidential elections as a critical stress test for the resilience and legitimacy of democratic institutions in the context of hybrid threats, populist mobilization, and deep societal polarization. The unprecedented annulment of the first round by the Constitutional Court—framed as a safeguard of electoral integrity—exposed both the potential and the limits of militant democracy, raising fundamental questions about the balance between protective intervention and public trust. By integrating a multidimensional analytical framework that combines institutional, symbolic, and civic dimensions of resilience, the article traces how algorithmically amplified populism, judicial exceptionalism, and entrenched political cleavages converged to challenge the stability of Romania's democratic order.*

A dedicated section analyses the "Georgescu phenomenon" as an illustrative case of hybrid populism, combining ethno-nationalist narratives, New Age spiritualism, and anti-elitist rhetoric to mobilize a heterogeneous electorate disillusioned with mainstream politics. Comparative insights from the Republic of Moldova, facing sustained Russian influence and implementing targeted reforms in electoral transparency, institutional independence, and counter-disinformation strategies, demonstrate that resilience strategies are never definitive, but require

constant adaptation to evolving threats. Parallels with Austria, Ukraine, and Bulgaria reinforce the broader European relevance of these findings.

The study concludes that democratic resilience cannot be reduced to procedural endurance. It must be understood as an ongoing process of normative recalibration, institutional adaptability, and symbolic repair, sustained by transparent governance, civic participation, and a renewed constitutional ethos. Romania's electoral crisis is thus framed not as an isolated anomaly, but as a liminal moment offering both a warning of legitimacy's fragility and an opportunity for democratic renewal.

Keywords: democratic resilience, electoral integrity, populism, hybrid threats, political legitimacy.

Introduction

In recent years, democratic systems have been increasingly exposed to hybrid threats that blur the boundaries between internal dissent and external manipulation, making resilience not a mere stereotype but an essential requirement in the face of growing and diverse threats. Electoral processes, long considered the hallmark of democratic legitimacy, now face layered risks: foreign interference, algorithmic amplification of falsehoods, institutional delegitimization, and systemic disinformation. These challenges test not only the procedural integrity of elections but the resilience and the very sustainability of democratic institutions themselves.

The Romanian presidential elections of 2024–2025, uniquely marked by the annulment of the first round and the rerun ordered by the Constitutional Court, provide a compelling case study in democratic resilience under duress. Romania, frequently described (most notably by President Iohannis in a 2017 speech) as a consolidated democracy in Eastern Europe [1], nevertheless faces ongoing debate over the accuracy of this label. While the term carries symbolic and diplomatic weight, suggesting institutional maturity and resilience, the country's political dynamics often reveal persistent vulnerabilities: politicization of institutions, weak checks and balances, and episodes of democratic backsliding. The recent electoral crisis crystallized this tension, simul-

taneously highlighting the formal robustness of certain democratic mechanisms and exposing the fragility of the broader institutional and civic culture that sustains them. In this setting, the very concept of resilience must be understood not as static resistance, but as a dynamic negotiation between institutional response, societal behavior, and symbolic legitimacy. Resilience is not one thing. It's legal safeguards, institutional adaptability, a clear normative frame and, crucially, the trust and vigilance of citizens.

The hypothesis I am pursuing looks at the Romanian case through the lens of a "dual reality", not only in terms of overlapping institutional and technological challenges, but also in the deep-seated tensions within the political imaginary. As I have shown in my previous research on Romanian political culture, the national imaginary is often shaped by binary oppositions and antinomic representations, patterns of thought that encourage an "either/or" logic, resist nuance, and fuel polarized narratives. [2] These cognitive patterns can both obscure and shape the responses to crisis. What appears as institutional decision-making may, in fact, be deeply embedded in mythic-symbolic structures, operating beneath the surface of political discourse.

The main research question from the start is: How did Romanian institutions and civil society respond to complex, hybrid security threats during the 2024–2025 electoral crisis, and what does this reveal about their capacity for sustainable resilience in the face of democratic disruption?

Methodologically, the study draws on a qualitative case study approach, combining legal document analysis, electoral data, media discourse, and secondary academic literature. Special attention is paid to the discursive strategies of legitimacy, the interplay between myth and law, and the tension between security and representation.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that Romania's electoral crisis reveals a deep structural tension: between legal rationality and symbolic politics, between normative stability and discursive volatility. Understanding this" antinomical structure" [2] of democratic experience is essential if we are to grasp not only what resilience means in emerging democracies, but how it is performed, narrated, and challenged under the pressure of hybrid threats.

Anatomy of an Electoral Crisis: Romania's 2024–2025 Presidential Race

The Romanian presidential elections of 2024–2025 constituted an unprecedented episode in the country's post-communist political development, marking the first instance in which a presidential vote was constitutionally annulled and subsequently repeted. The sequence of events that occurred over this period revealed profound institutional tensions, legal dilemmas, and symbolic fractures within Romanian democracy. More importantly, the process provided a test case for evaluating the capacity of electoral institutions and democratic norms to absorb and respond to systemic stress.

Against this backdrop, tracing the chronology of the electoral process becomes essential for understanding not only how the crisis unfolded step by step, but also how each stage reflected and, in some cases, amplified the underlying institutional and societal tensions. The following timeline outlines the key developments from the initial campaign period to the eventual repetition of the vote, highlighting the moments that proved most decisive in shaping both the outcome and its broader democratic implications.

- ***24 November 2024 – First Round of Presidential Elections.***

According to the official report published by the Permanent Electoral Authority [3], the first round of elections was conducted under standard operational parameters, with high voter turnout, particularly from the diaspora. However, the report also noted logistical inconsistencies and the need for improved oversight in the management of overseas polling stations.

The initial round of presidential elections featured a wide and ideologically diverse array of candidates. Voter turnout exceeded 50%, with diaspora participation reaching historic levels. The top two contenders were Călin Georgescu, an independent candidate with nationalist, anti-systemic positioning, and Elena Lasconi, representing the pro-European progressive spectrum.

Despite Georgescu securing a plurality of votes, the process was marred by significant irregularities, including opaque campaign financing, coordinated online disinformation campaigns — particularly via TikTok — and procedural ambiguities in the management of overseas voting.

Results of the 1st round of the presidential election in Romania on 24 November 2024

Turnout: 52.55%

Nr.	Candidate	Ballot Vote	Percent (~)
1.	CĂLIN GEORGESCU	2.120.401+347.901	22,94 %
2.	ELENA-VALERICA LASCONI	1.772.500+2.740	19,17 %
3.	ION-MARCEL CIOLACU	1.769.760+488.435	19,14 %
4.	GEORGE-NICOLAE SIMION	1.281.325+469.373	13,86 %
5.	NICOLAE-IONEL CIUCĂ	811.952+228.054	8,78 %

Source: https://prezenta.roaep.ro/prezidentiale24112024/pv/romania/results/

➢ ***6 December 2024 – Annulment of the Elections by the Constitutional Court***

In a decision of exceptional gravity, the Constitutional Court of Romania (CCR) annulled the results of the first round, just days before the second round , citing substantial violations of electoral integrity, evidence of foreign interference, and breaches of constitutional standards [4]. The Court's ruling mandated a complete restart of the electoral process.

The first round of Romania's 2024 presidential election was annulled after declassified intelligence revealed evidence of large-scale foreign interference, attributed to Russia, involving tens of thousands of coordinated TikTok accounts and cyberattacks promoting candidate Călin Georgescu in violation of election laws. This disclosure, which overturned an earlier validation of the vote, led the Constitutional Court to conclude that the integrity of the electoral process had been compromised beyond repair.

This move, the first of its kind in Romania's democratic history, triggered intense public debate, legal critique, and political polarization. Supporters viewed the annulment as a necessary act of institutional self-correction; critics, however, raised concerns about judicial overreach, the lack of concrete evidence, and the long-term impact on democratic legitimacy.

➢ ***January–March 2025 – Electoral Campaign Reset***

In the aftermath of the annulment, political parties and candidates recalibrated their electoral strategies. The campaign period was characterized by heightened scrutiny from both the Permanent Elec-

toral Authority and civil society watchdogs. A renewed emphasis was placed on transparency in political financing, platform accountability, and combating algorithmically amplified disinformation. The electoral field narrowed, and the polarization between nationalist and pro-European platforms became more pronounced.

➢ ***4 May 2025 – Re-run: First Round of Elections***

The first round of the repeated elections produced a new set of finalists. George Simion, leader of the nationalist and sovereigntist Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), emerged as the frontrunner, securing approximately 41% of the vote. Nicușor Dan, independent candidate and mayor of Bucharest, qualified for the run-off with roughly 21%. The campaign dynamics were shaped by strong populist mobilization, digital activism, and the continuation of polarizing narratives across online platforms.

Results of the 1st round (repeted) of the presidential election in Romania on 4 May 2025

Turnout: 53.21%

Nr.	Candidate	Ballot Vote	Percent (~)
1.	GEORGE-NICOLAE SIMION	3.862.761+1.882.994	40,96 %
2.	NICUȘOR-DANIEL DAN	1.979.767+86.837	20,99 %
3.	GEORGE-CRIN-LAURENȚIU ANTONESCU	1.892.930+662.766	20,07 %
4.	VICTOR-VIOREL PONTA	1.230.164+977.443	13,04 %
5.	ELENA-VALERICA LASCONI	252.721+192.039	2,68 %

Source: https://prezenta.roaep.ro/prezidentiale04052025/pv/romania/results

In the rerun of Romania's presidential election, right-wing nationalist George Simion won the first round with 40.96% of the vote, emerging as the clear favourite over liberal Bucharest mayor Nicușor Dan. Simion, a Eurosceptic who opposes military aid to Ukraine but supports NATO bases in Romania, drew strong backing from the diaspora, securing over 70% of votes in Italy, Spain, and Germany—and attracted much of the former electorate of disqualified candidate Călin Georgescu. His victory has raised concerns in European capitals, Washington, Kyiv, and Moscow ahead of the 18 May runoff.

➢ ***18 May 2025 – Second Round: Dan vs. Simion***

The run-off was widely interpreted as a referendum on Romania's democratic trajectory. The contest between a nationalist-populist vision and a centrist, institutionalist alternative mobilized significant civic participation. In a politically tense and highly mediatized environment, Nicuşor Dan secured the presidency with an estimated 54% of the vote. His victory was perceived as a symbolic reaffirmation of Romania's pro-European commitment and a rejection of authoritarian tendencies.

Results of the 2 round of the presidential election in Romania on 18 May 2025

Turnout: 64.72%

Nr.	Candidate	Ballot Vote	Percent (~)
1.	NICUŞOR-DANIEL DAN	6.168.642+829.589	53,60 %
2.	GEORGE-NICOLAE SIMION	5.339.053	46,40 %
3.	**TOTAL**	**11.507.695**	**100,00 %**

Source: https://prezenta.roaep.ro/prezidentiale18052025/pv/results?pv-candidate-chart-type=bar&pv-scope=total&pv-relative-max=max

In Romania's 18 May presidential runoff, independent candidate and Bucharest mayor Nicuşor Dan, backed by several centre-right and pro-European parties, defeated far-right leader George Simion (AUR) with 53.60% to 46.40% of the vote. Dan's 30-point surge between rounds was fuelled by a record 64.72% turnout, including 1.64 million diaspora voters, amid fears of a far-right presidency. The election followed the Constitutional Court's annulment of the November–December 2024 vote over Russian interference and the banning of first-round winner Călin Georgescu. Campaigning on anti-corruption, institutional reform, and keeping Romania on a Western course, Dan takes office in a politically and socially fractured country marked by inequality, disillusionment, and entrenched party patronage.

➢ ***Post-Election Period – From June 2025 Onward***

Although the election results contributed to short-term political stabilization, public discourse continued to grapple with unresolved structural questions:

- The long-term legitimacy of the Constitutional Court's intervention;

- The normative implications of annulling a democratic vote in the absence of judicial prosecution or transparent evidence;
- The capacity of Romania's electoral framework to adapt to hybrid threats, algorithmic influence, and intensified polarization.

These post-electoral debates underscore the fragile equilibrium between legal authority, democratic legitimacy, and public trust, and serve as a reminder that resilience is not merely institutional, but also discursive, participatory, and symbolic. They also highlight the extent to which Romania's democratic trajectory remains contingent on the interplay between domestic political culture, the evolving threat landscape, and the credibility of both formal and informal mechanisms of accountability. In this sense, the 2024–2025 electoral crisis was not only a stress test for institutions, but also a mirror reflecting the deeper tensions shaping the country's democratic future.

Table: Key Events of the 2024–2025 Romanian Presidential Elections

Date	Event	Details
24 Nov 2024	First Round of Presidential Elections	Călin Georgescu and Elena Lasconi emerge as front-runners. Significant diaspora turnout. Allegations of irregularities and disinformation.
6 Dec 2024	Constitutional Court Annuls First Round	Court cites electoral integrity violations, foreign interference, and procedural irregularities. Orders full re-run of the elections.
Jan–Mar 2025	Electoral Campaign Reset	Political actors recalibrate strategies. Increased regulatory scrutiny. Civil society mobilization and focus on disinformation mitigation.
4 May 2025	Re-run: First Round of Elections	George Simion leads (~41%), Nicuşor Dan follows (~21%). Populist rhetoric and polarization define the campaign environment.
18 May 2025	Second Round of Elections	Nicuşor Dan wins (~54%). Result interpreted as a reaffirmation of democratic legitimacy and pro-European orientation.
June 2025 →	Post-Election Developments	Ongoing debates on the Constitutional Court's role, legitimacy of the annulment, and need for electoral law reform.

This chronology illustrates not only the complexity of Romania's electoral process during this period but also the layered interactions between legal authority, political legitimacy, civic agency, and democratic resilience.

Conceptual Framework: Security, Democracy, Legitimacy, and Electoral Resilience

In the context of democratic governance, resilience has emerged as a central yet multifaceted concept, increasingly invoked in academic, institutional, and policy discourses. Far from being a purely technical or managerial term, resilience, when applied to political and electoral systems, encompasses structural, normative, and symbolic dimensions. It reflects the capacity of democratic institutions not merely to withstand shocks, but to adapt, transform, and restore functionality without sacrificing their core principles. [5, 6].

Administrative resilience, increasingly prominent in public discourse and a core objective of reform, refers to the capacity of political and administrative systems to absorb disruptions—whether internal or external—while preserving their essential functions, structure, and values. As the backbone of political societies, institutions depend not only on structural robustness but also on the human resilience of public officials. Resilience thinking, which shifts focus from mere efficiency to adaptability and option-creation, is vital for managing risk and complexity in a rapidly changing world. In the context of European integration, candidate states face stringent requirements on democratic institutions, the rule of law, and human rights, making their ability to maintain institutional independence and stability amid political turnover, crises, or geopolitical pressures a critical test of democratic resilience.

Resilience in political systems refers to the ability of institutions to absorb internal or external disruptions, while maintaining the legitimacy, efficiency, and coherence of governance. This includes crises such as electoral disputes, constitutional breakdowns, disinformation campaigns, or foreign interference, all of which were present in the Romanian electoral cycle of 2024–2025. But resilience cannot be reduced to institutional rigidity or procedural repetition; on the contrary, it implies adaptability, normative responsiveness, and systemic

learning [7]. Institutions must preserve stability, while remaining open to self-correction and reform [8,9].

Electoral resilience, a specific dimension of democratic resilience, refers to the capacity of the electoral process to deliver legitimate outcomes even in the presence of attempts to delegitimize it, distort information, or undermine public trust [10]. This includes legal safeguards, civic participation, media pluralism, administrative competence, and independent oversight mechanisms. The resilience of an electoral system is therefore not only a function of technical accuracy or cybersecurity, but also of social legitimacy, institutional trust, and representational inclusiveness [11].

In the Romanian case, resilience was tested both formally and symbolically. On the formal side, the Constitutional Court intervened to annul a contested electoral result, invoking violations of electoral integrity, a rare and radical act that demonstrated the legal system's corrective potential, but also raised concerns regarding constitutional overreach and democratic legitimacy [12]. In the Romanian case, resilience was tested both formally and symbolically. On the formal side, the Constitutional Court intervened to annul a contested electoral result, invoking violations of electoral integrity, a rare and radical act that demonstrated the legal system's corrective potential, but also raised concerns regarding constitutional overreach and democratic legitimacy. The decision reflects a shift toward a militant democracy framework, in which the constitutional order assumes a protective posture against perceived threats, even at the cost of temporarily suspending the electoral process. While such measures may be normatively grounded in the imperative to safeguard democratic continuity, Iancu warns that this logic becomes problematic when legal certainty, due process, and evidentiary rigor are replaced by broad, discretionary invocations of national security or institutional trust. The Court's justification relied heavily on abstract notions of "democratic integrity" and "foreign manipulation", but lacked concrete, falsifiable evidence of systemic fraud or coercion. This undermines the principle of electoral sovereignty and opens the door to a form of juristocratic interventionism, whereby constitutional guardianship risks sliding into political arbitrariness. In this view [12], such actions may paradoxically weaken the very legitimacy they seek to defend, by introducing

an element of constitutional exceptionalism that bypasses electoral accountability and public deliberation.

On the symbolic side, the rerun of the elections required society to reaffirm trust in the democratic process, despite narratives of manipulation, betrayal, or illegitimacy, especially prevalent in online and populist discourses.

But thinking on institutional reform and EU integration, resilience is not static; it must be constantly reproduced through proactive governance, transparency, and societal engagement. Resilient systems are those that learn from crisis and incorporate that learning into structural reform. They are marked not by the absence of disruption, but by the presence of mechanisms that allow them to recover and evolve without collapsing or abandoning their democratic ethos.

Moreover, resilience must be sustainable. Institutional sustainability involves long-term investments in administrative capacity, civic education, legal predictability, and participatory governance. It also includes the capacity to engage in meaningful dialogue across political, social, and ideological divides — a function particularly important in polarized societies, such as Romania, where the political imaginary is shaped by antinomies and binary oppositions.

In sum, conceptualising resilience in democratic and electoral terms requires a multidimensional approach, one that combines legal safeguards, adaptive institutions, informed public participation, and normative clarity. In the following sections, we will examine how these elements materialized during the Romanian presidential elections, offering both a test and a lesson in democratic resilience under pressure.

Key Security Threats in the Context of the 2024–2025 Romanian Presidential Elections

The 2024–2025 Romanian presidential elections must be understood not merely as a procedural confrontation between political actors, but as a revelatory episode for the structural vulnerabilities of democratic systems in the face of new configurations of power, influence, and destabilization. What appeared, in formal terms, to be a regular electoral cycle, soon revealed its embeddedness in a complex matrix of hybrid threats, discursive manipulation, institutional fragility, and normative contestation. The electoral arena was redefined as

a space of symbolic confrontation, where the legitimacy of democratic institutions and the coherence of the constitutional order were simultaneously tested.

Four principal vectors of threat can be identified that shaped the 2024–2025 electoral context: hybrid interference and informational warfare, understood as deliberate strategies of cognitive and algorithmic influence; populist polarization and societal cleavage, whereby electoral mobilization operated through the fragmentation of symbolic imaginaries; cybersecurity and the limits of institutional preparedness in anticipating and responding to asymmetrical attacks; and the legitimacy crisis generated by the Constitutional Court's unprecedented intervention, interpreted by many as an instance of constitutional exceptionalism.

Together, these dimensions reflect not only a convergence of threats, but a reconfiguration of the political imaginary and of the democratic normativity upon which electoral processes rest. In this context, resilience is no longer reducible to administrative efficiency or legal response but presupposes a deeper re-articulation of trust, transparency, and institutional equilibrium.

The Romanian presidential elections of 2024–2025 were not merely a political contest but a profound stress test for democratic security and institutional resilience. In this electoral cycle, security threats were multifaceted, ranging from classical hybrid operations to algorithmic disinformation, foreign interference, and domestic radicalization. These threats must be analyzed both as individual risk factors and as components of a broader ecosystem of strategic destabilization.

The 2024 Romanian presidential elections unfolded in an operational environment increasingly shaped by the dynamics of hybrid threats, as defined by recent national security doctrines. According to the National Defense Strategy 2020–2024, hybrid warfare entails the simultaneous use of conventional and unconventional tools, ranging from political and economic pressure to cyberattacks, psychological manipulation, and disinformation, aimed at undermining state sovereignty without resorting to overt military aggression [12]. Within this paradigm, electoral processes become key targets, as adversaries seek to exploit societal cleavages, discredit institutions, and delegitimize democratic outcomes. The erosion of public trust in the integrity of

elections is not an incidental effect, but a central objective of hybrid operations designed to destabilize liberal democratic orders from within.One of the most visible dimensions of this phenomenon was the algorithmic amplification of radical narratives, especially through TikTok, a platform with nearly 9 million Romanian users in 2024 [13]. Populist candidates with limited traditional media exposure relied on the virality and affective engagement potential of short-form videos, generating content that evaded electoral oversight while appealing to emotions and identity symbols. The use of TikTok for political manipulation was compounded by external actors, suspected to exploit platform vulnerabilities to distort public opinion [7].

The rise of candidates like Călin Georgescu epitomizes the security challenge posed by homegrown radical populism. Drawing from national-mystical rhetoric, conspiratorial anti-elitism, and esoteric narratives, his campaign blurred the boundaries between political communication and ideological radicalization. Such narratives eroded democratic cohesion and cast doubt on the legitimacy of institutional actors, including the Constitutional Court and electoral authorities.

This echoes a broader pattern observed across Europe, where electoral legitimacy is undermined not only through external interference but through internal instrumentalization of identity politics and anti-institutional sentiment [7].

The Romanian intelligence services and the Permanent Electoral Authority acknowledged the growing salience of cyber vulnerabilities in the lead-up to and throughout the 2024–2025 presidential elections. In line with the objectives articulated in the National Defense Strategy 2020–2024 [12], hybrid threats, particularly cyberattacks and coordinated disinformation campaigns, were officially designated as key challenges to national security. Despite this recognition, the institutional infrastructure for countering such threats proved insufficient, revealing critical gaps in early detection, cross-institutional coordination, and platform accountability. Most notably, efforts to foster public resilience through civic education and digital literacy remained fragmented and largely reactive. The absence of a comprehensive public communication strategy on hybrid threats, combined with the limited integration of media literacy into formal education, contributed to a

vulnerability landscape in which large segments of the electorate remained susceptible to manipulation, distrust, and polarization.

The unprecedented annulment of the first round of the 2024 presidential elections by the Constitutional Court of Romania marked a critical juncture in the relationship between constitutional authority, national security, and democratic legitimacy. The Court justified its decision by invoking classified intelligence reports that allegedly revealed substantial violations of electoral integrity, including foreign manipulation, disinformation campaigns, and procedural irregularities. Yet, this intervention exposed a fundamental tension at the heart of Romania's constitutional architecture: the absence of a clearly articulated legal mechanism for annulling presidential elections.

Moreover, the Court's heavy reliance on non-transparent intelligence briefings, which were neither publicly disclosed nor subjected to adversarial scrutiny, generated significant concerns about judicial activism and constitutional overreach. Rather than reinforcing democratic resilience, the decision may have inadvertently introduced a new form of systemic vulnerability, namely, a weakening of legal predictability and a disruption of electoral continuity. From a security perspective, such opacity can erode public trust in democratic checks and balances, particularly when exceptional constitutional interventions are not accompanied by clear procedural safeguards or post-facto justifications.

This case is to be situated within the broader framework of militant democracy; wherein state institutions assume the right, and the responsibility, to curtail or suspend democratic procedures in order to preserve the democratic order itself [13]. While such logic may be defensible in extreme contexts, its application in the Romanian case was marked by ambiguity, haste, and lack of transparency, raising the specter of discretionary power supplanting democratic accountability. In this sense, the Court's decision, while framed as a protective act, undermined both electoral sovereignty and normative legitimacy, calling into question the institutional balance between constitutional guardianship and democratic representation.

The Constitutional Court's decision to annul the first round of the 2024 presidential elections triggered a wave of intense and polarized reactions across Romanian society and its institutional landscape.

From the outset, the ruling generated a crisis of confidence that transcended partisan divisions, raising profound questions regarding the boundaries of constitutional authority and the fragility of electoral legitimacy.

Official institutions reacted with caution and ambiguity. The Permanent Electoral Authority (AEP) issued a measured statement acknowledging the Court's ruling while emphasizing its technical and administrative readiness to organize a new electoral process [14]. The Presidency refrained from directly commenting on the merits of the annulment, instead calling for "constitutional order and public calm" [15]. Meanwhile, parliamentary parties adopted diverging positions: pro-European factions expressed concern over legal uncertainty and the lack of precedent, whereas nationalist-populist parties framed the decision as a triumph of national sovereignty over "external manipulation".

The public response was equally divided. Civic organizations such as *Expert Forum* and *Funky Citizens* criticized the opacity of the process and the absence of public access to the intelligence that had allegedly justified the annulment. Multiple editorial voices warned of a "dangerous normalization of exceptionalism" under the guise of protecting democracy. At the same time, segments of the population, particularly those aligned with anti-system narratives, interpreted the decision as a confirmation of long-standing claims that the electoral system was corrupt and externally controlled.

In digital spaces, misinformation and speculation proliferated, exploiting the absence of official clarification to deepen public confusion and distrust. The lack of a coherent communication strategy from the authorities further exacerbated perceptions of institutional fragility and opened the door to populist reinterpretations of constitutional authority.

Beyond the institutional vacuum created by disinformation and fragmented official messaging, another critical dimension of democratic vulnerability became increasingly visible: the symbolic repurpose of national unity, not as a unifying constitutional ideal, but as a tool of populist polarization and rhetorical exclusion.

Among the most revealing dynamics of the recent Romanian presidential elections lies the paradoxical deployment of national unity as

both a constitutional principle and a rhetorical instrument. Framed in political discourse as a unifying ideal, the notion of unity was strategically co-opted by radical populist actors, resulting in its transformation into a mechanism of electoral polarization and symbolic exclusion. Rather than fostering civic cohesion, national unity was redefined through the lens of populist discourse: exclusive, emotionally charged, and identity-driven, culminating in a deeply fractured public space.

The elections occurred in a socio-political context marked by ideological polarization, economic precarity, and recurring crises of democratic legitimacy. Within this environment, populist narratives gained traction, invoking themes of sovereignty, national identity, and the defense of "traditional values". Though rooted in collective imaginaries, these references were frequently instrumentalized for electoral gain, undermining their constitutional and civic significance. Populist rhetoric relies heavily on binary oppositions: the "pure people" versus a "corrupt elite", the "authentic nation" against internal or external enemies. In this discursive frame, national unity is no longer conceived as civic solidarity among equal citizens, but as a homogenizing project, hostile to pluralism, cultural diversity, and institutional accountability. [16].

This mirrors broader global patterns, where nationalist-populist parties (from AfD in Germany to Fratelli d'Italia and Fidesz in Hungary) capitalize on societal discontent by promoting simplified, emotionally resonant political messages. [17].

In Romania, this strategy reached its apex in the unexpected rise of Călin Georgescu, a formerly marginal figure whose campaign merged anti-elitist populism with national mysticism and spiritual exceptionalism. Portraying himself as a providential leader, Georgescu invoked Orthodox religious symbolism, esoteric nationalism, and conspiracy rhetoric to frame his candidacy as a moral and civilizational mission. His messaging resonated especially with disenfranchised or distrustful voters, offering a narrative of purification and national rebirth. Despite early denials from domestic intelligence services regarding foreign interference, Georgescu's online campaign, heavily promoted on platforms such as TikTok, often in violation of electoral law, raised public concern. The campaign's virality, emotional appeal, and am-

biguity of expression allowed it to evade traditional media scrutiny while tapping into latent frustrations with mainstream politics. In this respect, Georgescu's rhetoric exemplifies a hybrid populism, combining authoritarian conservatism with the aesthetics of New Age personal empowerment and conspiratorial thinking.

Such rhetorical strategies, while not overtly extremist, carry the potential to erode democratic cohesion, particularly when they reinterpret national unity as exclusionary identity. They risk radicalizing voters through affective, pseudo-sacred appeals that bypass critical deliberation and constitutional norms. This trend is exacerbated by a perceived representational vacuum in the political system, with traditional parties failing to articulate inclusive, future-oriented projects capable of addressing citizens' concerns in credible ways.

In conclusion, defending the constitutional meaning of national unity in contemporary Romania demands more than symbolic invocation. It requires active efforts to protect pluralism, foster civic literacy, and strengthen democratic institutions against rhetorical and algorithmic manipulations that distort public understanding of identity, belonging, and political agency.

Anatomy of a Populist Surge: The 2024 Romanian Presidential Elections

The unexpected electoral performance of Călin Georgescu in the first round of the annulled 2024 presidential elections constitutes a revealing case study in the dynamics of contemporary populism. Far from being an isolated episode, his rapid ascension reflects a convergence of structural vulnerabilities, socio-political discontent, and strategic narrative engineering that resonated with disenfranchised segments of the electorate. This surge cannot be understood solely in terms of individual charisma; it is the product of an enabling political environment in which institutional fragility, ideological polarization, and mediated populist rhetoric interacted to redefine the symbolic terrain of electoral competition.

At the sociological level, Georgescu's appeal was rooted in a bifurcated political imaginary. On one side, the established parties, PSD and PNL, were perceived as part of a self-referential elite, unable or unwilling to address pressing social grievances, thus reinforcing the

perception of a closed political system. On the other hand, Georgescu projected an image of outsider authenticity, presenting himself as a providential figure untainted by political compromise. His discourse blended moral absolutism, nationalist mysticism, and anti-elitist critique, creating an affective repertoire that could mobilize both conservative-religious voters and younger citizens alienated from traditional politics.

Many factors underpin this electoral surge. No single factor alone would have been sufficient to account for Călin Georgescu's electoral success. Rather, it was the result of a *perfect storm*: the inaction of certain state institutions; the strategic missteps and short-sightedness of PSD and PNL leaders; the possible involvement of a foreign state actor; the low calibre of competing candidates; an unfavourable socio-economic and political context; voter disillusionment with the traditional political offer; the ambiguous role or inadequate action of intelligence services and their retired networks; and, above all, the deep political and social cleavages entrenched within Romanian society. [18].

First, the socio-economic discontent generated by persistent inequalities, inflationary pressures, and perceived stagnation in public service delivery created fertile ground for anti-system rhetoric. Second, the cultural dimension of political identity, amplified by algorithmic echo chambers on platforms like TikTok – allowed for the viral dissemination of emotionally charged, symbolically dense messages that bypassed traditional media scrutiny.

Third, the failure of mainstream parties to offer a coherent counter-narrative left a discursive vacuum in which simplistic yet emotionally resonant frames of "national renewal" and "moral purification" could flourish.

The political efficacy of Georgescu's campaign lay in its hybrid populism – an amalgamation of right-wing authoritarian conservatism, civilizational exceptionalism, and New Age-inflected spiritualism: (Călin Georgescu's half-learned discourse blended themes from the ethno-nationalist *vulgata* of the Ceaușescu era with elements of Christianity and New Age spirituality – finding resonance among a semi-educated public eager for similar aspirations and fantasies) [18, p.136]. This hybrid form allowed his rhetoric to be deliberately ambiguous, avoiding explicit alignment with extremist doctrine while sign-

aling to multiple constituencies that their values and grievances were being acknowledged. Also, such rhetorical flexibility is a hallmark of successful populist insurgencies: the ability to articulate a common enemy while permitting heterogeneous audiences to project their own aspirations onto the candidate.

From the perspective of democratic legitimacy, Georgescu's rise is symptomatic of representational erosion. The surge of support for a figure operating largely outside traditional institutional accountability mechanisms underscores the degree to which legitimacy is increasingly contingent on symbolic performance and perceived authenticity rather than programmatic substance or institutional track record. In this sense, the Romanian case reflects a broader European and global trend, wherein populist actors weaponize the disjunction between procedural democracy and substantive representation to destabilize established political orders.

Ultimately, the "Georgescu moment" in Romanian politics illustrates both the adaptive capacity of populist movements to exploit structural vulnerabilities and the limitations of existing democratic safeguards in countering such mobilisations. The annulment of the first electoral round did not erase the underlying conditions that enabled his rise. Absent meaningful institutional reform, narrative reconstruction, and a credible rearticulation of national unity within a pluralist framework, similar populist surges are likely to recur further challenging the resilience of Romania's democratic system.

A further dimension of the "Georgescu phenomenon" lies in its role as an unintended stress test for Romania's political institutions. The sudden visibility and electoral performance of a candidate operating at the intersection of nationalist mysticism, anti-elitist rhetoric, and digital populism placed unprecedented pressure on the formal architecture of democratic governance. It exposed institutional blind spots in monitoring campaign legality, regulating digital campaigning, and ensuring that electoral competition remains anchored in the constitutional ethos.

Yet, whether these institutions *passed* the resilience test remains an open and contentious question. On one hand, the annulment of the first electoral round by the Constitutional Court could be interpreted as a decisive assertion of institutional integrity – a legal intervention

designed to safeguard electoral legitimacy against procedural violations and possible manipulation. On the other hand, the absence of clear constitutional precedent, the opacity of intelligence-based justifications, and the political polarization that followed have left lingering doubts about the proportionality, transparency, and democratic costs of such a radical measure.

In this sense, the Georgescu episode represents a double-edged moment in the evaluation of democratic resilience. It demonstrated that Romania's institutions possess the formal capacity to respond to perceived threats to electoral integrity, yet it also revealed the fragility of public confidence in those same institutions when interventions are made without an accompanying framework of transparent deliberation and civic communication. As resilience theory reminds us, the capacity to absorb shocks is only one dimension; equally important is the ability to recover in ways that enhance, rather than diminish, long-term legitimacy.

The unanswered question, therefore, is not simply whether Romanian political institutions survived the challenge posed by the Georgescu candidacy, but how they did so, and at what symbolic and democratic cost. Without a deliberate process of public reflection, accountability, and narrative repair, the lessons of this stress test risk remaining underutilized, leaving the system vulnerable to future episodes of populist disruption.

Democratic Narratives and Symbolic Repair after Crisis

In the aftermath of such crises, procedural restoration alone is insufficient to heal the fractures in democratic legitimacy; it must be complemented by deliberate processes of symbolic repair. This involves reframing the public narrative in a manner that restores coherence between constitutional authority, institutional action, and civic perception. In the Romanian case, the annulment of the first electoral round created a discursive vacuum that was rapidly filled with competing interpretations — some rooted in legal reasoning, others in conspiracy-driven populism. Addressing this fragmentation requires three strategic pillars:

- Narrative reframing – shifting public discourse from binary narratives of "victory" or "betrayal" toward a shared understanding

of the crisis as a constitutional stress test capable of strengthening democratic safeguards when handled transparently.

- Transparency and public deliberation – ensuring that exceptional measures, particularly those justified on national security grounds, are accompanied by accessible explanations and evidence, thus pre-empting disinformation and reinforcing institutional credibility.
- Civic engagement beyond the ballot box – creating participatory mechanisms, such as deliberative forums and local consultation platforms, that allow citizens to co-produce solutions in the aftermath of institutional crises.

Lessons from the Romanian case underscore that post-crisis legitimacy is not automatically restored through the resumption of electoral procedures. It demands visible institutional learning, consistent communication, and the symbolic re-anchoring of unity as a pluralist value rather than an exclusivist slogan.

These insights hold direct relevance for Moldova, where persistent external influence and contested integration narratives call for robust transparency and symbolic cohesion strategies, and for Ukraine, whose electoral institutions operate under wartime constraints and must guard against the normalization of exceptional measures. In both contexts, integrating symbolic repair into resilience planning strengthens not only procedural continuity but also the deeper civic trust on which democratic sustainability depends.

Following the unprecedented disruption of the 2024–2025 presidential elections, the Romanian democratic system was confronted not solely with the task of institutional stabilization, but with a more profound necessity: that of reconstituting the symbolic foundations of legitimacy. The erosion of public confidence in constitutional mechanisms, compounded by discursive fragmentation and competing interpretations of sovereign authority, rendered insufficient any merely procedural response. What was required, rather, was a reconstruction of democratic legitimacy understood not only in juridical or electoral terms, but as a normative and narrative rearticulation of the democratic order, one capable of reestablishing coherence between institutions, political imagination, and civic trust. The path toward democratic repair transcends technical fixes; it requires the **reconstruction**

of collective meaning, where national unity, transparent governance, and civic resilience are re-narrated to reestablish shared values. Public rituals, such as referendum acts, commemorative statements, or civic dialogues, must be deliberately crafted to enact a renewed social compact that acknowledges the crisis while reaffirming democratic cohesion [19, 20].

In the aftermath of Romania's 2024–2025 presidential elections, the legitimacy crisis that occurred was not reducible to legal or institutional dysfunction. Legitimacy in transitional democracies must be reconceptualized beyond procedural legality [16] encompassing symbolic coherence, civic recognition, and normative continuity. The rupture caused by the annulment of the first electoral round, an unprecedented institutional gesture, generated a moment of destabilization in the collective political imaginary, where the formal order appeared decoupled from its symbolic anchoring.

Also, in the Romanian case, the 2024–2025 electoral crisis may become not only a political rupture but a foundational moment in the collective memory of democracy, where competing actors attempt to narrate the crisis as either a democratic safeguard or a constitutional trauma. The way societies choose to remember or forget such moments is crucial for the (re)construction of political identity and institutional legitimacy [20]. If the annulment of the first electoral round is framed solely as an exceptional necessity, without public reflection or civic pedagogy, the deeper symbolic rupture may persist unhealed, feeding future mistrust.

From a perspective of cultural theory of performance [19], a complementary perspective is offered: political legitimacy is sustained through credible public performances that align institutional roles with shared moral narratives. When such performances fail, when elites appear disembodied from their civic functions or discursively incoherent, a vacuum opens, often filled by populist figures who simulate authenticity and moral clarity through emotionally resonant, myth-laden rhetoric. In this sense, the Romanian case illustrates the convergence between performative failure and symbolic fragility, where traditional political actors lost their claim to legitimacy not solely because of procedural failure, but because they could no longer *perform the democratic script convincingly*.

In this context re-legitimation after crisis requires more than technocratic restoration; it demands a symbolic act of reconstruction, grounded in transparency, deliberation, and civic inclusion. Thus, both theoretical frameworks converge in highlighting that legitimacy is not merely institutional, but performative, narrative, and culturally embedded. It must be enacted and sustained through discursive practices capable of restoring coherence between constitutional authority, democratic values, and the citizen's normative expectations.

In post-crisis democratic contexts, legitimacy must be rearticulated not only through institutional correction, but through the symbolic recuperation of meaning, memory, and public trust. Legitimacy in transitional democracies is inseparable from the narrative and normative reconstruction of political order. The 2024–2025 Romanian electoral crisis has thus created a moment of discursive inflection, in which past fractures, institutional opacity, and populist contestations must be addressed through mechanisms that transcend technocratic response. Such crises become memory-constitutive moments [20], where political actors compete to define the meaning of rupture, responsibility, and institutional fidelity. If left uninterpreted or deliberately obfuscated, these moments risk solidifying into collective trauma or distrust.

To prevent this, it is essential to embrace a deliberate model of public discourse, wherein citizens, civil society, and institutional actors participate in the co-construction of new narratives of belonging, accountability, and repair. In line with Habermas's theory of communicative action [21], deliberation must go beyond reassurance; it must actively restore ethical legitimacy by reconnecting formal constitutional authority with the civic imagination and the lived experience of democratic agency. In this sense, deliberation becomes not only a procedural ideal, but a mechanism of symbolic healing, one that enables the political community to reintegrate disrupted meaning and re-legitimize the democratic ethos.

Post-crisis re-legitimization also depends on fostering mechanisms of **counter-democracy**, active civic oversight, media accountability, and participatory feedback loops [22]. The Romanian electoral crisis illustrated not only a breakdown in institutional procedure, but a broader transformation in the nature of democratic legitimacy. As Rosanvallon argues, citizens increasingly enact their democratic agen-

cy not merely by voting, but by monitoring, contesting, and demanding transparency from those in power. In this context, post-crisis legitimacy must be understood as provisional and reflexive, sustained through continuous acts of public scrutiny and discursive accountability, not just institutional restoration. In societies where democratic trust is fragile, promoting open channels for citizen monitoring institutional behavior is a form of symbolic repair in itself, restoring agency to the electorate and reinforcing institutional accountability.

Finally, the memory of disruption must be wocitizenso the democratic conscience as a **warning, not a spectaclrepair, restoring**d forgetting remind us that collective resilience depends on appropriately remembering and normatively integrating experiences of crisis [23]. The remembrance of the electoral unsettlement should serve not as a source of continued division, but as a catalyst for strengthening democratic norms, institutional transparency, and public education.

Through symbolic repair, narrative reconstruction, and participative oversight, Romania's democratic experiment can transcend the rupture of 2024–2025, transforming crisis into a more inclusive and resilient political identity.

Post-Electoral Symbolic Reparation and the Challenge of Democratic Continuity

The formation of a new government following the unprecedented annulment and re-run of Romania's 2024–2025 presidential elections marked not only an institutional recalibration, but the emergence of a new symbolic framework through which democratic legitimacy might be reconstructed. While the electoral process culminated in the victory of President Nicuşor Dan, a figure associated with urban reformism and civic moderation, the post-electoral moment was not uniformly perceived as a definitive closure of the legitimacy crisis. A considerable segment of society remained skeptical, interpreting the change of leadership as a procedural necessity rather than a normative renewal. This disconnection between institutional outcomes and symbolic restoration reveals the depth of the fracture experienced during the crisis and the complexity of re-legitimizing the democratic order.

From the outset of his mandate, President Dan emphasized constitutional responsibility, institutional transparency, and the restoration of civic trust. However, the vector of more radical reform has been

assumed by the newly appointed Prime Minister Ilie Bolojan, whose background in administrative modernization and local governance lent credibility to a reformist mandate. In his initial addresses, Bolojan advanced a program of deep democratic reform, targeting systemic dysfunctions revealed by the electoral crisis.

His agenda includes:

- a comprehensive revision of the electoral law, particularly regarding campaign oversight and disinformation control;
- the depoliticization of constitutional adjudication and the strengthening of electoral monitoring bodies;
- the implementation of algorithmic regulation and platform accountability mechanisms;
- and the institutional anchoring of civic education as a democratic safeguard, not merely a curricular add-on.

Placed in the immediate post-electoral context, the "Bolojan Agenda" transcends its technocratic appearance, operating as a symbolic act of governance in a fragile legitimacy environment. The austerity blueprint functions on two registers: externally, as a performative pledge of fiscal discipline to Brussels and international markets; internally, as a stress test for the durability of the coalition's mandate and for the public's tolerance of short-term hardship in exchange for long-term stability. This dual function exposes a deeper dynamic in post-crisis governance: the need to integrate economic necessity into a broader narrative of democratic repair. In the absence of sustained civic engagement and transparent communication, such measures risk being reframed by opponents as externally imposed austerity, undermining the very symbolic capital that the electoral victory sought to restore. The Romanian case thus illustrates how, in a volatile political climate, the consolidation of democratic continuity requires not only the correction of fiscal imbalances, but also the careful management of political symbolism and public perception.

Yet, despite their normative clarity, these initiatives must confront not only political resistance, but also the symbolic deficit left by the crisis. But legitimacy cannot be restored solely through functional restoration; it requires a reconstitution of public meaning, a discursive reaffirmation of democratic values, and a pedagogical effort to integrate the crisis into the collective memory as a moment of democratic reflexivity, not as a silent rupture.

This task cannot be delegated exclusively to state institutions. Civil society, academia, and independent media bear a critical responsibility in facilitating a symbolic rearticulation of legitimacy, capable of bridging institutional credibility with civic recognition. Without such a multidimensional strategy of democratic reconstruction, even a reformist government such as Bolojan's risks governing under conditions of latent distrust, where legitimacy remains formally intact but symbolically unsettled.

The 2024–2025 Romanian presidential elections revealed the extent to which democratic resilience cannot be reduced to institutional continuity or procedural correction. The crisis that unfolded, marked by electoral annulment, judicial exceptionalism, and symbolic contestation, exposed not only systemic vulnerabilities but also profound fractures in the civic imagination and public trust. In this context, legitimacy emerges not as a static attribute of institutions, but as a dynamic and contested process of ethical justification, symbolic coherence, and public recognition.

As this chapter has argued, restoring legitimacy after systemic disruption requires more than legal solutions or technocratic reform. It demands a re-articulation of democratic meaning, one that integrates memory, responsibility, and civic pedagogy into the architecture of political repair. The responses of President Nicușor Dan and Prime Minister Ilie Bolojan offer distinct but complementary trajectories: one grounded in procedural restraint and civic prudence; the other oriented toward structural modernization and reform. Yet both face the same underlying imperative: to rebuild democratic credibility in both institutional and symbolic registers.

It is worth noting that both President Nicușor Dan and Prime Minister Bolojan stand far removed from the expectations embodied in the "saviour myth" that Călin Georgescu appeared so eager to fulfil. The populist promise of redemption, capable of catapulting an outsider from political obscurity into the national spotlight [24], no longer occupies, at least for the moment, a place in Romania's political landscape. The question that remains is whether leaders lacking in personal charisma can nonetheless achieve what the unsubstantiated vision of the self-styled "guru" claimed to deliver.

Drawing on theoretical contributions, we can conclude that post-crisis legitimacy must be cultivated through transparent deliberation, narrative coherence, and participatory reconstruction. Democratic institutions must not only function, they must perform, convince, and be perceived as morally intelligible. In this sense, the future of Romanian democracy depends on its ability to transform rupture into reflection, and crisis into constitutional maturity.

From Crisis to Reform: Institutional and Civic Implications

The 2024–2025 Romanian presidential elections serve as a critical juncture in the trajectory of post-communist democratization, highlighting both the vulnerabilities and the latent adaptive capacities of political systems under stress. The annulment of an electoral round, while exceptional, is not without parallels in other European contexts. Episodes of institutional intervention in electoral processes, whether in the form of judicial annulments, heightened scrutiny over campaign financing, or regulatory action against disinformation have occurred in countries such as Ukraine (post-2004 Orange Revolution) [25]), Austria (2016 annulment of the presidential run-off), and Bulgaria (constitutional interventions on electoral legislation). These cases collectively underscore that institutional resilience is neither static nor linear; it is tested, recalibrated, and often redefined in the aftermath of crisis.

From an institutional perspective, the Romanian case confirms that formal mechanisms for crisis response must be complemented by transparent, deliberative, and normatively coherent procedures [22]. The absence of such coherence risks transforming protective interventions into sources of further polarization and distrust. Comparative experience within the EU suggests that states with robust electoral commissions, independent media regulators, and codified mechanisms for digital platform accountability, as in Estonia or Denmark, are better equipped to navigate electoral disruption without incurring severe legitimacy costs [26].

The Republic of Moldova offers an instructive comparative perspective on the interplay between electoral integrity and democratic resilience under conditions of sustained external pressure. While its democratic institutions remain comparatively fragile and its political

system more directly exposed to overt geopolitical influence, particularly from the Russian Federation, recent electoral cycles have prompted targeted reforms aimed at enhancing transparency in campaign financing, strengthening the operational independence of the Central Electoral Commission, and developing institutional mechanisms to counter disinformation. Notably, the establishment of the Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation, alongside the banning of certain pro-Russian media channels and political parties, reflects a strategic attempt to address vulnerabilities exploited through "active measures" such as staged protests, illegal campaign financing, and manipulative electoral promises.

Yet, as experts [27]. observe, these countermeasures remain constrained by deep-seated structural vulnerabilities: a polarized political landscape, fluctuating judicial independence, entrenched oligarchic influence, and persistent pro-Russian sentiment in certain regions such as Găgăuzia. The Moldovan case illustrates the concept of "double reflexive control" whereby hostile actors adapt their tactics whether the state acts or refrains from acting, thereby ensuring that institutional responses are never final or unproblematic. This underscores a central lesson for post-Soviet and post-communist democracies: institutional reform must grapple not only with procedural deficiencies, but also with the enduring legacies of informal power structures and identity-based cleavages that can be readily instrumentalized in the electoral arena.

From a civic standpoint, the Romanian crisis revealed the pressing need for democratic literacy as a form of resilience infrastructure. The capacity of citizens to critically evaluate competing narratives, resist disinformation, and demand accountability from institutions is not innate, it must be cultivated. Here too, Moldova provides a relevant comparison: civil society organizations, often supported by international donors, have developed media literacy programs and fact-checking initiatives (e.g., StopFals.md) to combat the pervasive influence of propaganda in electoral contexts. Yet, the reach of such initiatives remains uneven, especially in rural areas, and their impact is contingent upon the parallel strengthening of institutional responsiveness.

In this light, the Romanian experience should be leveraged not merely as a cautionary tale, but as a policy laboratory for aligning

institutional reform with civic empowerment, an alignment equally relevant for neighbors such as Moldova. Electoral law revision, enhanced judicial transparency, and regulatory frameworks for digital campaigning must be paired with participatory deliberation, historical reckoning, and symbolic repair. Such an approach ensures that reform is not only a matter of administrative redesign, but a process of re-legitimating democratic authority through shared ownership of the political order.

Ultimately, the lesson from Romania, and from other East-European and EU precedents, is that democratic resilience requires a dual track of action: one that fortifies institutional safeguards while investing in the civic competencies that give those institutions their meaning. Without this alignment, reform risks becoming a technocratic exercise divorced from the lived reality of democratic citizenship.

The Romanian electoral crisis, when placed within the broader panorama of twenty-first-century political upheavals, compels a deeper interrogation of what we mean by institutional stability. In a world characterized by accelerating technological change, intensified geopolitical competition, and the proliferation of hybrid threats, stability can no longer be equated with procedural regularity or constitutional inertia. Political institutions operate in an environment of permanent contestation, where legitimacy is tested not at fixed intervals but continuously, in real time, under the scrutiny of a hyper-connected public sphere. In such a context, the decisive question is not whether institutions can *endure* disruption, but whether they can adapt without eroding their normative core. This requires more than the mechanical reproduction of legal frameworks; it demands the cultivation of anticipatory capacities, cross-sectoral cooperation, and the embedding of resilience as a cultural and ethical norm, not merely as an administrative function. The Romanian case reveals both the potential for decisive institutional intervention and the fragility of public trust when such intervention lacks transparent, participatory justification, raising the question of how stability itself should be redefined in an era where crises are not anomalies but structural features of the political landscape.

Conclusions

The 2024–2025 Romanian presidential elections were not just a bump in the usual political calendar. They shook the very idea of how resilient and adaptable our institutions really are, especially in a time when hybrid threats, algorithmic populism, and entrenched social divides are no longer exceptions but the backdrop of politics. It all started like any other election—until it didn't. The first round's annulment, something no one had seen before in post-communist Romania, turned the race into a constitutional rupture. Supporters called it a necessary safeguard against procedural breaches and even foreign meddling. Critics saw something else: a reminder that militant democracy can act with force, but sometimes at the expense of public trust, and perhaps with a taste of judicial overreach.

From this vantage point, resilience emerges not as a static attribute of political systems, but as an inherently dynamic, multidimensional process. It requires the ability to absorb shocks without collapsing, to adapt institutional practice to evolving threats, and to restore normative coherence and symbolic integrity in the aftermath of disruption. In the Romanian case, the simultaneous presence of judicial exceptionalism, algorithmically amplified populism, and a highly polarized public sphere revealed that electoral legitimacy is not an automatic by-product of constitutional design. Instead, it must be actively constructed, performed, and reaffirmed through transparent governance, participatory deliberation, and inclusive political discourse.

The responses of President Nicuşor Dan, emphasizing constitutional prudence and procedural order, and of Prime Minister Ilie Bolojan, pursuing deep structural reforms of the electoral, judicial, and administrative systems, embody two complementary logics of post-crisis governance: stabilization and transformation. Yet both face the same strategic challenge: bridging the gap between the formal restoration of democratic function and the symbolic reintegration of democratic meaning. Without sustained efforts in civic education, public communication, and the creation of participatory oversight mechanisms, institutional repair risks remaining formally effective but symbolically incomplete.

Comparative experience reinforces this conclusion. The Republic of Moldova, operating under persistent geopolitical pressure from

the Russian Federation, has undertaken targeted reforms in campaign finance transparency, electoral commission independence, and counter-disinformation strategies. As Andronic [27]. observes, Moldova's defensive measures, ranging from the banning of politically controlled media channels to the dissolution of parties acting as proxies for foreign influence, remain constrained by structural vulnerabilities: fluctuating judicial independence, entrenched oligarchic networks, and identity-based cleavages in regions such as Găgăuzia. Crucially, Moldova illustrates the principle of "double reflexive control", whereby hostile actors adapt whether the state intervenes or refrains, ensuring that resilience strategies are never final. Parallel lessons can be drawn from Austria's annulment of its 2016 presidential run-off, Ukraine's post-2004 electoral reforms, and Bulgaria's constitutional interventions in election law, each case demonstrating that resilience is not a destination, but a continuous process of recalibration.

In light of these converging insights, the Romanian episode should be understood as a liminal moment in the country's democratic development, a threshold that exposed the fragility of legitimacy while simultaneously opening space for democratic renewal. It underscores the need for a broader theory of democratic repair that integrates institutional reform, symbolic reconstruction, and civic capacity-building. Such a framework must draw on the interplay between memory (Ricoeur), communicative action (Habermas), and counter-democratic vigilance (Rosanvallon) to ensure that democratic systems do not merely survive crises but emerge from them strengthened in both structure and meaning.

Ultimately, the lasting lesson is that resilience is never definitive. Each democratic crisis uncovers new fissures between political authority and social reality, compelling renewed institutional learning and civic engagement. For Romania and for other European democracies navigating similar pressure, the challenge is not simply to restore what was disrupted, but to transform crisis into an enduring opportunity for constitutional maturity, societal cohesion, and the deepening of democratic culture.

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Her work stands out through a sustained commitment to understanding the mechanisms of contemporary governance, the cultural and discursive foundations of legitimacy, and the transformations of identity and communication in today's European societies.

CHAPTER 4.

RĂMAS BUN DE LA REGIMUL HIBRID: TESTAREA DEMOCRATIZĂRII ÎN UCRAINA PE DRUMURILE RĂZBOIULUI

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https://doi.org/10.59295/sdcri2025.04

Rezumat: *Articolul examinează principalele tendințe ale dezvoltării democrației în Ucraina, ca factor formator de simboluri al consolidării societății în condițiile războiului ruso-ucrainean aflat în desfășurare. Este analizat parcursul statului de la formarea și restabilirea statalității ucrainene până în prezent, cu accent deosebit pe factorii care au favorizat dezvoltarea țării pe o cale democratică. Sunt identificate cauzele deviațiilor autorităților în perioadele de guvernare ale președinților L. Kucima și V. Ianukovici. Este subliniat rolul decisiv al societății civile și al activiștilor în apărarea valorilor democratice în Ucraina, atât în timpul Revoluției Portocalii, cât și al Revoluției Demnității. O atenție specială este acordată importanței democrației în condițiile agresiunii ruse, care durează din 2014. Este evidențiat impactul negativ asupra procesului democratic cauzat de invazia pe scară largă a Rusiei în Ucraina, începută la 24 februarie 2022, precum și de instituirea regimului legal al legii marțiale. Se subliniază importanța eliberării Ucrainei din capcanele regimului politic hibrid, apărarea independenței și atingerea statutului de membru cu drepturi depline al Uniunii Europene și al NATO.*
Cuvinte cheie: *Ucraina, războiul ruso-ucrainean, democrație, regim politic hibrid.*

FAREWELL TO THE HYBRID REGIME: TESTING DEMOCRATIZATION IN UKRAINE ON THE ROADS OF WAR

Abstract: *The article examines the main trends in the development of democracy in Ukraine, as a symbol-forming factor of the consolidation of society in the conditions of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war. The path taken by the state from its inception and the restoration of*

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the Ukrainian state to the present day is analyzed, with special emphasis on the factors that promoted the country's development on a democratic path. The reasons for the deviations of the authorities during the reigns of Presidents L. Kuchma and V. Yanukovych are identified. The decisive role of civil society and activists in upholding democratic values in Ukraine, both during the Orange Revolution and the Revolution of Dignity, is noted. Particular attention is paid to the importance of democracy in the conditions of Russian aggression, which has been ongoing since 2014. The negative impact on the democratic process caused by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and the introduction of a legal martial law regime is noted. The importance of Ukraine's escape from the traps of the hybrid political regime, its defense of independence, and its achievement of full membership in the EU and NATO is emphasized.

Keywords: Ukraine, Russian-Ukrainian war, democracy, hybrid political regime.

Introduction

First of all, it is important to note the special significance of democracy, its preservation and development, particularly in the context and conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian war. After all, this ongoing war is defined not only as aggression by one state against another, namely, Russia against Ukraine. It is characterised by the fact that the Russian authorities and a significant part of society have fallen into the trap of the delusion of Putin's retro-imperial project, which seeks to restore Russia's role as a global imperial power that has the right to impose its will on other peoples and states, and which considers itself the natural (in quotation marks) hegemon of Eurasia, primarily in Central and Eastern Europe.

At the same time, this is a war of values, because it is a war waged by a country that has confidently gone through all the stages of restoring an authoritarian regime and is now evolving, on that basis, into at least neo-totalitarianism. Thus, it is also a war of values: the values of independence, democracy and freedom on the part of Ukraine and the countries that support it, and the values of aggression, domination, genocide, the right of force, the desire to assert power at any cost,

disregarding not only the norms of civilised morality but also international law.

Therefore, this is also an existential war, and an important dimension of it is Ukraine's democratic choice, its desire to be a democratic state, on the one hand, and Russia's rejection of democratisation, the democratic path of development, and a liberal-democratic regime, on the other. This process in Russia began with imitation facade democracy, a hybrid regime, and has now evolved into the formation of a political regime that is in fact at least neo-totalitarian. In a geopolitical sense, this struggle of the Russian authoritarian state, aggressive and retro-imperial, against democratic Ukraine and the democratic West also fits into the context of the confrontation between the democratic West and the authoritarian East as a whole — not the entire East, but primarily a number of countries such as Russia, the People's Republic of China, North Korea, Iran, and so on [5, p. 48–49]. Finally, it concerns the choice of orientation of many countries of the global South, which generally take a wait-and-see position or, unfortunately, in recent decades and years have been drifting steadily towards authoritarian and even openly dictatorial regimes [15, p. 123]. Thus, the question and role of democracy in the context of this war is enormous, especially since democracy is not just a political regime and the processes of its functioning, but also a socio-political value shared by the majority of Ukrainians.

For many Ukrainians, the meaning of this war lies in defending their independence and statehood, as well as preserving and strengthening its democratic nature. Otherwise, many Ukrainians do not understand why they should sacrifice their health and lives in this brutal war that has been going on since 2014. Next, we will look at how democratic trends and transformations have taken place in Ukraine over the previous historical period.

The path to democracy through the pitfalls of authoritarian relapses

First of all, in the first section, we will note how the democratisation process took place from the early years of Gorbachev's perestroika to the formation of the foundations of democracy in independent Ukraine. It is obvious that perestroika opened up new opportunities for the then inhabitants of the USSR and the Ukrainian SSR that had

never been seen before in Soviet reality. This was primarily the policy of glasnost, the possibility of holding increasingly free, initially limited competitive (elections at the grassroots level, in labour collectives of enterprises and organisations), and then increasingly competitive elections, which were based not only on the competition of the personal qualities of the candidates, but also on ideological positions and political platforms. I would like to remind you that this process developed quite rapidly from 1989 to 1990.

Of particular importance was the revolution in values that took place in the minds of Ukrainians, who reclaimed their own history and discovered the historical path that the Ukrainian people had followed in previous eras. The self-awareness of Ukrainians had been grossly distorted by Soviet cultural and educational policies and repressions against Ukrainians and other peoples of the Soviet Union, the destruction of their prominent representatives, and the even longer-standing Russian imperial policy of Russification and destruction of Ukrainian identity, uniqueness and culture. Therefore, perestroika truly opened up new horizons [7]. However, within the framework of the Soviet Union, the further development of the peoples and nationalities of the Soviet Union proved impossible, and therefore, after the failure of the attempt to restore the omnipotence of the nomenclature during the August 1991 coup, Ukraine quite quickly, on 24 August, adopted an important political and legal act on its state independence.

In this way, together with other Soviet republics, some of which, such as the Baltic countries, had already embarked on the path to asserting their state independence, it actively participated in the process of dismantling the Soviet Union and thus the omnipotence of the party nomenclature and the mode of rule that was characteristic of the Soviet era. As Ukrainian independence began to assert itself, Ukraine increasingly acquired the qualities of a sovereign state, both formally and substantively, and the processes of democratisation continued quite actively, perhaps thanks to the crises that neither the Soviet authorities nor the post-Soviet leadership could cope with. Therefore, the initial enthusiasm for independence and the euphoria of leaving the USSR evaporated quite quickly. As early as 1992, Ukrainian citizens began to realise more and more that independence does not automat-

ically bring security, prosperity or democracy, but requires considerable effort and self-sacrifice [12].

In the difficult circumstances of the early years after independence, the activities of opposition forces such as the People's Movement of Ukraine, the Republican Party and the Democratic Party were particularly important. The suspension and subsequent weakening of the Communist Party of Ukraine, although for some time its role was taken over by the Socialist Party of Ukraine and the Peasant Party of Ukraine, which had a significant influence on political processes in our country due to their significant representation in the Ukrainian parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, also affected the processes of democratic transformation. Nevertheless, the Ukrainian authorities gradually pursued a policy of distancing themselves from the Soviet legacy, the Soviet model and related Soviet forms of government and state administration.

However, the democratisation processes were ambiguous and largely determined by the deepening systemic socio-political and socio-economic crisis in Ukraine. Mass impoverishment of the population, non-payment of wages, unemployment, miners' protests, the beginning of active emigration and labour migration from the country – all these processes raised questions about the responsibility of President Leonid Kravchuk as early as 1994, and continued with the government, at that time headed by Leonid Kuchma, and the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine.

Ultimately, all these political players, who tried for quite a long period of this fierce struggle to shift responsibility from their shoulders to others, seeking to whitewash themselves and blacken their opponents, led to early extraordinary, early elections at all levels of power in Ukraine. The phenomenon of the 1994 elections in Ukraine deserves special attention and mention [4]. It was during this period that Ukrainians were given the opportunity to elect virtually all of the country's authorities, from the President of Ukraine and the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine to all local authorities: regional, district and local councils – rural, settlement and city councils.

In these circumstances, it is very important that these elections were sufficiently competitive and open, and that the influence of so-called political technologies on voters was minimal. It was then that

Ukrainians had the chance to elect a new government. To a large extent, they failed to distance themselves from the previous nomenclature. This happened because, in the process of dismantling Soviet statehood in Ukraine and forming national statehood, the main factor in the formation of personnel, personnel policy and, accordingly, the institutional design of the Ukrainian state was the nomenclature formed by the Soviet regime. It was transformed from colonial-type managerial personnel, in fact representatives of the Soviet Union (as the successor in many respects to the Russian Empire), into new representatives of the national elite. It is clear that this elite was formed on a nomenclature basis from personnel, who were selected and educated by the education system and personnel policy of the Soviet Union. They were by no means prepared for the establishment and affirmation of a national state, but rather for the implementation of the interests and tasks of the union centre – Moscow. This greatly slowed and hampered down not only the processes of nation-building and state-building, but also the processes of forming a democratic political elite accountable to its citizens.

After 1994, Ukraine entered a long period of strategic uncertainty regarding the priorities for its further development, wavering between democratic and authoritarian tendencies. It is important to mention such key events as the 1995 Constitutional Agreement, which became the legal prologue to the adoption of the Constitution on 28 June 1996. This Constitution, in turn, established Ukraine as a presidential-parliamentary republic, in which significant powers were concentrated in the hands of the president. Leonid Kuchma became president of Ukraine in 1994. His motto was: "Give me more power, I don't have enough authority". He is also remembered for his famous phrase: "Tell me what to build, and I will build it for you". In it, one can see an amazing combination of the psychology of a representative of the Soviet system of governance or, according to the old Russian tradition, a "prikazchik" (foreman), who played the role of a successful servant of his master, in this case nominally the Ukrainian people, and at the same time a person who constantly demanded as much authority and power as possible for himself, and for the most part received it.

The 1996 Constitution had many positive features in terms of the legal definition of Ukraine as a democratic, legal and social state in

which the rule of law and the priority of human rights are proclaimed. It enshrined the principle of separation of powers, the rule of law and the inviolability of fundamental human rights and freedoms. At the same time, in terms of preventing authoritarian tendencies in Ukraine, this constitution did not act as a restraining factor. On the contrary, by granting executive power, it simultaneously freed it from specific political responsibility for the results of the implementation of a very powerful package of powers.

The years following the adoption of the Constitution were marked by constant government crises. On the one hand, Leonid Kuchma continued to seek a format for his new powers, as, for example, during the so-called referendum "on the people's initiative" in 2000. In reality, there was very little "popular" about this initiative. The initiative itself was born in the minds of political strategists and close advisers to President Kuchma, who saw the expansion of his powers as a guarantee of their own interests and those of the financial and industrial groups they represented. The idea behind this referendum was quite obvious. Not satisfied with the constitutional powers granted to him in 1996, Leonid Kuchma sought to transition to a super-presidential republic, as it was called at the time. In essence, he wanted to build a regime of personalised autocracy modelled on the Russian Federation and Belarus [19].

At the same time, this referendum, which would have given the president significantly more powers, would have given him carte blanche to form a bicameral parliament in Ukraine (on unknown and therefore unclear grounds and needs). Moreover, it is highly likely that the upper house would be formed mainly by the president himself. Despite all these initiatives, formally supported by a vote that was largely manipulated, if not falsified, for various reasons, its results were not ratified or approved by parliament. Therefore, this legalistic transition to a super-presidential republic in Ukraine did not take place. L. Kuchma's entire second term as president was accompanied by an intensification of negative trends in Ukraine's development, not only authoritarian ones, but also due to the escalation of confrontation with the opposition to the president and the radicalisation of socio-political struggle in Ukraine. These processes took place against the backdrop of relative socio-economic stabilisation in the country.

By the end of his term, Leonid Kuchma had minimal authority and support in society, with his personal approval rating barely exceeding 4%. This prevented him from accepting the proposal to run for another presidential term, which would have been a clear violation of the Constitution. Unfortunately, the Constitutional Court of Ukraine ruled that Leonid Kuchma's first and second terms in office did not add up to two terms, but were only one term as president. After such legal prostitution and a master class in legal casuistry, much to the shame of the Constitutional Court and our justice system, L. Kuchma showed a more sober understanding that his chances of power were either illusory or that this power would be too costly for him, not to mention Ukraine. Therefore, he made a choice and bet on the "heir" operation.

This was consistent with the logic of the 1999 transfer of power in the Russian Federation from Boris Yeltsin to Vladimir Putin. After Leonid Kuchma chose Viktor Yanukovych as his main successor rather than his main rival Viktor Yushchenko, the Orange Revolution unfolded in the country. It was based on the entirely justified outrage of Ukraine's democratically minded voters at the conduct of the elections, especially the second round. This election campaign was conducted with brutal, blatant and undisguised fraud, with so-called carousels, ballot box stuffing, intimidation of voters and bribery. The events of October 2004, when millions of Ukrainians took to the streets of Ukraine and the main Maidan in Kyiv – Maidan Nezalezhnosti – led to the collapse of the scripted, and possibly directly imposed by the Kremlin, scenario of the transition of power [19]. The scale and energy of the Ukrainian people's protests against the results of these elections, against manipulation and falsification, against attempts to minimise the development of electoral democracy in Ukraine, led, with the support of the democratic world, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Council of Europe and the European Union, to the impossibility of implementing this scenario. Ultimately, the protests, in which Ukrainian civil society played a leading role, resulted in a certain political and legal compromise.

First, there was the constitutional compromise of 8 December 2004. In order to defuse the situation and at the same time reconcile the opponents and the political forces that supported them, a transition was made from a presidential-parliamentary to a parliamenta-

ry-presidential republic. As a result, the constitutional powers of the president were significantly reduced, while the powers of parliament and the government were increased. The latter was to be appointed and controlled mainly by parliament. Accordingly, the president's powers were no longer such a decisive factor in the struggle for power, and this cleared the way for the so-called third or repeat second round of elections, as a result of which the opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko won.

Ukraine's unfinished democratisation: Viktor Yushchenko's chance and Viktor Yanukovych's authoritarian restoration

The period of Viktor Yushchenko's presidency was initially marked by high hopes and expectations [8]. Ukraine returned to the path of electoral democracy, and significant steps were taken to ensure the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens. Ukraine took decisive, important steps towards European and Euro-Atlantic integration that would determine its course for years and decades to come. It should be noted that these steps were initiated by Leonid Kuchma, and this is his historic positive legacy. However, these processes began to take on real meaning under President Viktor Yushchenko. This included such important steps as the transition to negotiations on association with the EU and attempts to secure a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Ukraine. This is to the credit of Viktor Yushchenko and his political team.

However, not everything went well with Viktor Yushchenko's political team. Already in the first year of his presidency, a split occurred in this team between Yushchenko and his supporters and Yulia Tymoshenko, who was prime minister. This first deep political crisis revealed the extreme heterogeneity of the Orange Revolution victors' camp. It had a significant impact on the effectiveness of the president and his team, as well as on Ukrainians' perception of the results of the Orange Revolution. This gradually led to the erosion of the achievements of 2004–2005 and the levelling of the important gains of the Orange Revolution. The odious Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych returned to power, initially as Prime Minister.

In 2010, new presidential elections were held, in which V. Yushchenko received a meagre level of support from Ukrainians, which proved to be a fiasco for him as a politician and his policies, mainly

due to voters' disbelief and disappointment in his ability to deliver on his promises. However, the battle between the main candidates for the presidency, Viktor Yanukovych and Yulia Tymoshenko, was quite fierce. Here again, it should be noted that the dichotomy of "Yanukovych as an authoritarian leader and Tymoshenko as a democratic leader" does not fully stand up to criticism. Both well-known politicians were representatives of the oligarchic clans that had become the main actors in the Ukrainian political process and stakeholders in its political regime since the late period of Leonid Kuchma's presidency. They were both authoritarian leaders. But Yanukovych embodied the traditional type of leader, like a conservative post-Soviet politician. Tymoshenko, on the other hand, was a populist leader.

However, neither of them really represented different macro-regions of Ukraine. This should be mentioned, because at that time a simplified and largely misleading "east–west" dichotomy of Ukraine was widespread in Ukraine and beyond. In fact, both were representatives of eastern Ukraine. The difference was that Yulia Tymoshenko was a representative of the Dnipropetrovsk clan, whose key representatives included the notorious Prime Minister of Ukraine Pavlo Lazarenko and L. Kuchma. Yanukovych, on the other hand, was a creation of the Donetsk clan, whose most famous sponsor and representative was Ukrainian billionaire Rinat Akhmetov.

Therefore, Viktor Yanukovych's victory over Yulia Tymoshenko did not mean the victory of authoritarianism over democracy. Rather, it meant that one authoritarian leader was able to defeat another authoritarian leader. As a result, tendencies towards the curtailment of democratic processes, restrictions on the scope of democratic factors, and, in fact, the progressive development of the Ukrainian state intensified and became entrenched in Ukraine. These negative developments were quite noticeable from the first years of Yanukovych's rule. In particular, as the head of the Party of Regions and as the president of Ukraine, he did not even hide his sympathies for the model of power and system of values on which United Russia was based in the Russian Federation. Accordingly, Putin's regime in that country was a model and desirable form of government for him. As it turned out later, it was the customer and controller of his political mission in Ukraine.

Thus, the then ruling Party of Regions acted as the official partner of the United Russia party, and Yanukovych himself publicly declared that he sought to build a strong vertical of power in Ukraine, which was confirmed very quickly in 2011 [10]. Then, at his political behest, once again obedient, loyal, and, in this case, clearly unprincipled, the Constitutional Court of Ukraine "stamped" a deeply questionable, obviously commissioned decision that the Constitution in the version of 8 December 2004 was recognised as illegitimate, adopted with procedural violations. Consequently, the Constitutional Court ruled to return to the version of the Constitution dated 28 June 1996.

This shameful decision brought Ukraine back to the presidential-parliamentary model, to the supremacy of the president's prerogatives and powers. Other legislative acts adopted by parliament, seemingly in implementation of this decision, in particular the Law on the Cabinet of Ministers, further strengthened the influence of the president and his appointees on political processes in the state. The Ukrainian political regime began to drift confidently towards authoritarianism, following the Russian model. It reached the point where, after local elections that were once again largely manipulated, Viktor Yanukovych and his party initiated the resignation of the heads of more than 40 municipalities and regional centres of Ukraine who had been elected by the local communities. This was an undisguised attempt to extend this "verticalisation of power" even to those institutions of power which, according to the Constitution and the laws of Ukraine, had broad administrative autonomy and should not have been part of the vertical structure of executive power.

The culmination of these efforts to establish an authoritarian regime in Ukraine and attempts to consolidate it were, of course, the geostrategic changes in Viktor Yanukovych's foreign policy. He demagogically declared that he consistently advocated the continuation of European integration. Unlike Euro-Atlantic integration, which, he said, the country did not need, Ukraine should become a non-aligned state, because no one was threatening it, so Ukraine did not need to join NATO. At the same time, European integration remained a priority in his rhetoric, with the successful signing of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU as a new step towards its implementation.

Yanukovych's domestic policy included the suppression of the opposition and repression of his political opponents. In particular, former Prosecutor General Viktor Lutsenko, former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, Yanukovych's main rival in the presidential election, and many others ended up in prison. Some of them repented before the new head of state and reached an agreement with the investigation, such as former Minister of Ecology Heorhiy Filipchuk, while others were forced to serve their sentences.

In these conditions of democratic regression and attacks on the rights and freedoms of Ukrainian citizens, a very important, seemingly foreign policy step is being taken, which is a completely logical consequence and result of the authoritarian deviation of the political regime during Yanukovych's time. The government, led by Mykola Azarov, announced a legally incorrect statement that the Ukrainian government was suspending negotiations on the Ukraine–EU Association Agreement with the European Union. This was absurd even from a formal legal point of view, because negotiations on this agreement had already been completed. It had been initialled, i.e. it was completely ready for signing, and no further negotiations were taking place.

Until October 2013, V. Yanukovych and his Prime Minister M. Azarov had publicly stated that this agreement would be signed at the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius. The summit took place, albeit with Yanukovych formally present, but without any relevant documents being signed by Ukraine. There was a clear and obvious Russian influence behind all of this.

It is worth remembering that the Kremlin had previously twisted Armenia's arm, and its government refused to sign the Association Agreement. At that time, Russia seemed to be successfully dictating its will to the Ukrainian government. It is obvious that it had very effective levers of influence over Yanukovych. According to the well-founded assumptions of many experts, it had very serious compromising information on him, which, if made public, would mean at least his political death.

Using these trump cards, Putin forced his protégé Yanukovych to capitulate and attempt to reorient Ukraine's foreign policy, and thus its domestic policy, from a European and democratic vector to a Eurasian and authoritarian one. However, Ukrainian society stood in the

way of the triumph of Putin's plan. Ukrainian youth gathered at the Euromaidan in Kyiv, initially without political slogans and refusing to support the opposition. They sought to stop this retreat from European to Eurasian integration and from what was, albeit hybrid at the time, perhaps even a facade of democracy, to a Eurasian police state and consolidated autocracy of the Russian–Belarusian model [13].

Ultimately, after the unprovoked, except for the authoritarian instincts of Viktor Yanukovych's team, most likely under the direct dictation of the Kremlin, violent dispersal of peaceful protesters — young men and women — at the end of November, Euromaidan quickly grew into a mass protest. It became the centre not only of peaceful protest, but also of growing violent confrontation between the opposition and Yanukovych's regime. This confrontation culminated in the bloody events of the Revolution of Dignity, when more than 100 Ukrainians fell victim to the security forces on the instructions and with the direct participation of Russian security forces. These events, which were symbolically named the Revolution of Dignity, led to Viktor Yanukovych leaving Kyiv. He attempted to convene a somewhat obscure congress in Kharkiv, but the delegates to this congress never saw their leader. With the help of the Russian special services and the last Minister of Defence of Ukraine, Pavlo Lebedev, he ended up in Rostov-on-Don, Russia, via Ukraine.

Thus, Viktor Yanukovych's attempt to establish an authoritarian regime in Ukraine ended ingloriously, bloodily and shamefully. This was the second systematic attempt after Leonid Kuchma to introduce authoritarian rule in Ukraine. Incidentally, in both cases, the Kremlin played a significant, if not decisive, role. After all, if successful, these changes would inevitably have buried the democratic aspirations of Ukrainians and the European and Euro-Atlantic prospects of the Ukrainian state [9].

Post-revolutionary Ukraine: democratic choice in the context of war with retro-imperial autocracy

February 2014 marks the beginning of a new stage in the modern history of Ukraine, and possibly Europe and the whole world. In the aftermath of the Revolution of Dignity, Ukrainian society hoped and believed that its bloody excesses were behind it and that a period of peaceful development lay ahead, with the country returning to

the path of democracy and, accordingly, moving closer to and successfully integrating into the EU and NATO. The overwhelming majority of Ukrainians demanded that the new authorities, initially headed by the acting president, Verkhovna Rada Chairman Oleksandr Turchynov, implement systemic reforms that would transform Ukraine into an effective democratic state with a socially oriented market economy and guaranteed respect for the law. Accordingly, society demanded that the authorities carry out systemic reforms that would transform Ukraine into an effective democratic state with a socially oriented market economy, guaranteed respect for the law, and adequate protection of the rights and freedoms of citizens. They needed a Ukraine that aspires to and is capable of becoming a full member of the European and Euro-Atlantic community.

These processes of reform and change, which began under pressure from civil society and were implemented, albeit with various obstacles, by the authorities from 2014 to 2016, were quite active and progressive. They showed that Ukrainian civil society is a key actor and the main driver of change in Ukraine. It dictates these changes, tries to implement and control them, and actively participates in their implementation.

These positive changes, starting with the return to a parliamentary-presidential republic, measures to reform the Ukrainian political system, including the party system (remember the mechanism of state financing of political parties, which was also a completely European, democratic norm), and modernisation of the public administration and service system, all took place, unfortunately, against the backdrop of the outbreak and escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian war. From the illegal annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of hostilities in eastern Ukraine, under Russia's false slogans that it had nothing to do with it, and that in both cases it was the initiative of local people, citizens of Ukraine who were dissatisfied with the "Kyiv regime", to its open aggression and full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia has been steadily escalating its confrontation with Ukraine [20, p. 33–34]. Moreover, the characteristics of this so-called Kyiv regime in Moscow's propaganda and official statements have increasingly evolved from accusations of insufficient respect for human rights, in particular anti-Semitism, undemocratic practices, and so on, to accusations, ul-

timately, of the illegitimacy of the government, attaching such absurd labels to it as junta, Nazis, fascists, and the like.

The entire arsenal of Moscow's propaganda – destructive, false, and unfounded – showed that the Russian authorities do not perceive Ukraine as an independent state, do not respect the clearly stated free choice of the Ukrainian people, disregard the results of electoral processes, and, ultimately, do not take into account the fact that Ukraine exists as a sovereign state.

It was under these conditions that the reformist surge of 2014–2016 nevertheless yielded significant results [18]. Among the many reforms, including social, educational and healthcare reforms, the most extensive and important for the future of Ukrainian statehood and public administration was the set of reforms aimed at decentralising power [11]. It was the processes of decentralisation of power, aimed at transferring powers from executive bodies to local self-government bodies, that brought about significant and, for the most part, positive changes. These included the creation of new amalgamated territorial communities with a much larger resource base, powers, including financial capabilities. As a result, communities have become more self-sufficient, stable and resilient in their development.

Territorial and administrative reform was also carried out not only at the level of territorial communities, but also at the level of districts. New districts were created, larger in terms of territory and resources, which made it possible to create a self-sufficient and self-governing sub-regional level of government. Unfortunately, these processes at the level of the newly formed districts were not completed. The new district councils, despite the promises of the first and second post-revolutionary presidents, Petro Poroshenko and Volodymyr Zelensky respectively, to complete the transformation at the district level in favour of local self-government bodies by granting the district councils the relevant powers, have not received those powers. Elected in 2020, they have not acquired the powers promised by all existing concepts of decentralisation of power.

Finally, at the regional and regional level of government, the processes of decentralisation of power have, unfortunately, not led to any changes. Therefore, the system of public management and administration, which was established by the laws of 1997–1998, with the de fac-

to omnipotence of district and regional state administrations, which were subordinate to the Cabinet of Ministers, but whose main leader remained one or another president of Ukraine, was left untouched. This has given rise to many justified criticisms and complaints.

At the same time, Ukraine took important steps towards rapprochement with the European Union and, to a certain extent, NATO. The course towards European and Euro-Atlantic integration was legislatively enshrined in the new version of the Law "On the Principles of Foreign Policy of Ukraine" and finally even enshrined at the constitutional level. Its introduction into the country's basic law not only demonstrated the importance and value of Europe for the Ukrainian state, but also laid the maximum possible legal grounds for its irreversibility – for example, in the context of possible changes in the party-political situation, both on the part of the president and the Ukrainian parliament and, accordingly, the government.

These strategically important steps, although consolidated by the adoption, signing and ratification of the Association Agreement with the European Union, were nevertheless significantly affected by negative external and internal factors and did not fully deliver the results expected by society. Thus, Ukraine could not really count on such an important step towards EU membership as its recognition as a candidate country. That is, until the full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation on 24 February 2022.

The Kremlin leadership, having concluded that local and regional means of influence on Ukrainian society, including the artificial fuelling of separatist movements, aggressive campaigns as part of hybrid warfare, a flood of disinformation and the systematic undermining of the authority of the Ukrainian government, were not producing the desired results, resorted to direct and undisguised military aggression. However, in an attempt to "shyly" disguise it, with the aim of misinforming both its own citizens and the international community, it used the term "special military operation."

In fact, the goals that were officially and repeatedly voiced by Vladimir Putin and his team about the "denazification" of Ukraine, its "demilitarisation", its neutral status, preventing it from joining NATO, and so on, actually all boil down to desovereignising Ukraine, depriving it of its statehood, political choice and responsibility for its future.

The aim is to draw it into the orbit of Russian politics, or even annex it completely. Russia has succeeded in this to a greater or lesser extent when we talk about modern Georgia under the rule of the "Georgian Dream."

Under the new circumstances, the Russian Federation continued its course of escalating the situation in Ukraine, undermining the unity of the Ukrainian people, demoralising them, physically exterminating them and morally bleeding them dry, with a view to developing a full-scale war. At the same time, it also demonstrated its inability to achieve this either through hybrid warfare or through the direct invasion of Ukraine by its armed forces. In other words, Putin's blitzkrieg failed, and since then the Russian Federation has been forced to switch from its failed tactics of a quick victorious war to a war of attrition, exhausting the mobilisation, demographic, military and political resources of Ukrainian society. Unfortunately and horribly, the war continues to this day.

Ukrainian society is fighting Russian aggression, resisting Russian attacks on a vast front stretching over a thousand kilometres in daily battles and skirmishes. Of course, Ukraine is suffering enormous losses, especially painful in terms of the loss of its most valuable asset – its citizens, its human potential. In such conditions, Ukraine is faced with a choice about how to deal with democracy in the face of mortal danger [3]. This war is obviously not only important for the preservation of the Ukrainian nation and its right to self-determination, not only for the preservation of the Ukrainian state, its sovereignty, and its ability to choose its own path of development. For Ukrainians, success in the Russian-Ukrainian war is linked to the preservation and strengthening of democracy [2].

Wartime challenges to democracy and hybrid political regime risks

It cannot be ignored that, in the context of full-scale Russian aggression, Ukrainian democracy is facing unprecedented challenges and undergoing significant deformative influences [16, p. 113–114]. Firstly, it should be recalled that even before the war, the 2019 elections led to the formation of a so-called mono-majority in Ukraine, for the first time in its history, when President Zelensky and his Servant of the People party gained, in effect, unlimited control over central and,

to a large extent, local government. In such conditions, of course, the temptation to adopt one form or another of authoritarian rule was already very great.

Secondly, the logic of confronting Russian aggression also prompted the maximum concentration of power resources in the hands of the central authorities, especially the president. Thirdly, the legal regime of martial law significantly restricted the constitutional rights and freedoms of Ukrainians. This also meant that the practical use of the instruments of democracy, primarily direct democracy, which had been actively developed and implemented during the reforms in the period after the Revolution of Dignity, was largely marginalised in the political space and deactivated in public policy practices. Of course, some of these instruments were formally preserved, such as electronic petitions, etc., but this did not change the essence of such processes.

The space for democracy, both representative and direct, in Ukraine has narrowed significantly since 24 February 2022. Therefore, Ukrainians are faced with a very difficult choice: security or democracy, sovereignty or civil liberties. And to a large extent, Ukrainians themselves show that there is no dilemma for them in this choice. This is because Ukrainians value sovereignty, statehood and democracy most highly and consider them to be the most important values. According to various sociological surveys, two-thirds or more of Ukrainian society place values such as Ukraine's independence, statehood, sovereignty, European and Euro-Atlantic choice, but also the value and importance of democracy, on an equal footing [17, p. 20].

At the same time, public opinion in Ukraine shows that, while choosing democracy, highly valuing democracy and clearly understanding that the struggle for Ukraine's freedom and independence is directly linked to the preservation and strengthening of the Ukrainian democratic state and its institutions [1], Ukrainians at the same time demonstrate insufficient political and civic activity. They lack understanding and awareness of the means and forms of political participation through which they can influence their own state and its authorities at various levels. They also have many complaints about the current authorities.

These criticisms and complaints have resulted in a crisis of confidence in key institutions of power: with the exception of the presi-

dency, other key authorities, such as the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, and local authorities (primarily the executive branch), enjoy very low levels of trust, which could even be described as critically low. This raises the question: de facto presidentialism, contrary to constitutional provisions, changes in the political space, in which the key players are not primarily the parliament and the Cabinet of Ministers accountable to it, as required by the Constitution after the return to the 2004 model, but the president, namely the Office of the President and his inner circle, have a decisive influence on Ukrainian politics [14, p. 116]. This is what is causing considerable concern about the future prospects for democracy in Ukraine and about the fact that this new format of a hybrid political regime, which combines democratic and authoritarian features in varying proportions, is, unfortunately, once again becoming relevant and entrenched in Ukrainian political practice.

And here there is room to search for answers to important questions. In recent years, including during the first years of Volodymyr Zelenskyy's presidency, Ukraine has been recognised by other countries and international experts as a state with serious problems in terms of democratic participation, ensuring the rights and freedoms of citizens, excessive influence of oligarchs on political and social processes, the state's information space, and so on. At the same time, it has been recognised as a country with a successful and fairly effective electoral democracy.

However, the last national elections in Ukraine took place in 2019 – the presidential elections and the early parliamentary elections initiated by him – and local elections took place in 2020. Thus, Ukrainians have not elected their central government for six years and have not elected their local government for more than five years. It is clear that in the context of a full-scale war, the holding of elections under the legal regime of martial law is, if not impossible, then certainly extremely difficult. But, on the other hand, the question arises: what about the democratic mechanism of control and renewal of power at all levels? Electoral mechanisms do not work and are impossible, and the tools for citizens to control the activities of the authorities either do not work or are minimal.

Even high- and mid-level officials are not selected through competitive processes, but are appointed under wartime conditions. It is becoming increasingly clear that all of this is leading to the accumulation of serious problems in Ukraine's democratic process and to growing socio-political tensions in society. In addition, Ukraine's enemies, particularly Russia, are not sleeping and are trying to do everything they can to delegitimise the Ukrainian government and deprive it of public support. All these divisions and contradictions in Ukrainian society are being used to provoke its weakening and disintegration. So, instead of democratic national consolidation, we have a certain fragmentation, which, unfortunately, is sometimes provoked by the current government.

Let us recall the corruption scandals, as well as the sad case when President V. Zelensky initiated, and the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopted, laws that changed the system of subordination of anti-corruption bodies and effectively integrated them into the executive branch headed by the president.

Of course, the positive aspect of the attack on the independence of anti-corruption bodies was not only the negative signals from our foreign partners in the EU and NATO countries, which, incidentally, seemed to be largely ignored by the current government. Civil society and Ukrainian youth played a significant role, taking to the streets with the so-called cardboard protest, despite all the legal restrictions of martial law, and stopping this devolution of anti-corruption state policy. President V. Zelensky was forced to propose a different version of the law, and this version, of course, had to take into account criticism from both civil society and our foreign partners. Perhaps not completely, but these pro-corruption legal and institutional transformations were stopped, primarily on the initiative of young people and civil society.

But it is very unpleasant to recall, and simply necessary to record for history, how joyfully the parliamentary majority, the same Servants of the People, applauded the adoption of this law in the session hall of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. These images spread around the world and, of course, made an extremely negative impression, which is very difficult to shake off, and perhaps should not be shaken off, both by supporters of democracy and the rule of law within Ukraine itself

and beyond its borders. Thus, unfortunately, the war continues and places a huge burden on Ukrainian society, exhausting it and, in particular, exhausting the resources of civil society and the capabilities of its active part.

Yes, if we recall the first months of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war, when Ukrainian society truly became a model of democratic consolidation [21], when queues of volunteers stood in front of military registration offices, Ukrainians went to defend their country. Those who, for physical and other reasons, could not fight with weapons in their hands, launched a powerful volunteer movement, which, together with the support of autonomous, self-sufficient local communities, ensured the support of the Ukrainian armed forces and the effectiveness of the rear. All this made it possible not only to resist the aggressor, but also to stabilise the socio-economic situation in the country, provide adequate reception for internally displaced persons and solve other problems.

This potential for resilience and resistance appears to have been significantly reduced in the fourth year of full-scale invasion. This is also because many soldiers and active citizens have either been killed or maimed. Replenishment from the passive part of Ukrainian society, which is quite significant, or from the pro-Russian faction of Ukrainian society, which has simply gone into hiding, the so-called "zhduuns", is limited and predictably unconstructive.

This once again poses serious challenges and threats to the Ukrainian state. Responding to these challenges and threats is the responsibility of the authorities, on the one hand, in responding to the demands of society, including its demand not only to preserve but also to develop democratic processes and procedures and the instruments of the rule of law. On the other hand, it is the responsibility of the authorities to develop and use instruments of democratic influence of the population and citizens on the authorities at all levels. And we also have problems with this, as well as with the readiness of citizens to be equal and demanding partners of the authorities in solving all these problems.

Conclusions

Therefore, in conclusion, it should be emphasised that Ukrainian society has made its value, political and civilisational choice in favour of democracy. It has demonstrated its readiness and ability to fight for it both through peaceful protests and by defending its country from an enemy that seeks to destroy the Ukrainian state and its important pillar – the democratic order. At the same time, despite significant achievements and sacrifices, Ukraine, unfortunately, has not yet emerged from this trap of hybridity and the pitfalls of authoritarian reversals. The Ukrainian political regime continues to remain hybrid. At times, due to external and internal political circumstances, authoritarian tendencies in Ukraine are even intensifying to a certain extent.

This is happening, among other things, because of the inability to use the mechanisms of electoral democracy and the curtailment of mechanisms and restrictions on the instruments of direct democracy. The processes of decentralisation of power in our country have been halted again due to Russia's full-scale invasion.

At the same time, despite severe trials and losses, civil society in Ukraine has not died. It acts, works, and seeks ways to strengthen its influence and presence in social and political processes. It fuels actions to control and influence the restriction of authoritarian tendencies in Ukraine's political process. It continues to influence the authorities, despite the increasingly obvious excesses of their monopolisation. It has been and remains a key actor in the transformation, including democratic transformation, of the Ukrainian state. And the fact that Ukraine strives for full European and Euro-Atlantic integration, which is not a mere constitutional declaration but a demand of Ukrainian citizens, sets a fairly clear direction for our movement towards democracy, a vector of direction and the possibility of objectively assessing coutry's achievements and mistakes.

Of course, it is sad to see certain crisis phenomena among our Western partners, the unpredictability and undisguised authoritarian tendencies of the current head of the White House, Donald Trump, and attempts by populist leaders to "come to terms" with Putin's Russia, not only in Central European countries, but above all in neighbouring countries that are most important to Ukraine, such as Hungary and Slovakia, and, following the recent elections, the Czech Republic.

Similar problems also affect developed Western European countries. This synthesis of populism and authoritarianism, which is becoming increasingly relevant for the Western world, places a double burden on the development of democratic trends and on the ability of Ukraine's democratic forces to ensure its democratic stability and consolidation.

Nevertheless, Ukrainian society is fighting for its independence and sovereignty, as well as for its European and Euro-Atlantic future [6]. An important prerequisite and foundation for this is the preservation and development of a democratic political regime and the strengthening of the institutional and value foundations of the Ukrainian rule of law.

Finally, one of the most important dimensions and resources of all these processes has been and remains not only civil society as such, but also the educational and cultural policy of the Ukrainian state. It must finally move towards creating an effective system of civic education and, as part of it, political education. This is so that Ukrainian citizens receive the necessary knowledge, skills and competences to be effective, conscious, interested, motivated and influential participants in the processes of creating a new Ukraine.

It is evident that in the ashes and ruins of war, previous notions of independence, politics, and politicians are becoming a thing of the past. A new quality of Ukrainian society is emerging, in which veterans of this war, the armed struggle against Russian aggression, and volunteers who have made the greatest contribution to Ukraine's resilience will play an increasingly important role. And it is clear that this is creating a demand for new political forces. Let us emphasise that we are not talking about new political faces, which often turn out to be masks for entering the political arena, and there have been far too many such "new political faces" in Ukraine. Rather, we are talking about the demand for new political forces, new political programmes and, most importantly, new forms of accountability of politicians to their own people and their future.

Ukrainians must have enough strength and inspiration to both withstand the enemy and mortal danger and strengthen their statehood by developing its democratic foundations and ensuring its full integration to the European Union and NATO.

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CHAPTER 5.

AMENINȚĂRI ȘI PERSPECTIVE PENTRU REZILIENȚA DEMOCRAȚIEI LA FRONTIERA UCRAINEANO-ROMÂNO-MOLDAVĂ: ALEGERI ÎN VREMURI DE RĂZBOI

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https://doi.org/10.59295/sdcri2025.05

Rezumat: *În timpul războiului, democrația se află sub amenințare, deoarece crizele necesită decizii rapide și uneori radicale. Războiul Rusiei împotriva Ucrainei, început în 2014 într-un format hibrid și continuat în 2022 într-un format tradițional, convențional, a devenit, de asemenea, un război împotriva democrației. Moscova și-a lansat ofensiva pe mai multe direcții — vizibile și invizibile publicului larg: militare, informaționale, economice, diplomatice etc., pentru a influența democrațiile europene și a-și impune propria hegemonie. Kremlinul acordă o atenție deosebită Europei Centrale și de Est, în special Republicii Moldova și României. Alegerile prezidențiale și parlamentare din aceste țări au devenit un adevărat câmp de luptă între forțele democratice și populiștii, și radicalii pro-ruși. Forțele pe care Moscova le-a mobilizat pentru instaurarea unui regim loial în România și Republica Moldova au fost fără precedent. Totuși, în ambele cazuri, Moscova a pierdut. Instituțiile democratice și-au demonstrat reziliența și flexibilitatea în perioade de criză. Evoluția situației electorale din Republica Moldova și România a arătat că, în pofida narațiunilor ruse despre slăbiciunea democrației, aceasta rămâne singurul instrument eficient de depășire a autoritarismului în forma sa imperială. În același timp, războiul total al Rusiei rămâne cea mai importantă provocare și amenințare la adresa democrației.*
Cuvinte-cheie: *democrație, războiul ruso-ucrainean, Europa Centrală și de Est, Moldova, România, alegeri, război informațional, securitate.*

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THREATS AND PROSPECTS FOR PRESERVING DEMOCRACY ON THE UKRAINIAN – ROMANIAN – MOLDOVAN BORDER: ELECTIONS IN WARTIME

Abstract: *In wartime, democracy is under threat, as crises require quick and sometimes radical decisions. Russia's war against Ukraine, which began in 2014 in a hybrid format and in 2022 in a traditional, conventional format, has also become a war against democracy. Moscow has launched its offensive in several directions —visible and invisible to the general public—military, informational, economic, diplomatic, etc.—to influence European democracies and establish its own hegemony. The Kremlin is paying particular attention to Central and Eastern Europe, in particular the Republic of Moldova and Romania. The presidential and parliamentary elections in these countries have become a real battleground between democratic forces and pro-Russian populists and radicals. The forces that Moscow has thrown into establishing a regime loyal to itself in Romania and the Republic of Moldova have been unprecedented. However, in both cases, Moscow has lost. Democratic institutions proved their resilience and flexibility in times of crisis. The development of the electoral situation in the Republic of Moldova and Romania showed that, despite Russia's narratives about the weakness of democracy, democracy remains the only effective tool for overcoming authoritarianism in its imperial form. At the same time, Russia's war on all fronts remains the most significant challenge and threat to democracy.*

Keywords: democracy, Russian-Ukrainian war, Central-Eastern Europe, Moldova, Romania, elections, information warfare, security.

Introduction

The ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine has become the most significant geopolitical challenge of the 21st century. Its significance for the collective security system, formed after two world wars, lies in its forcing every country in the world to choose sides. Moreover, even if some try to balance, their actions testify to a choice that is existential not only for them, but also for the fate of democracy.

The Ukrainian-Romanian-Moldovan border region is a special political and spiritual space, united by a common history and challenges

of the present. Ukraine, Romania, and Moldova have all gone through a difficult transition from authoritarianism to democracy, building it through the thorns of historical and political stereotypes and fears. The recent elections in Romania and Moldova have become a battleground for democracy in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine. It has become clear that Moscow is waging its war not only against Kyiv, but also against Bucharest and Chisinau. Understanding the essence of contemporary Russian policy in Central and Eastern Europe, which includes all three states, requires reference to its historical preconditions and peculiarities.

During the two world wars of the last century, Central and Eastern Europe were one of the main theatres of war. Wars swept through these lands several times, bringing enormous losses and destruction. As a result of the world wars, practically everything changed for the population living in the region, in some cases even their nationality, as the architecture of the world order underwent significant changes after both the First and Second World Wars.

The year 1918 saw the fall of empires, one of which, the Russian Empire, formally disappeared from the political map of the world and transformed into the Soviet Union. The imperial nature of this "union" was evident from the moment of its creation: the annexation of new territories took place according to the usual pattern for Moscow – through the creation of puppet governments that expressed a "voluntary" desire to "join" Soviet Russia, their financial, military, organisational, and other support, followed by the unfolding of "civil confrontation" and, accordingly, Moscow's open military intervention in the internal affairs of already independent states to restore its dominance. Thus, the era of the people's republics proclaimed in 1917-1920 by the former colonies of Russia ended with the return of Russia to these lands in a Soviet format, the creation of the so-called Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

This algorithm, successfully tested at the beginning of the 20th century – in 1917-1922, was repeated by Moscow in the mid-1940s, when it formed a socialist camp of Central and Eastern European states. After victory in World War II, the Kremlin prioritised strengthening control over Eastern European countries. Joseph Stalin, generalissimo and leader of the Soviet state, "considered the Soviet sphere

of influence to be the most important outcome of the war and was not going to make any concessions to the West in this part of Europe" [40]. Therefore, the pressure on the countries of the region regarding their potential cooperation with Western democracies was unprecedented. It was precisely because of the USSR's position that the countries of the region were forced to refuse to participate in the Marshall Plan and accept aid from the American government to rebuild their economies after World War II [41].

Cominform, and later, from 1955, the Warsaw Pact Organization (WPO), created as a counterweight to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), became additional instruments of control over the states of the region. Unlike NATO, the organisational structure of the WSO was built in accordance with Moscow's imperial ambitions: 1) only Soviet generals held leadership positions in the organisation; 2) the organisation's headquarters were in Moscow; 3) the armies of the member states, which, in addition to the USSR, included East Germany (GDR), Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Albania, were fully integrated into the WSO structure. The working language was Russian [38].

All this allowed the Kremlin not only to strengthen its presence in the region but also to maintain Moscow's status as an imperial centre: the independence of the member states of these associations was, to a certain extent, formal, since only Moscow made strategic decisions on development and international cooperation. This is evidenced by the aforementioned refusal of Eastern European states to participate in the Marshall Plan at Moscow's request and their subsequent participation in all associations initiated by the latter, primarily the Warsaw Pact. Attempts to defend their right to sovereignty were perceived as a direct threat to the existing legal order and were suppressed by force, as in 1956 in Hungary or 1968 in Czechoslovakia. In fact, the military operation in Budapest in October 1956 was the Warsaw Pact's first [38].

The "velvet revolutions" in the region in the late 1980s, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the reunification of Germany led to the understanding that maintaining the Warsaw Pact as a military-political alliance was impossible and pointless. In February 1991, a decision was made to liquidate the military structures, and on July 1, 1991, the

Warsaw Pact ceased to exist. Literally a month and a half later, a coup began in Moscow with an attempt to return the USSR to the Stalin era, which effectively put an end to the existence of the Soviet Union.

With the collapse of the USSR, the situation was changing radically, and it seemed that Russian imperialism would finally be destroyed. At least, that was the hope of all opponents of the Soviet regime. The mobilisation of national elites and the unfolding of anti-colonial national movements led to the collapse of the socialist system, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, and, ultimately, the Soviet Union itself. The independence of the former republics of the USSR and their desire to build their own sovereignty proved the success of the second stage of the collapse of the Russian Soviet Empire. It should be noted that the change in political elites, primarily the rise to power of Boris Yeltsin in Russia, was perceived primarily as an opportunity to establish and develop Russia as a democracy. His active role during the attempted coup in August 1991 triggered a domino effect – a parade of sovereignties by the republics of the former "union."

Radical changes in the former Soviet space marked the period from 1991 to 2000. The development of independence in each newborn state had its own character and peculiarities. As for Russia, Boris Yeltsin's liberal statements were seen mainly as a basis for future democratisation. An additional argument in favour of the latter was the return to history, the appeal to the works of oppositionists repressed by the Soviet authorities – Solzhenitsyn, Sakharov, and others, drawing attention primarily to the anti-Soviet nature of their works and statements.

However, no miracle happened. Russia did not become a liberal democracy, or even a democracy at all. Moreover, it quickly became clear that the newly formed Russian Federation was a colossus with feet of clay, unable to survive as an independent geopolitical actor without Western support. Furthermore, the West did everything possible to preserve and strengthen the Russian Federation, because after the collapse of the USSR, it seemed impossible to survive the collapse of yet another state and another redistribution of control over nuclear weapons. Here, one could recall the technical and other support programs (TACIS, for example) that were provided to the Russian Federation in the early 1990s to prevent its further collapse. We could also men-

tion the Kremlin's convulsive attempts to preserve at least the formal framework of the union by creating the so-called Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which never became a real geopolitical player. Looking back at the 1990s today, the author is convinced that without Western aid, the Russian Federation would not have survived as a single state, as centrifugal tendencies were quite noticeable, and the social tensions and economic situation were complex. Humanitarian aid from the West and the so-called "Bush legs" saved not only Moscow and St. Petersburg, but also the entire current Russian Federation from starvation [25] and, in the author's opinion, geopolitical collapse.

Politically, the loss of Ukraine and other republics (which, despite their formal sovereignty, were in fact colonies of Moscow) became a litmus test for Moscow's imperial ambitions. Unprepared to develop its own national project, the latter convulsively tried to maintain its influence over the states that emerged from the ruins of the USSR, while at the same time preserving itself as a single state, giving no chance to national republics such as Ichkeria or Tatarstan for genuine autonomy, let alone independence.

Despite liberal statements, the imperial nature of the new president's policy – jBoris Yeltsin – manifested itself almost immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Russian-Chechen wars of 1994-1996 and 1999-2007 (the latter ended by the next president, Vladimir Putin) against the backdrop of the current Russian-Ukrainian war and the Russian-Georgian war of 2008 allow us to highlight the peculiarities of Russian imperial policy at the turn of the second and third millennia. In all cases, we are talking about the active use of hybrid warfare tools in interaction with states that Moscow traditionally considers to be its sphere of influence and which have shown a persistent desire for independence. Thus, the term "war" was not used by Moscow in any of these cases: in Ichkeria, it was a "counterterrorism operation" [47], in Georgia, a "peace enforcement operation" [16], and in Ukraine, a "special military operation" [48]. The military attack began without a declaration of war, with an active disinformation prelude aimed at discrediting the victim of Russian aggression. Unable to defeat any of the above-mentioned parties by military means, Moscow focuses on information warfare, undermining the stability and cohe-

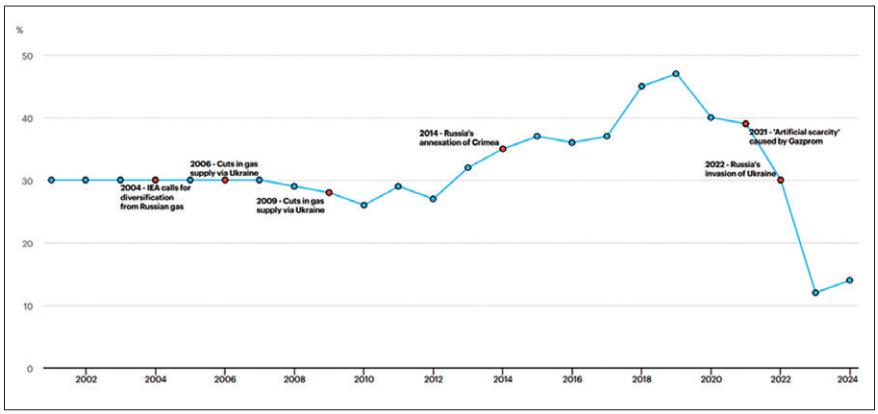
sion of societies through manipulative technologies, propaganda, and disinformation.

Looking back on the last decade of the previous millennium, we realise it was a turning point for Russia. The inability of the new political elite to form its own national project, the lack of understanding of what Russian national identity is and what the Russian national idea consists of, inevitably kept Moscow in the practices of imperialism that had been formed and successfully implemented over the centuries. The Soviet man – Homo Sovieticus – was transformed into the Russian man – Homo Russicus. The path from Yeltsin's "dear Russian citizens" ("dorogiie rossiiane") to Putin's "Russians" (russkiie) was extremely short, and it took only one New Year's Eve to consolidate it legally. Thus, in literally ten years, the Soviet Union was transformed into Russia, where Soviet is equated with Russian and where there is no place for the national self-expression in any of its manifestations.

Over the past ten years, Eastern Europe has come a long way from Moscow, overcoming the challenges of Euro-Atlantic integration. Moscow has been unable to do anything about it. However, it could not allow Ukraine and other former Soviet republics to turn toward Euro-Atlantic integration. Preserving the Russian state meant preserving the empire, the essence of which is expansion in all its manifestations, primarily territorial. Ukraine, like the Republic of Moldova, was seen as an integral part of this empire, with the prospect of restoring influence over the rest of Central and Eastern Europe. To implement its plans, Moscow needed additional tools, which could only be obtained in exchange for energy resources. This required a change in the political course of the Russian Federation itself.

New Year's Eve 1999–2000 brought an unexpected "gift" not only to Russians, but also to the entire world community – the appointment of Vladimir Putin as acting president of the country. Almost immediately, in the same year 2000, the European Union began an active energy dialogue with the Russian Federation. Both sides were highly interested in developing cooperation. Each had its own goals, with the EU hoping that Putin would "continue the course of the previous president" and viewing Russia "as a reliable partner" [53, p. 40]. The cheap energy resources offered by the Russian Federation were extremely beneficial for the European Union. In a short period, a number

of Western European countries fell into Russia's trap of cheap energy. At the same time, it should be noted that, practically from the very beginning of the Energy Dialogue, it had a strong political dimension, and gas supplies to the EU were used to achieve political goals, in particular to discredit Ukraine as a reliable partner in the eyes of the EU. The following infographic allows us to trace the main features of gas cooperation between Brussels and Moscow through the prism of the Ukrainian factor:



Джерело: https://www.iea.org/data-and-statistics/charts/share-of-european-union-gas-demand-met-by-russian-supply-2001-2024

The opportunities opened up by the Energy Dialogue not only provided Moscow with financial gains, but also strengthened its military and political potential, not to mention its ability to influence decision-making processes within the EU through reflexive management tools, in particular pressure on the authorities, providing disinformation about a particular situation, influencing the enemy's decision-making algorithm, and changing the timing of decisions, etc. [50]. Systematic information pressure on European states became apparent after the outbreak of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine in 2014. Since then, the situation has only worsened: new technological capabilities allow Moscow to actively use all innovative information tools to influence the general public, destabilising the situation, introducing elements of uncertainty and creating an atmosphere of chaos, which ultimately leads to an increase in negative trends, distrust in demo-

cratic institutions, internal resistance to the actions of the authorities, and the spread of radical ideas, whether right-wing or left-wing, depending on the political culture and traditions of a given society.

Between 2014 and 2022, Russia's interference in the internal affairs of European states was repeatedly documented. The most significant examples were the referendums in Spain and Scotland, Brexit, the elections in France, etc. On the eve of and after the outbreak of a large-scale war against Ukraine, the information front expanded and became particularly relevant. Today, Russia is trying to bring political forces dependent on itself to power in European states, not only to deprive Ukraine of support, but also to establish its hegemony on the European continent. Given the experience of the hybrid war of 2014-2022, as well as the military challenges of today, pressure on EU states is intensifying, which is particularly acute during election campaigns, particularly in Romania and the Republic of Moldova, which are Ukraine's neighbours and on whose political stability and European orientation it depends.

The Russian-Ukrainian war and its impact on electoral processes in neighbouring countries

As the successor state to the USSR, Russia has been unable to accept the loss of "its" territories since its inception. Its attempt to transform the USSR into the so-called CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) is a vivid example of this. The next step on the path to restoring Russian imperialism in its full force was the aforementioned appointment of Vladimir Putin as acting president of the country, followed by his election to this post. The latter immediately declared Russia's geopolitical ambitions and outlined inviolable "red lines" in relations with Moscow:

"For centuries, Russia has been and remains a great world power. It has always had and will always have areas of legitimate interest [...]. We must not relax our vigilance, we must not allow our opinion to be ignored" [18].

Since then, Russia has been systematically moving towards restoring the Soviet-era format of the Russian Empire, expanding its sphere of influence not only into the countries of the former socialist camp, but also into Western Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Africa.

The large-scale war against Ukraine, which has been ongoing since February 24, 2022, had every chance of starting earlier. The Russian Federation made its first attempt to enter Ukraine by military means back in 1992, when the Black Sea Fleet was divided [17]. At that time, Russia lacked both the political audacity and the military and economic potential to start a war. Therefore, information and energy became the main instruments of influence on Ukraine and Ukrainians.

The next step is to resolve the hybrid war in 2014 and the large-scale war in 2022. Russia's current war against Ukraine has been and remains aimed at destroying Ukrainian statehood. This can only be achieved by undermining democratic institutions not only in Ukraine but, above all, in the EU, which has become a beacon of freedom and democratic choice for states that were Soviet republics in the recent past.

Since 2014, and especially since 2022, Russia has been paying particular attention to Ukraine's neighbouring states. By discrediting democracy and promoting its own narratives there, Russia is effectively surrounding Ukraine with a belt of unfriendly states, which in turn should lead to Ukraine's isolation in both political and logistical terms. The latter, in turn, will make it impossible for the European states to assist Ukraine in its confrontation with the Russian aggressor. The expected result for Russia is further defeat and the subsequent occupation of Ukraine. Another consequence of this policy will be the expansion of Russian influence in Europe, at least in the territory of the former socialist camp. Among the states under Moscow's particularly close attention are Romania and Moldova, Ukraine's neighbours, whose citizens' political choices will largely determine the future course of events in Ukraine.

Defeat in Moldovan style: European course instead of "Russian world"

The Republic of Moldova is one of the countries that gained independence following the collapse of the USSR. On August 27, 1991, Moldova declared independence and began to forge its own geopolitical path. However, all this time, the Republic of Moldova has been living in a state of hybrid war, which has created conditions for the preservation and, at a particular stage, even strengthening of Russian influence

on political processes within the state and on the vector of its foreign policy development.

Accepting the Republic of Moldova's independence as a fait accompli and subsequently respecting its sovereignty became an impossible task for the Russian political elite, especially the state leadership. Moscow continued its policy of "divide and rule" in Moldova, seeking to play a key role in the region while simultaneously creating additional challenges and threats through its presence.

The presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova in September 2024, as well as the parliamentary elections in 2025, demonstrated the readiness of the Moldovan political elite to defend democratic values and the opportunity to choose their own geopolitical destiny independently. The conditions in which these elections took place were formed even before the declaration of independence, and the pain points Russia pressed on have their roots in the 1980s and early 1990s at least. These include Chisinau's constitutional obligations regarding neutral status, Transnistria, Gagauzia, national identity in the context of geopolitical choice, and so on. The change in the geopolitical situation forces us to return to Moldova's recent history through the prism of military challenges and threats to Moldovan statehood.

The history of the formation of the modern territory of the Republic of Moldova is complex and full of contradictions. The Soviet authorities created the preconditions for subsequent conflicts while implementing their national policy. The inclusion of the Transnistria region into the Moldavian SSR (as the Republic of Moldova was then called) and its subsequent subordination to Moscow led to predictable consequences: the formation of a separate, Russian-speaking, conservative nomenclature, which became the new political elite of the region. Frightened by the ethno-political renaissance in Moldova, the spread of unionist ideas, in particular the potential prospect of unification with Romania, which was then actively discussed, as well as the need to study the Moldovan language, which on August 31, 1989, the Supreme Soviet of the Moldavian SSR declared official, it opposed Chisinau. While the Chisinau elite could not believe in the possibility of separatism in Transnistria, the Russian-speaking population of Transnistria categorically rejected the process of ethnopoliticalization

of Moldovan society. It began to view it as a threat to the existence of their established way of life [36].

As a result, Transnistria declared independence from Moldova on August 25, 1991, while retaining Soviet laws on its territory [39]. Tiraspol's radical position was due to several factors, among them confidence in Moscow's support. The subsequent outbreak of military conflict was inevitable. Moreover, while official Chisinau received "moral support" from Bucharest, Tiraspol received real military support from the Russian Federation. Since then, the 14th Russian Army (part of the All-Russian Army under the agreement of April 1, 1992), located on the left bank of the Dniester, has sided with Tiraspol. Thanks to this, Transnistria was able to deploy heavy weapons, including tanks, in the battle for Bendery, which forced Chisinau to make concessions and begin negotiations [36]. The course of the conflict, the negotiations, and their results are described in the works of scholars from Moldova and other countries. However, in the author's opinion, one fundamental fact remains unnoticed: the resolution of Russia's hybrid war against Moldova.

The fundamental difference between hybrid warfare and information warfare is the potential use of military force. By combining traditional military actions with non-traditional methods such as propaganda, disinformation, cyberattacks, economic, political, and other levers of influence, hybrid warfare allows for the establishment of reflexive control over enemy territories and the realisation of interests there. In this case, the proclamation of an independent, democratic Moldova ran counter to Moscow's interests, which are desperately trying to preserve Russian imperialism in any form. For the Kremlin, a democratic Moldova, like a democratic Ukraine, Georgia, etc., is an enemy that must be destroyed at any cost.

With the collapse of the USSR, Moscow has been systematically undermining the sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova, with a separatist enclave in the form of Transnistria and loyal Gagauzia. The presence of Russian troops on Moldovan territory in Transnistria, combined with Moscow's information dominance, has enabled it to significantly influence the sovereign state's internal political life over the following decades. It has also influenced its foreign policy priorities, because the author never tyres of repeating that democratic choices cannot be

made under threat and that the potential to use force is sometimes a more powerful weapon than its overt use. The latter is clearly evident in Russian policy in Moldova, where the potential use of armed forces is a constant backdrop to political decision-making not only by the ruling elite, but also by the electorate, which is simultaneously under significant informational pressure from the Kremlin.

For Moscow, Moldova has been and remains a strategically important foreign policy objective. It provides access to the EU via Romania, which, for a long time, remained the only Central and Eastern European country independent of Russian energy resources. In the context of a large-scale war against Ukraine, this opportunity takes on particular significance, as the situation on the Russian-Ukrainian front and socio-political stability in the region, which is also the eastern border of the European Union, directly depend on the security of logistical links.

In the case of Moldova, Russia achieved its desired outcome for a while: the country's neutral status is enshrined in its constitution, which is the subject of constant political manipulation and geopolitical pressure from Moscow. In addition to Transnistria, Moscow's proxy in Moldova is the Gagauz autonomy. Like Tiraspol, Comrat declared independence in 1991, only on August 19. However, due to its geography and inability to ensure its independence, it returned to the Republic of Moldova in December 1994 as an autonomous region. According to the Law on the Special Legal Status of Gagauzia (Gagauz Eri), "in the event of a change in the status of the Republic of Moldova as an independent state, the people of Gagauzia have the right to external self-determination" [27].

Thus, sovereign Moldova has been living in a state of hybrid war for over 30 years, where political decisions, like elections, take place under systematic and powerful pressure from Moscow. At the same time, a generation of young people has grown up during independence, for whom European values and prospects are much closer than Russian ones, or, more precisely, reincarnated Soviet ones.

Every election in the Republic of Moldova since 1991 has been a test of readiness to break away from Moscow. As mentioned above, in 2020, Maia Sandu, leader of the pro-European Action and Solidarity Party, won the presidential election. Her opponent was Igor Dodon, the then-incumbent president and leader of the Socialist Party.

His statements about Crimea belonging to Russia sparked widespread discussion in the Ukrainian public sphere and raised the question of a possible ban on his entry into Ukraine. A number of activists and MPs called on the Security Service of Ukraine to ban Igor Dodon from entering Ukraine. However, under international norms, it is not possible to ban diplomats from entering the country, as they have special status when crossing the border [46]. Therefore, it was not possible to ban him from entering Ukraine during his presidency. Relations between the two countries during this period can hardly be called constructive, let alone friendly.

The election of Maia Sandu as president changed the nature of Moldovan-Ukrainian relations and Moldova's interactions with the European Union and Russia. From her first days in office, Sandu faced active opposition to her initiatives and Moldova's shift towards European integration from pro-Russian forces. This did not prevent her from actively working to reduce the influence of pro-Russian political forces in the country, carry out reforms, and implement a European integration course.

The outbreak of Russia's large-scale war against Ukraine has brought the issue of security to the forefront for Moldova. This is particularly true in the military sphere: Russia's 14th Army continues to be stationed in the unrecognised region of Transnistria, and Moscow is actively using this potential for military force to maintain its influence in the republic. This concentration of Russian forces between Moldova and Ukraine creates additional tension in the region and requires a new approach to neutralise it.

In addition to military and political tensions, the Russian-Ukrainian war has created several new challenges for Moldova. First and foremost, increased information pressure: Russia intensified its disinformation and propaganda activities, discrediting the EU, Ukraine, Moldovan President Maia Sandu, and her policies. In addition, the socio-economic situation has worsened: in 2024, the country's economy entered a recession, with GDP growing by only 0.1%. As noted by economic expert V. Ionite, "Economic stagnation in 2024 with insignificant growth of 0.1% is only a symptom of a much more serious problem: over the past five years, the cumulative growth of the economy was only 0.4%, which is an alarmingly low level, comparable only

to the period immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union" [52]. According to the expert, this is a sign of a systemic economic crisis.

The socio-economic crisis that Moldova is experiencing is being exacerbated by active Russian interference in the country's internal affairs. Unable to do so directly, Moscow is using proxies in the region and expanding its network of agents of influence and lobbyists to keep Moldova within the "Russian world". In its disinformation and propaganda activities, the Kremlin substitutes concepts, shifts emphasis, and manipulates citizens' consciousness. In the context of the presidential and then parliamentary elections, the situation has become threatening.

One area where Russian cynicism takes on particularly grotesque forms is Ukrainian refugees. From the very first hours of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Moldova opened its borders to people who were forced to leave their homes because of the war. As of the end of 2024, 123,000 Ukrainian refugees were living in the Republic of Moldova [28]. Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moldova has taken in more than 1.4 million Ukrainians [49]. A significant number of them have moved to other countries or returned to Ukraine. Among those who remained in Moldova, according to a study by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), about 60% found work, with 44% finding permanent employment. Some work remotely or in temporary or informal jobs [10]. In its attempt to discredit Ukraine and Ukrainians, Russia has launched a widespread disinformation campaign. In July 2022, Russians launched a series of posts on social media about "ungrateful Ukrainians". As noted by Dmitry Lekartsev, director of assistance to Ukrainian refugees in Moldova, Moldovan society has shown unity in its desire to help Ukrainians affected by the war:

"*To be honest, I have never seen such unity in Moldovan society. People gave everything they had. Once, a little boy came to us with his piggy bank, broke it open, and gave us all his savings. People were sincere and open. Then another story began: there was a wave of posts and various videos on TikTok saying that Ukrainian refugees were bad and ungrateful, etc. In response, we launched the Moldova Pentru pace ("Moldova for Peace") campaign"* [33].

Moscow's defamation campaign against Ukrainian refugees in Moldova is part of a broader effort. It began immediately after the full-

scale invasion and aims to cause social division, polarisation, and a rejection of support for Ukraine at all levels. In Moldova, this theme was actively used to discredit Maia Sandu's European course and her PAS during the elections. To maintain its influence and pursue its own interests, Moscow has intensified the *Matryoshka* and *Overload* campaigns. These social media disinformation networks are directly targeted at Moldova. Their messages constantly contain elements of anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, including accusations of "terrorist attacks" and "mass riots" linked to Ukrainian refugees. Among the main target audiences of these campaigns is the Moldovan diaspora, which has demonstrated its commitment to Moldova's European course [43].

A systematic approach to discrediting everything European is a characteristic feature of Russian policy in Moldova. Since 1991, Russia has been actively working to create a negative image of the EU and the European integration process in Moldova. The Russian-Ukrainian war has become an additional tool for political manipulation in the country. Moscow has introduced the term "Ukrainization" with a negative connotation as a synonym for "war", thereby intimidating broad segments of the population with the negative consequences of choosing Europe. In fact, Russia has proposed the following propaganda chain, which, incidentally, it also uses in Georgia: the choice of European integration, the division of society, and war with all its consequences. This chain is schematic, but it fully reflects the Russian approach, where formally Moscow plays no role, but the second and third links in the chain are precisely its activities and the desired outcome. After all, it allows it to continue controlling the situation and opens the door to the restoration of Moscow's imperial power in certain territories.

The information vise with which Moscow has attempted to squeeze Moldova in recent years is unprecedented even for the Kremlin. In 2023, the latter spent $55 million to destroy democratic Moldova. In 2024, this amount reached €200 million [8]. One of the reasons for the increased pressure was Moldova's acquisition of EU candidate status in June 2022. This forced Russia to expand its arsenal of tools to influence the situation in the republic, including controlled protests, energy blackmail via Transnistria, and the creation of vote-buying networks during local elections. The latter were fronted by Shor and cost $55 million on the campaign [2].

During all election campaigns – local, presidential and parliamentary elections – Moldovan pro-European political forces were under constant pressure from Moscow, including through fugitive Moldovan oligarchs from the old regime. According to Prime Minister Dorin Recean, Russian agents bought votes and oligarchs organised anti-Western protests [2]. In fact, Moldova has become the second front in Russia's war against democracy. While Ukraine is holding back the Russian military offensive and defending the front, Moldova has become a testing ground for new influence tactics aimed at accelerating the establishment of Russian myths in Moldovan society.

A specific feature of the geopolitical battle for Moldova has been the de facto division of Moldovan society into Russian- and Romanian-speaking communities. This division is conditional in the context of each citizen's command of languages. According to the author's observations, the number of citizens who are fluent in both languages is growing in the country, as is the number of young people who prefer English to Russian. This refers to preferences in information consumption and trust in sources, as well as the orientation towards the relevant audience of the subject of information influence, in this case, Russia. The latter is oriented towards Russian-speaking consumers for whom Russian is their native language (11.1% according to 2024 data) or the language of everyday communication (15.3%) [3]. The largest Russian-speaking population is concentrated in cities and northern regions, particularly in Bălți, where this figure reaches 45% [22]. Accordingly, the Kremlin's propaganda machine is operating at full capacity there, as pro-European forces have been unable to provide a strong, consolidated response in the Russian-speaking media space.

Until 2022, Russian media occupied key positions in the Moldovan information space, including print publications such as *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Trud*, and *Argumenty i Fakty*. Russian media influence began to weaken in 2022. At that time, Maia Sandu signed a law banning the broadcast of Russian news and analytical programs, as well as military films from the Russian Federation and other countries that had not ratified the convention on cross-border television [45]. The closure of *Sputnik's* local bureau by the Moldovan Information and Security Service for inciting hatred during the Russian invasion

of Ukraine was an additional argument for changing the situation in favour of national audiovisual and print media, and strategically national political discourse. In 2023, for the first time in history, the Romanian-language newspaper Ziarul de Gardă had a larger circulation than the Russian-language Komsomolskaya Pravda. As for trust in Russian-language sources, a study by the Institute for Public Policy found that only 27.5% of respondents continued to trust them in 2023 [44].

Without legal access to traditional media, Russia has increased its presence in cyberspace, as mentioned above, especially on social networks such as TikTok and Telegram, as well as on anonymous Facebook pages. Various memes have become a popular tool of influence, allowing the aggressor to impose the desired image through visual perception. In general, the content disseminated by the Russian side in the Republic of Moldova before and during the presidential and parliamentary elections can be divided into three thematic clusters [8]:

1. Identity-based narratives frame: Europe as a threat to Orthodoxy, the national language, the "traditional" family, and values;
2. Economic, including social fears about living standards, the cost of utilities, lost markets, and the EU's colonialist policy, while Russia offers significant economic opportunities for development;
3. Security, based on the manipulation of neutral status, issues of peace and war, threats from NATO and the EU, which are contrasted with Russia's desire to protect Moldova and guarantee its peace and stability, in particular through the presence of military forces in Transnistria.

The Russian-Ukrainian war runs through all these clusters, and, under the Russian approach, responsibility for resolving and conducting it lies with Ukraine, the North Atlantic Alliance, and the EU, but not with Russia. Accordingly, all the negative consequences of the war are incorporated into messages useful to Russia and disseminated to the population in formats familiar and understandable to everyone, regardless of age, gender, or nationality.

A clear pro-European position, swiftness in making decisions that are inconvenient and unexpected for the Russian side, such as the ban on Russian media in 2022, the obligation of national Internet provid-

ers to block seven Russian Internet resources (including *RIA Novosti* and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*), blocking Telegram channels associated with the pro-Russian I. Shor [54] and refusing to depend on Russian energy sources have strengthened trust in Maia Sandu as a president capable of achieving her goals. Therefore, despite the active information campaign launched by the Kremlin through agents of influence and proxies, the level of trust in Maia Sandu among Moldovan society remained at the highest level throughout the presidential election campaign, as did the level of trust in her political party, PAS. Similarly, the majority of Moldovans leaned toward the European course of the state [15], which was key during both the presidential and parliamentary elections.

An important decision to mobilise the pro-European electorate was to hold a referendum on enshrining EU membership as a strategic goal of the state in the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova on the same day as the presidential elections. On the one hand, this opened a window of opportunity for Maia Sandu in her electoral campaign, but on the other hand, it intensified anti-European rhetoric from pro-Russian forces.

The presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova were held on October 20, 2024, alongside a referendum on European integration. Voter turnout was relatively high at 51.68%, well above the electoral minimum of 33.33%. Maia Sandu won in the first round with 42.45% of the vote and in the second round with over 55%. The candidate from the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova, Alexander Stoianoglo, won over 48% of the vote. The country's European course was supported by 50.38% of voters [54], with the Moldovan diaspora playing a significant role in the victory of pro-European forces. It demonstrated a high level of political awareness and confirmed its desire to build a democratic Moldova.

The presidential elections in Moldova demonstrated the stable position of the "Russian world", so the parliamentary elections became a continuation of the struggle between two forces – European democracy and imperial Russia. The difference lay in the increased attention paid to Moldova by the entire democratic community, the intensified mobilisation of democratic forces, and the formation of informal networks of informational resistance to the Russian propaganda ma-

chine. The latter also began their work in the traditional Russian-language field of Russian propaganda, thereby undermining Russian attempts to encroach on Moldovan sovereignty. The main activities include monitoring information, identifying key Russian disinformation narratives, developing counter-narratives, and then launching them into the country's information space. At the same time, various media and information literacy projects were implemented for the Russian-speaking population, primarily young people, explaining the essence and forms of information warfare, propaganda, and political manipulation, round tables and discussions, television programs, and podcasts, some of which with the participation of the author of this study.

The parliamentary elections took place amid heightened tensions, with every vote crucial to the future development of the state. Voter turnout was 52.21%. PAS M. Sandu received 50.2% of the vote, becoming the only pro-European force in parliament. The rest have various ties to Russia or Russian forces and demonstrate either strongly pro-Russian or moderate pro-Russian positions. It is noteworthy that the Democracy at Home party, led by V. Kostyuk and partnering the Alliance for the Unification of Romanians (AUR), led by G. Simion in Romania, also entered parliament, albeit with the least support (5.6%) [29].

Having confirmed its European choice in general, Moldovan society remains fragmented and manipulated by the Russian side. With the end of the 2023-2025 electoral cycle (from local to parliamentary elections), Russia's hybrid war against Moldova is not over. Moscow will continue to discredit the pro-European M. Sandu and her policies, especially domestic ones, as there are more than enough challenges here.

At the same time, Moldova managed to achieve the most important thing – to demonstrate to Moscow and the whole world that Russia is a losing state. And not only on the military front in Ukraine, but also on the hybrid front in the Republic of Moldova. This victory was one of the most painful defeats for the Russian Federation, which is now trying to compensate for its losses through instruments of reflexive governance in the Caucasus and Asia.

Defeat in Romanian style: experience of countering Russian aggressor in the Romanian electoral arena

Romania has never shown any particular fondness for the Kremlin or its policies, primarily because of its historical experience of interaction with Moscow. Over the past decades, the dynamics of Romanian citizens' trust in the Russian Federation have shown a negative balance. In 2023, the share of those in Romania who have a positive attitude towards Russia decreased from 36.8% (2023) to 18.3% [51]. At the same time, this is the country where Russia is currently trying to lay the groundwork for the next wave of populists, of various stripes, to come to power, who will be more than critical of the EU and its policies.

The recent parliamentary and presidential elections in Romania, which had been presented as a "light" Russian intervention, turned into an instrument of hybrid warfare that Russia is waging against Ukraine and the entire democratic world. The issue of Ukraine shifted from foreign policy to domestic policy: it was constantly raised in the programs of election campaign participants and in public discussions. Thus, the Russian-Ukrainian war took centre stage in electoral discourse. As did the related social and economic challenges for Romania, as well as the imaginary political dividends that populists promised their electorate in exchange for support.

According to Moscow's plan, the war in Ukraine was supposed to divide Romanian society and lead to the establishment of Moscow's reflexive control over the state. The disinformation narratives that the Russian side is actively spreading in Romania are aimed at changing the public consciousness and worldview of the country's citizens. The main goal is to discredit the European Union and NATO in the eyes of the Romanian electorate and to foster hostility towards the West and its policies in the region, Ukraine, and Ukrainians. Among the main messages are: an attack on Christian / family values by the EU and, accordingly, the EU as a "gay dictatorship" [20], large social payments to Ukrainian refugees, emphasis on the socio-economic gap between Ukrainian refugees and Romanian citizens (the former being "wealthy idlers" who parasitise on social assistance from the Romanian state), etc.

It should be emphasised here that in its propaganda policy of "divide and rule", the Russian side took into account only the negative ex-

perience of Romanian-Ukrainian cooperation, without considering the significant positive contribution of the EU to the development of the modern Romanian state, primarily in its socio-economic dimension, and the importance of security on Romania's eastern border, which is also the eastern border of the EU and NATO. It is worth briefly recalling Romania's path to the EU, which it clearly outlined immediately after the overthrow of Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime in 1990. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 marked a point of no return for Romania's socialist past. Just two years later (1993), Romania signed an Association Agreement with the European Economic Community, consisting of 126 articles and covering various areas of cooperation between the two states [5]. Over the next decade, steps were taken to become a full member of the EU: from applying to developing a strategic "Partnership for Accession", which clearly outlined the forms of assistance to be provided to the candidate country along the way [13]. Romania became an EU member state on January 1, 2007. At the same time, the country joined the Schengen area on March 31, 2024.

Despite positive developments in the socio-economic sphere, Romania remains one of the poorest countries in the European Union, which in turn has a significant impact on public sentiment and political processes in the country. Russia actively uses the latter to promote disinformation narratives and establish reflexive control over the Romanian state by supporting various political forces, primarily populists. Historical and political stereotypes and disputes between Romania and its neighbours, including Ukraine, occupy a special place in this information war.

Although Romania recognised Ukraine's independence in January 1992, relations between the two neighbouring states have not been easy to build. The Treaty on Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation between Ukraine and Romania, which became the first basic document defining the foundation for further cooperation, was signed only in 1997. It left unresolved issues regarding the delimitation of the continental shelf and exclusive economic zones, which ultimately led to a protracted legal process at the UN International Court of Justice [37].

Romania's accession to the EU in 2007 set new priorities in domestic and foreign policy. It should be noted that in the period after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004) and until 2008 (the period of

active preparation and the first year after Romania acceded to the EU), a number of bilateral legal documents and agreements were signed between the two countries aimed at regulating various areas of intergovernmental cooperation [37]. The then presidents V. Yushchenko (Ukraine) and T. Basescu (Romania) demonstrated their willingness to resolve contentious issues between the two countries and significantly intensified intergovernmental cooperation.

The Revolution of Dignity and the overthrow of the regime of V. Yanukovych in Ukraine were, to a certain extent, similar to the overthrow of the regime of N. Ceaușescu. Although this comparison is not entirely accurate from the perspectives of history and political science, the aspirations of both societies for freedom and democracy in 1989 in Romania and in 2013-2014 in Ukraine have more in common than they differ. The author is convinced that the Revolution of Dignity was an event that demonstrated the necessity and irreversibility of active inter-state cooperation based on shared democratic values. Romania condemned Russian aggression in Ukraine, did not recognise the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and called on the international community to respond adequately to new challenges and threats [19].

Romania responded to the start of the large-scale military invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops on February 24, 2022, as a partner of Ukraine. From the very first hours, Ukrainian refugees were met at the Ukrainian-Romanian border by volunteers and representatives of humanitarian organisations, who provided all the necessary assistance – from hot tea to finding temporary shelter and psychological and medical support. Refugee reception centres were set up in Suceava, Bucharest, Constanta, and other Romanian cities bordering the Chernivtsi region. As of October 31, 2025, 195,258 Ukrainians had requested temporary protection in Romania [14]. The largest number of refugees was recorded in Bucharest, Constanța, Maramureș, Galați, Suceava, and other cities. Most of them were women and children.

Together with EU member states, Romania supported international sanctions against Russia, condemned the aggression, and became a logistical hub for providing various types of assistance to Ukraine, which cannot but worry Moscow, which today is more interested than ever in destroying any form of partnership between Ukraine and Ro-

mania. Therefore, the Romanian presidential elections became an opportunity for Russia to exert influence that it could not fail to take advantage of.

The presidential elections in Romania were scheduled for November 2024. The first round took place on November 24. Fourteen candidates competed for the post of head of state, one of whom, Diana Shoshoake, was removed from the race by a decision of the Romanian Supreme Court. Most of the judges stated that the politician's statements were "sufficient grounds to indicate that Diana Shoshoake [26] as a presidential candidate questions and disregards the obligation to respect the Constitution through public statements calling for the abolition of fundamental state values and choices, namely membership in the EU and NATO" [23].

Independent candidate Călin Georgescu, who was not the favorite in the race, won the majority of votes. Elena-Valerica Lasconi, representative of the Union for the Salvation of Romania, came in second. The difference in votes between them was minimal—just over three percent. Călin Georgescu received 22.94% of the vote, while Elena-Valerica Lasconi received 19.17%. Ion-Marcel Ciolacu, whose victory was predicted by many political experts from various countries and think tanks, came in third, losing to Elena-Valerica Lasconi by a mere 0.03%. George Simion, leader of the well-known far-right AUR, later became one of the favourites in the presidential race, receiving 13.86% [11]. Of the four politicians who received the most support from the Romanian electorate, two, Călin Georgescu and George Simion, are representatives of far-right (nationalist) views.

Călin Georgescu's victory came as a surprise: preliminary polls showed that Ion-Marcel Ciolacu (PSD leader) and George Simion (AUR leader) were most likely to advance to the second round of elections. Călin Georgescu's main messages, which resonated with the AUR, actually echoed the Kremlin's propaganda narratives: anti-EU, anti-globalism, anti-Ukraine. The candidate repeatedly expressed his approval of Vladimir Putin and Ion Antonescu, demonstrating his patriotism through visual images close to the electorate, such as "wearing a traditional Romanian shirt and riding a cantering white horse" [6]. Călin Georgescu emphasised that after his election, he would stop all military and political support for Ukraine:

"Zero. Everything stops. I have to take care of just about my people. We have many problems ourselves" [9].

It is no coincidence that the candidate's vision of the future resonated with the Romanian electorate. Despite the success of the reforms, Romania remains one of the poorest countries in the EU. In 2024, it ranked third among European countries for poverty, with a rate of 27.9%. This means that the average salary in the country is lower, the social protection system is weaker, and income inequality is higher compared to the core EU countries [42]. Among the main challenges are labour market participation, a rapidly shrinking working-age population, significant regional disparities, employment of disadvantaged groups, and, what is most remarkable from our point of view, a very high number of young people not in employment, education, or training. Common to a declining and ageing population, this creates additional challenges for domestic political stability in the country, which Călin Georgescu took advantage of in his election campaign. By emphasising the need to stop aid to Ukraine, he effectively refocused voters' attention on an "external enemy" that was "taking away" resources from the Romanian people. His totally populist proposal to solve socio-economic problems by stopping aid to Ukraine in its war against the Russian aggressor, presented in short videos for TikTok and other social networks, was aimed at those dissatisfied with the current state of affairs in the country. These are primarily those who feel economic instability, live mainly in rural areas with low access to services, are socially vulnerable, or work in the so-called "grey" economy. His electorate, like that of George Simion, consists of those who have not benefited from European integration, who feel left out of the modernisation process, on the sidelines of socio-economic and political processes.

Călin Georgescu's TikTok campaign was both an unprecedented success and failure. In a short time, he achieved the desired result – leadership in the electoral race. Messages about a "strong leader" who is a "true Romanian" and has a 'plan' and "solutions" for all problems found their audience. At the same time, such an unprecedented victory for the "dark horse" of the election – a rapid increase in support from 5% to 22.9% – prompted a response from the Romanian authorities. The Central Election Bureau of Romania began recounting the votes

on November 30. Moreover, although on December 2, the Constitutional Court of Romania recognised the first round as valid, the situation changed radically in just a few days [35].

On December 5, President Klaus Iohannis released intelligence documents that proved interference in the presidential election in support of Călin Georgescu through the TikTok platform and cyberattacks, including Russian ones [35]. These documents confirmed the promotion of commissioned content in support of the far-right Călin Georgescu. The Constitutional Court initiated a full recount of the votes [7]. The Romanian national media regulator accused TikTok of "amplifying" Călin Georgescu's content to the detriment of other candidates "through the automation of video promotion" [31]. The deputy head of ANCOM (the media regulator) even demanded that the social network be temporarily blocked until the investigation was completed [7]. Here, it is worth referring to the platform's own report, which emphasises its active work to prevent the creation and operation of covert influence networks. According to information released by the platform itself, TikTok blocked three covert influence networks in Romania during several months of the election campaign, in particular, "a network of 78 accounts operating from Romania, with 1,781 followers, that attempted to promote candidate Călin Georgescu on TikTok — which to date is the only network we have identified that focused on promoting Călin Georgescu as a prominent topic". In addition, appropriate steps were taken against a network linked to Sputnik Media, which targeted Romanian and Moldovan audiences [4].

The logical consequence of the disclosure of information about violations of electoral law was the annulment on December 6, 2024, two days before the second round, by the Constitutional Court of Romania of the results of the first round, in which Călin Georgescu had won. However, despite the annulment of the results of the first round of the presidential election, Călin Georgescu attempted to continue his electoral battle and, on March 7, 2025, became the official candidate for president for the second time in the elections scheduled for May 4. However, on Sunday, March 9, Romania's Central Election Authority blocked C. Georgescu's candidacy, stating that "it is unacceptable after the Constitutional Court annulled the December vote" [21]. After C. Georgescu was banned from participating in the election race, the

leader of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) party, George Simion, announced his candidacy instead.

The Romanian presidential elections became a striking example of democracy's institutional capacity to combat populism and political manipulation amid Russia's information warfare. The situation that developed in the Romanian electoral field became a truly unprecedented case in global electoral practice. The presidential elections in the country were marked by the removal of two controversial candidates (D. Shoshoake and C. Georgescu) and the cancellation of the first-round results, followed by the start of a new electoral cycle. The candidates removed from the race were ideologically linked to each other and to G. Simion, the leader of the AUR. The ultra-right populism of both D. Shoshoake and C. Georgescu was represented in the second round of the presidential election by G. Simion. He, however, tried to sit on three chairs: to maintain relations with the EU, Russia, and the US, seeking the maximum benefits in each case. His criticism of the EU was not as radical as that of C. Georgescu. However, it was clear that, if elected, G. Simion would complicate procedures and delay decision-making as much as possible regarding aid to Ukraine. As for his position on the Russian-Ukrainian war, Simion stated the need to restore relations with Russia and sign a peace agreement:

"We must stop this war. We must stop any civilian casualties. Moreover, that is why we must achieve a ceasefire. We hope that Donald Trump's peace initiatives will bear fruit" [32].

In light of Trump's November initiatives (2025) to establish peace in Ukraine, this approach fully explains the more than loyal attitude of both the US and Russia towards this candidate. Both Washington and Moscow have demonstrated their support for G. Simion with all available informational and political tools. Here, as in the case of the current "peace plan", D. Trump and V. Putin have presented a united front.

For Moscow, Simion's victory was critical. It would have allowed Moscow to establish its direct influence in the region and given it an additional tool to exert pressure on Brussels (alongside its puppet Viktor Orbán), would have made Ukraine's European integration impossible (or at least more difficult), and would have given it additional opportunities to keep Moldova within the embrace of the "Russian world". However, the latter is still debatable, given Romania's national

interests in the region. In any case, the conflict potential of the Romanian-Moldovan-Ukrainian border region would increase, which Moscow would use to achieve its own interests.

The first round of the spring presidential elections in Romania ended with a clear victory for G. Simion. He won the support of 40.5% of voters and said that if he wins, he might bring C. Georgescu, the de facto twice-deposed pro-Russian far-right candidate, onto his team. Nicuşor Dan, the mayor of Bucharest, a centrist independent candidate, received 20.99% of the vote [24]. Unlike Simion, Nicuşor Dan has a pro-Western stance, is a staunch supporter of Romania's European course, and supports Ukraine in the Russian-Ukrainian war.

G. Simion's victory, against the backdrop of his statements regarding the potential implementation of C. Georgescu's program (this is the only way to interpret his statements about the possibility of Georgescu bringing his team on board), alarmed not only the pro-European electorate within Romania, but also the entire democratic world.

The following two weeks were decisive for mobilising the country's pro-European electorate. Analysing the course of events in Romania at that time, it should be emphasised that Nicuşor Dan's electorate, which consists mainly of residents of large cities, voters with higher education, and medium and high incomes, demonstrated a high level of civic awareness. The election results confirmed Romania's European course: Nicuşor Dan won 53.6% of the vote, while G. Simion won 46.4%. Voter turnout exceeded forecasts, reaching 64.7% [1].

Immediately after the election, George Simion announced his victory:

"We are the clear winners of this election. We declare victory on behalf of the Romanian people. However, this is not my victory. It is Călin Georgescu's victory. He is the true president of Romania" [30].

However, the very next day, he had to admit defeat publicly.

"We were alone against everyone. I am proud of you and congratulate my opponent on his victory. It was the will of the Romanian people... We will go to the end, even if it is difficult to endure the bitter taste of defeat right now" [34].

Romania has successfully passed the test of the 2024–2025 presidential elections. It has managed to defeat a powerful and largely invisible enemy—the Russian Federation, which uses all possible tools

and formats in its information war against democracy. The importance of this victory lies in the fact that the attempt to establish reflexive control over the country by bringing its candidates to power in Russia has failed. The latter failed to destroy the partnership between Ukraine and Romania, to nullify the achievements made during the country's EU membership, and to push the country toward a populist abyss. And although the positions of the AUR and other radicals remain quite strong in Romania, institutionally, the country remains a stable democracy, which is a key factor in preserving its potential for development and growth.

Conclusions

Russia's military offensive against Ukraine has revealed that the process of the collapse of the global colonial system is not yet complete. The last global empire, Russia, continues to exist, aggressively attempting to subordinate global political processes to its own authoritarian practices. Moreover, while in the early 1990s this took place in a somewhat covert manner, under the guise of "peacemaking", today Russia openly declares its imperial intentions and ambitions, backing them up with daily terrorist attacks on Ukrainian cities and villages, killing thousands of civilians every day and night.

Unable to implement its military plans within the deadlines it had set for itself, Moscow expanded the geography of its information and hybrid warfare, primarily to Ukraine's neighbouring states. Among them are the Republic of Moldova and Romania. Moldova, which has been under Russian hybrid attack since the early days of independence, found itself in the grip of a Russian hybrid offensive. With a separatist enclave in the form of the unrecognised Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic and the Russian army on its territory, it continues to fight for its sovereignty and the right to make independent political choices. The complex socio-economic situation in the republic has increased the operational capabilities of Russian influence. Moscow spared no expense in Moldova's election campaigns to promote its own candidates. For the 2025 elections alone, it allocated €100 million to undermine trust in democratic institutions, disrupt electoral processes, and so on [12]. However, despite Russia's active efforts, Moldova made its historic choice in favour of European integration in the 2024 presi-

dential elections and confirmed it in the 2025 parliamentary elections. This was one of Moscow's most significant defeats on the hybrid front and demonstrated the irreversibility of the empire's decline in regional influence.

Romania has never been a country where Russian influence has been as strong as in neighbouring Moldova or Ukraine. Even during the socialist era, the potential for conflict between the two countries was rather high. In its quest to surround Ukraine with a belt of unfriendly states and to establish (or restore) its dominance in the region, Moscow has thrown its weight behind efforts to reshape Romania's political landscape. Its open support for far-right populists did not produce the desired result: the Romanian deep state demonstrated institutional resilience and preserved democratic procedures in the face of blatant political manipulation by Moscow. The latter, even with the help of the US, failed to push through its candidate for the presidency.

In its desire to maintain control over Moldova and strengthen its influence in Romania, Moscow sought to preserve its role as the region's leading power. The implementation of plans for reflexive control over Moldova and Romania could have created a danger zone for the entire European continent. However, in this electoral struggle, democracy demonstrated not only its resilience but also its competitiveness with autocracy, even in times of crisis. Despite Moscow's narrative about the effectiveness of authoritarianism in times of crisis, it turned out that it is democratic institutions and procedures that are most effective in protecting citizens from unauthorised attacks on their security. However, Russia's war on the European continent is the greatest challenge, threat, and litmus test of democracy's resilience in times of crisis.

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CHAPTER 6.

PERSPECTIVE DE PROMOVARE A VALORILOR SECURITĂȚII UMANE ÎN CONDIȚIILE INSECURITĂȚII POLITICE

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Rezumat*: Promovarea valorilor specifice securității umane în condiții de insecuritate politică în condițiile fortificării și accelerării procesului de democratizare a societății umane sunt direct legate de necesitatea elaborării și impunerii unui nou model de abordare față de fenomenul securitar în contextul amplificării insecurității și incertitudinii în relațiile internaționale. Această nouă abordare este în acord deplin cu perspectiva modificării accentelor în domeniul securității de la securitatea statului și de la cea națională, la securitatea umană și la siguranța persoanei. Societatea umană conține un set de valori și modele cu privire la contracararea pericolelor și riscurilor de securitate bazată pe respectul pentru demnitatea omului, pe nevoia asigurării siguranței personale a acestuia. Astfel, siguranța persoanei ocupă un loc primordial în spectrul larg al preocupărilor pentru domeniul securității. În contextul procesului de globalizare, considerăm că este necesar să fie amplificată și cultura securității, mai ales că societatea contemporană este una a riscurilor, pentru care progresul reprezintă o provocare fundamentală dublată de un șir de pericole, riscuri și amenințări securitare. Concepția securității umane care pune accent pe dimensiunile non-militare ale securității, presupune, de asemenea, și promovarea protecției drepturilor și libertăților fundamentale ale omului. Articolul este elaborat în cadrul subprogramului de cercetare: 01.05.01 „Securitatea națională a Republicii Moldova în contextul aderării la Uniunea Europeană: abordări juridice, politice și sociologice" implementat în cadrul ICJPS al Universității de Stat din Moldova și în cadrul proiectului „Camps and Camp-Like Settings in Urban Environments: Bridging Humanitarian and Development Activities", finanțat de SNIS.*
Cuvinte cheie: *insecuritate politică***,** *securitate umană, siguranța persoanei, globalizare, constructivism, dezvoltare umană, criză globală.*

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PERSPECTIVES ON PROMOTING HUMAN SECURITY VALUES UNDER CONDITIONS OF POLITICAL INSECURITY

Abstract: *The promotion of values specific to human security in conditions of political insecurity in the context of the strengthening and acceleration of the democratization process of human societies is directly related to the need to develop and impose a new model of approach to the phenomenon of security in the context of the amplification of insecurity and uncertainty in international relations. This new approach is fully consistent with the prospects for changing the emphasis in the field of state and national security, human security and personal safety. Human society contains a set of values and models regarding countering security dangers and risks based on respect for human dignity, on the need to ensure personal safety. Thus, personal safety occupies a primary place in the broad spectrum of concerns in the field of security. In the context of the globalization process, about the need to amplify the culture of security, especially since contemporary society is one of risks, for which the progress of the category is a fundamental challenge doubled by a series of dangers, risks and security threats. The concept of human security, which emphasizes the non-military dimensions of security, also involves promoting the protection of fundamental human rights and freedoms. The article is developed within the research subprogram: 01.05.01 „National security of the Republic of Moldova in the context of accession to the European Union: legal, political and sociological approaches" implemented in the ILPSR of Moldova State University and within the project „Camps and Camp-Like Settings in Urban Environments: Bridging Humanitarian and Development Activities", funded by SNIS.*

Keywords: political insecurity, human security, personal safety, globalization, constructivism, human development, global crisis.

Introduction

In the era of increasing international uncertainty and aggravation of global problems, as well as the deepening of the global crisis, the level of insecurity is increasing, including political one, manifesting itself in all constitutive spheres of political life, ultimately affecting the quality of democracy and the proper functioning of socio-political systems. [1, p. 102].

The need for personal safety and security of man is among his first vital needs, after biophysiological ones, such as nutrition, the need for shelter and survival, in the hierarchical pyramid of needs developed by psychologist Abraham Maslow in 1943. [2, p. 373]. Personal security transcends physical safety and the fear of being attacked and calls for economic and financial security: the need for a guaranteed minimum income, job security, the security of the psychological comfort necessary for effective activity free from the anxieties of everyday life. [3, p. 233] Human security also refers to sociopolitical security, through which man seeks to live in a comfortable, fair and stable hierarchical system, safe from the violence of wars, revolutions and coups d'état with clear and fair rules in which progress and prosperity can be possible through honest work, loyalty and perseverance [4, p. 212].

The perception of system insecurity by the citizen can generate such distortions of political behavior as the diminution of interest in participating in political processes, can amplify electoral absenteeism, can increase the effect of the phenomenon of irrational voting or can contribute to maximizing the general dissatisfaction of the electorate with political processes and phenomena [5, p. 91], resulting from the impossibility of exercising its main function within the democratic system of redistribution of state power, as a result of blocking the functionality of the democratic principle of adopting decisions by majority consensus, given the need to ensure systemic security by temporarily establishing technical but authoritarian relationships between the rulers and the governed, in order to facilitate the efficiency of the system in the natural fight against the dangers to it [6, p. 34].

In an insecure environment, freedom is significantly reduced, resulting from the need to emphasize the community interest as a priority over individual interest until the dangers are annihilated. Since, in the conditions of the world crisis, political insecurity is amplified to a global level, freedom as a constitutive element of the democratization of the political sphere suffers major disruptions, being neglected and significantly reduced [7, p. 39].

Given the amplification of the global crisis and its threat to the existence of man on Earth, solving the problem of humanity's survival in decent conditions, ensuring all the necessary premises for a high standard of living for each individual, but also for humanity as a whole, in the subsequent periods after overcoming the crises that threaten

contemporary civilization, depends largely on finding a functional formula for establishing efficient social control, including through various mass media sources, over the social management process, especially in the case of the managerial process using advanced biological and informational technologies, to which the vast majority of the population does not have access, in order to ensure a sustainable development of the entire human civilization under conditions of equity. Thus, a series of mechanisms can be noted that must be implemented to achieve this goal, being in a systemic interdependence [8, p. 211].

Therefore, there is a need to reconceptualize the issue of security and its role for the proper functioning of democratic mechanisms of social governance, especially during the multidimensional global crisis that humanity is currently going through. Thus, it becomes important to highlight a fundamental characteristic, specific to both the social sphere and public life, as well as the field of norms and standards of behavior, namely – the capacity to adapt and rally the areas of social life to the pressing priorities and major needs of society [9, p. 205], especially since the dangers generated by the global crisis are now in the amplification stage and present a significant threat not only in terms of the destabilization of the world order and social life systems, such as the political, economic system or the system of traditional moral values, but also raise more and more doubts regarding the survival of the human species on Earth, given the realization of the bleakest scenarios of the current situation. [10, p. 512].

Within contemporary socio-political debates, it is attested that the concerns of voters, politicians, and society as a whole are being brought to the forefront, the issue of adjusting the normative-legislative framework, as well as the political framework, to aspects related to the biological condition of man, to various aspects in which the issue of life, the role of life and its rights is placed in a completely different place than before, within the set of social, economic, legal and political priorities [11, p. 109]. And the most defining element of the reorientation of the vector of politics sec. XXI consists in the fact that as a result of the political confrontations between the aspirations of groups of citizens who advocate for the revision of the legal, social and economic bases of the contemporary political model, although secular but still based on religious traditions, mostly Christian, but also Islamic or Jewish, with the conservative forces of the political system

that intend to oppose the changes, socio-political debates acquire a completely different meaning from the perspective of reducing them to the confrontation of value systems and the argumentation of the supremacy of moral and behavioral models [12, p. 523].

At the end of the century XX, there was a discussion in wide circles among scholars of various specialties, by researchers in the social sciences, in the field of economics, but especially in the field of political sciences, about such complex influences that tended to dominate socio-political life in the near future, such as: digitalization and computerization as trends and natural extensions of globalization, including in the sphere of exercising power, in the field of socio-political pressures or security processes, so that after the passage of the mentioned period, those assumptions and estimates became certainties that leave a deep impact, especially in culture, behavior and socio-political consciousness, both at the global level and at the micro-political level, referring directly to the human individual and his immediate entourage [13, p. 92]. At the beginning of the 21st century, however, the attention of scientific circles, the class of politicians and technocrats from various fields of the economy is completely captured by the subject of the priorities and sociopolitical potential of human communities, in combination with Artificial Intelligence and other advanced communication technologies, to face the challenge of the multidimensional global crisis that is increasingly deepening and structurally diversifying, with a clear emphasis on the military component, being caused in a significant way by the involution of social morality and the degradation of the ethical and value standards of contemporary man [14, p. 23].

In the context of the globalization process, the task of social modernization through democracy becomes a mission that is both difficult and responsible, in the conditions in which modernization and democratization of society represent, on the one hand, one of the proposed results and solutions of globalization, and on the other hand, an efficient lever for implementing and humanizing the globalization process. In contemporary specialized literature, there are more and more studies looking at the essence and various aspects of the global crisis in the context of the globalization process [15, p. 533]. Thus, M. Deliaghin sees a cause of the expansion of the global crisis in the discrepancy from the traditional way of perceiving life and the galloping rhythms in which the world is changing, becoming more and more

aggressive, more competitive and more pretentious, both towards the simple citizen and towards the ruling elites, who are required to adapt on all levels to the new conditions, from socio-psychological to bio-genetic adaptation [16, p. 28]. In this situation of continuous global crises, contemporary society is increasingly becoming one in which risk predominates. According to the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, modernization will inevitably lead to the dissolution of contemporary civilization, giving rise to a risk society, dominated by various dangers and threats, among which civilizational and technological ones stand out for their particular violence [17, p. 93]. In the context of theoretical pluralism, it is assumed that each scientific approach defines in a differentiated way the legal framework, the laws and development trends of the various branches of social modernization, highlighting the appropriateness of the post-classical and interdisciplinary approach to the applicability of the domain of human security in the socio-political and civilizational context of the Republic of Moldova [18, p. 341]. In this sense, it is clear that the Republic of Moldova represents a state that is still in the process of forming and defining its goals and priorities, that faces significant difficulties and major obstacles in achieving its national interests, a dispersed political community with a reduced potential for international affirmation, located on the periphery of global processes and trends, both in economic and international relations, as well as from the point of view of the circuit of universal social, cultural, artistic and spiritual values [19, p. 548]. However, it is clear that the social and political aspirations and expectations of the population of the Republic of Moldova, articulated through its socio-political elites, are of a nature to bring this state back into the regional circuit by affirming the strategic option of European integration, especially in the context of the military events in Ukraine after February 2022, which generated a series of demographic processes in the region, triggered important processes of restructuring and re-technologizing [20, p. 142]. In this sense, it is obvious that in the social subconscious of public opinion in the Republic of Moldova, the main motivation for these aspirations and expectations is to benefit from the stability, prosperity and well-being of the EU, through connection to regional processes and through internal modernization of the society in the Republic of Moldova [21, p. 151]. It is always clear that by reducing the degree of isolation and marginalization of the society in the Republic of Moldova

and its connection to global processes and trends, universal trends, with all their specific positive and negative elements, will also be felt in the Republic of Moldova through a decisive impact on the most important political processes, namely the decision-making process, of modernization and Westernization [22, p. 98]. In this context, the contribution of security applied to man and society is to smooth the impact of negative global trends on local politics and society and to amplify the possible benefits, through the elaboration and practical implementation of strategies and institutions necessary for the formation and adjustment of decisions adopted both at the macro-political level and in narrow domains, presumably in the most exotic spheres of human activity – biomedicine, experiments with subjects human, social and psychological research that may affect the integrity and interests of a human subject involved, etc. [23, p. 131].

In the conditions of the need for closer cooperation of various actors in the international arena and the coordination of their efforts in order to develop and implement a complex strategy for the survival of humanity, developed in accordance with the values, norms and principles of human security, enshrined in international law, in the conditions of the aggravation of the global crisis on all levels, it becomes necessary to deepen the cooperation of the Republic Moldova is subject to international law, but also to various state institutions and agencies, as well as at the level of non-governmental organizations or economic agents from the Republic of Moldova, with similar institutions in the EU [24, p. 72].

In the context of the need to implement the EU accession plan by the Republic of Moldova, it is necessary to assume the positions, standards, models and experience of the EU, reflected in policies related to security and human development, and to contribute by the Republic of Moldova, to the extent possible, to ensuring the security of European and Western communities by counteracting the disastrous effects of global problems at the local level [25, p. 92]. It is necessary for the Government of the Republic of Moldova, other institutions involved, to promote policies to combat multidimensional global crises in accordance with the imperatives of security and human development, as a foundation for consolidating internal social cohesion and as a basic reason and rationale for international and regional cooperation not only with the EU but also with other global and regional security insti-

tutions, respecting the history of European integration in the foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova, the objectives pursued at the local level should include personal security, well-being, guarantee and assurance of fundamental human rights and freedoms, ensuring the autonomy, benefits and interests of the human individual, protection of confidential information, individual and community security of human beings, as well as increasing the sense of certainty in tomorrow for the ordinary citizen of the Republic of Moldova [26, p. 33].

This concept of human security was launched in the socio-academic circle in the early 1990s, and for the first time it was mentioned in such an international norm in 1994 when the United Nations Human Development Report was published [27, p. 188]. The main purpose of this new term in the field of security was to overcome the limits imposed on the conceptualization of the phenomenon of security by its traditional military sense [28, p. 491]. The new sense of human security extends to a higher level the understanding of the phenomenon in question, presenting it as a multidimensional one that includes economic, food, health, environmental, personal, political, community security, etc. [29, p. 159]. If we are to analyze the concept of human security in detail, it is important to note that this notion bears an eminently synthetic and complementary character with at least two other concepts, such as that of human rights, on the one hand, and on the other – the issue of human development [30, p. 560]. Together, these three notions: human security, human rights, and human development represent a harmonious conceptual complex aimed at elucidating and explaining the processes of evolution and transformation of man in the context of the contemporary world, with all the challenges, dangers, and threats that they entail for the human person [31, p. 88]. Without human security, human rights and development lose their meaning and can no longer achieve the goal for which they were proposed – the creation of an adequate environment for the development of both the human person and human communities [32, p. 69]. On the other hand, ensuring human security and human rights outside the development paradigm represents an unnecessary waste of time, hampered by a static and unsustainable situation [33, p. 31]. The goal and achievement of human development and individual security without an adequate level of ensuring respect for human rights becomes obsolete the moment individual rights and freedoms are considered less

important or secondary to the community, priority being placed on the security and development of the state to the detriment and expense of the citizen [34, p. 118]. Of the three organically linked elements: human security, human rights and human development, the first of which appears last in the social and economic circuit, chronologically speaking [35, p. 78]. Human security, in fact, has come to perfect the concept of progress of contemporary human civilization, based on well-being, tolerance and individual freedoms [36, p. 105]. In general, it is clear that human security tends to encompass other notions, transforming them decisively, in accordance with the priority of security and sustainability of efforts to achieve progress [37, p. 54]. Thus, all three elements: human security, human rights and human development become part of a single concept of safe and free development [38, p. 480].

There are numerous human security issues in the Republic of Moldova. Numerous aspects potentially affecting the human security of the population of the Republic of Moldova are becoming major concerns in the context of EU accession [39, p. 192].

The issue of the international policy option of the Republic of Moldova represents a subject of considerable debate and dispute in the scientific community, currently raising numerous questions regarding the advisability of applying multiple schemes, perspectives and approaches to assessing risks, threats and benefits for the security, stability and well-being of the Republic of Moldova, both in the short and long term. medium and long term [40, p. 128]. In this context, the Republic of Moldova, despite its relatively low importance in the international and regional arena, has, rather, a tendency to consume regional and internal security, in terms specific to a paradigm launched at the Copenhagen School, rather than to generate and export security to neighboring states [41, p. 207].

In the short period of time that has passed since the beginning of 2014 and especially after February 2022, when the territory of Ukraine was massively attacked by the Russian Federation, the Republic of Moldova, in the context of its need for stability and restoration of the functionality of the law enforcement authorities both externally and internally throughout the entire constitutional territory, can and must take advantage of the opportunity Its joining and association with international blocs offers a greater weight of benefits in relation to risks

for the Republic of Moldova, in order to solve the most serious security problems it faces [42, p. 26]. Thus, in this order of ideas, the option of accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union can no longer have an alternative, and it offers numerous benefits of modernization, increased welfare, stability and strengthening of security, including human, related to reduced risks at the level of delegation of coordination functions in some areas, offered to community structures [43, p. 60]. However, it is worth noting that the accession to the EU, for a number of states, former republics of the USSR, from the poor category, including the Republic of Moldova, also worsened the bilateral relations of these states with the Russian Federation, which has a colonial behavior, being determined to restore its lost influence in the respective area [44, p. 268]. In this context of the need to modernize the Republic of Moldova through access to the values, models and funds of the European Union, the threats and attacks of the Russian Federation with the aim of internal destabilization (social, economic and political, including through media manipulation, through the Transnistrian separatist region, as part of a large-scale hybrid war) are becoming increasingly dangerous [45, p. 162]. The stakes of these threats and blackmail from the Russian Federation are to intimidate the societies of the ex-Soviet states, including the Republic of Moldova [46, p. 600]. In this sense, the Russian Federation in the former union republics resorts, in fact, to activating a mechanism of threat, of mass manipulation to which the indigenous population of the Republic of Moldova was also subjected, mechanisms of terrorizing the population that operated at maximum speed especially during the period of the existence of the Soviet Union, such as the fear induced in the broad masses of the population by the abuses of the colonial power but also by socio-political and financial-economic instability, fear of a possible armed escalation of internal conflicts, underdevelopment and poverty, but the most important factor at stake in Russia's hybrid war is the nostalgia of the pro-Russian population in the newly independent states for the authoritarian and paternalistic Soviet regime [47, p. 163].

Human security is promoted including through programmatic documents in the Republic of Moldova, including through the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova, the latest version of which was approved in December 2023, by ensuring social security, by

ensuring food security in the perspective of supporting a healthy lifestyle, and promoting public health as a fundamental value [48, p. 81].

All the elements set out above and promoted through the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova, denote the fact that in recent times, the Republic of Moldova, despite the precarious state of human security, the health of the population and the efficiency of the mechanisms established to ensure such security, has been increasingly determined to align itself with global trends in promoting human security, with all its many components. important lack of an indigenous legislative framework to fully respond to these global and European trends [49, p. 37]. However, it is important to note that the level of ensuring human security on the territory of the Republic of Moldova is not uniformly distributed [50, p. 81]. Thus, according to research by the Commission for Population and Development under the Government of the Republic of Moldova, for example, the level of demographic security, as a component of human security, shows great disparities, being the highest in the municipalities of Chisinau, Balti and Cahul, and the lowest in rural localities in the districts of Taraclia and Sholdanesti, directly depending on factors such as unemployment, the population's access to health services, education, disease incidence, mortality, birth rate, population aging, socio-economic development, etc. [51, p. 61].

Large proportions of poverty and crime in the country in material-economic areas such as tax evasion, corruption at different levels of state administration in the Republic of Moldova, favored from and through the territory of Transnistria, controlled by the Russian Federation through the separatist regime [52, p. 177]. Separatism is a form of human terrorism, domestic and international crime has caused enormous damage to the Republic of Moldova, a fact confirmed by the deplorable economic state of Moldovan society, the massive emigration of the workforce and the population from the Republic of Moldova over the better part of three decades since the declaration of independence of the Republic of Moldova [53, p. 606].

In this regard, regarding the current situation and relevance of the problem of the expansion of terrorism for the Republic of Moldova, it must be emphasized that our state has been facing the problem of Transnistrian separatism for more than two decades, which represents a classic case of entropic terrorism, from the perspective of the pluralist political science school [54, p. 57]. The separatist regime in

the Transnistrian territories is financed and supported from abroad by the Russian Federation, in order to disrupt the internal situation, blackmail decision-makers, terrorize public opinion, demoralize it, undermine the efforts of the Republic of Moldova to join the EU and jeopardize any attempt at full integration into the world community by attracting investments in the local economy [55, p. 121]. Unfortunately, despite the continuous negotiations in various formats between the law enforcement authorities of the Republic of Moldova and the self-proclaimed countries, over time after the onset of the hot phase of the conflict on the Dniester in 1992, it was not possible to fully transfer the violent potential and threats to the security of the state emanating from the separatist authorities, in terms of constructive discussions and debates in the development of a model for the reintegration into the constitutional system of the Republic of Moldova of the territories controlled by the Russian Federation through separatists [56, p. 82].

And this failure of the political class and the society in the Republic of Moldova to realize the true cause of the Transnistrian separatist phenomenon can be fully explained in terms of the pluralist paradigm, through insufficient democratization and development, both human and economic, of our society, a condition that does not allow Transnistrian separatism, in the present case, to overcome its terrorist, threatening and violent phase [57, p. 34]. In order to facilitate the necessary development of social and decision-making processes of reform at the political and social level of the Republic of Moldova [58, p. 100]. In the last decade, visible progress has been recorded in terms of transparency in the process of debate and discussion among broad sections of the population and public opinion in society on a diverse range of problems that the indigenous society traditionally faces, regarding the emergence of numerous scandals and abuses in the financial-banking sector (such as the theft of the billion), and in the sphere of respect for fundamental human rights, which has resulted in the start of the process of public analysis in critical terms of the security vulnerabilities of the Republic of Moldova, of the dangers and threats to human security [59, p. 14].

Human security has been rethought and reimagined as a comprehensive approach that supports UN Member States in identifying more easily the top global challenges to human survival, life and dignity [60, p. 42]. Human security is recognized as connecting peace, de-

velopment and human rights such as civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights [61, p. 361]. As a result of this document, the third intrinsic and fundamental element of the concept of human security is also promoted, which refers to the freedom of the human individual to live with *dignity*, outside poverty and despair, in addition to freedom from fear and want, enshrined as basic elements of human rights since 1948, since the adoption by the UN of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [62, p. 374].

In the first decade of the 21st century, new and interdisciplinary visions of human security appear in multiple scientific works in an interdependent connection with moral theory [63, p. 221]. In this context, it is relevant to bring into discussion some reference works in the field of conceptualizing human security from a multidisciplinary perspective, such as that of original authors in the field of political science and security studies, such as T. Shahrbanou and A. Chenoy on the multiple implications of the concept of human security, published in 2007 [64, p. 138]. The first of these authors is an Afghan researcher, director of the Center for Peace and Human Security of the Institute of Political Sciences (Sciences Po) in Paris, part of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) working group on human security issues, she contributed substantially to the process of preparing the UN Human Development reports, while A. M. Chenoy is an insightful researcher of the phenomenon of human security and professor of political science and international relations at the „Jawaharlal Nehru" University in New Delhi, India. In the view of these authors, the concept of human security is considered to place a special emphasis on values and a normative approach to the field of security, unlike other dominant models in security studies, such as the realist one, which operates predominantly with facts and retrospective analyses and less with abstract theories and norms of a prospective nature [65, p. 101]. The idea is proposed that the concept of human security is intended to be a set of moral standards in the field of applied ethics, which establishes precisely the ethical limits of behavior in international relations [66, p. 78]. Also, the concept of human security indicates well-defined ultimate goals of efforts to ensure security that are largely reduced to the edification of the well-being of human beings. If from a realist perspective, the moral motivation in the process of ensuring security

is considered to be the reason of state: „raison d'etat", then within the concept of human security the moral imperative becomes the reason for existing – „raison d'etre" [67, p. 463]. Based on this, the correlation between the conception of human security and the bioethical approach as a superior stage of the development of moral theory in the conditions of global crisis would be able not only to differentiate the evolution of security studies by stages depending on the load of their approaches, but also to usefully and beneficially direct the evolution of concepts regarding security towards solving the civilizational imperatives that currently face humanity, such as sustainable development and the sustainable overcoming of the global crisis.

T. Owen and P. H. Liotta are also important researchers in the context of the conceptual development of human security. In their opinion, human security still needs to be supplemented with content, for the simple reason that the given approach is not sufficiently well and uniformly understood, both by researchers and politicians or military. They carry out a theoretical approach to define and develop basic concepts such as risks, threats and vulnerabilities in the field of human security [68, p. 41].

With the amplification of the globalization process, the concept of human security generates more and more new ethical challenges. However, the multidimensional global crisis dictates and configures the security agenda, and contradictory moral aspects are part of the totality of the effects, but also of the causes of the global crisis. The globalization process and its beneficial impact on the common conceptualization of security from the perspective of similar civilizational values is the subject addressed by researchers P. Battersby and J.M. Siracusa [69, p. 61]. However, globalization does not only have beneficial effects and net benefits, including in relation to the promotion of human security, bringing a certain prejudice to the unique social way of existence and spirituality of small communities, which feel threatened by globalization, which, in turn, can turn into a danger to human security. D. Roberts intervenes in the academic dispute with reference to human security by emphasizing biopolitical aspects in the context of the need to build a global international government that can be entrusted with the task of normatively promoting human security [70, p. 87]. This represents an ingenious approach from the

perspective of emphasizing the biological factor as a fundamental one in the process of conceptualizing human security, as well as the ethical factor as a natural one of human nature, without which constructive, non-conflictual and non-violent rapprochement between cultures and civilizations in the era of globalization cannot be conceived.

Solving the problem of humanity's survival in decent conditions, ensuring all the necessary premises for a high level of life and human security of each individual, but also of humanity as a whole, in the subsequent periods after overcoming the crises that threaten contemporary civilization, depends largely on finding a functional formula for establishing efficient social control, including through various mass media sources, over the social management process, especially in the case of the managerial process using advanced biological and informational technologies, to which the vast majority of the population does not have access, in order to ensure a sustainable development of the entire human civilization under conditions of equity. Thus, a series of mechanisms that must be implemented to achieve this goal, being in a systemic interdependence, can be noted. Democratization of access to political and social decisions of cardinal importance for society, strengthening the legal system and the defense of human rights and freedoms, increasing the importance of scientific substantiation of the governance process and socio-political projects, important mechanisms but which are far surpassed by the mediator role in establishing an efficient social control over the decision-making process in the socio-political sphere, strengthening and supporting the mass media as the fourth power in the state and that of ethical expertise of macro-social projects, policies and strategies proposed to be implemented in social practice by the political class.

The democratization process presupposes, first of all, a positive trend in the field of deepening human freedoms and political rights, closely linked to the expansion of the social pool and public acceptance of the decision-making process. Under these conditions, a robust system of ensuring personal safety and human security in society is a fundamentally important support for maintaining an upward trajectory of socio-political reforms for the deepening and rooting of traditions specific to democracy in the transitional society. Given the need to study the functioning of the mechanism of ensuring personal safety

and human security for the deepening of democratic traditions and practices, the regulatory framework becomes crucial in the context in which social practices and policies depend decisively on the objectives of society, outlined normatively and legislatively. The national legislative framework provides a set of definitions that establish the foundation for understanding how security issues are addressed in the Republic of Moldova.

Human security aims to protect individuals individually, but also as a social whole, by ensuring the conditions of life and livelihood, the fundamental needs. Therefore, the democratization of society cannot be possible without ensuring the security and safety of the person, and only this condition provides sufficient motivation for the involvement of the person as a citizen in public affairs, in the decision-making process, in political competition, etc. In the same context, we note that human security cannot ignore its most strategic goal – to educate both the person and the masses, to induce and form, through amplification and multiplication, the fundamental human qualities and virtues that underlie the progress of the security field in the broadest possible sense, but also the basis of social progress, in the broadest sense of the word. Human security and democratization, as complementary areas of human activity, in a practical sense, both with involvement in the political space, can acquire various new characteristics depending on the situation and context, arising from the set of social expectations towards them in order to sustainably resolve the global crisis, including its local manifestations in the Republic of Moldova in various spheres of human and social life, using the entire spectrum of available methods and levers. In the context of the present research, it was found that both the discipline of human security and the theory of democratization include sufficient methodological and conceptual elaborations, systems of principles and approaches to contribute substantially to the acceleration and quantitative and qualitative amplification of the practical valorization of the results accumulated in the theoretical and applied field of sustainable development, launched two decades ago. The process of amplifying the influence of the human factor in researching the issue of human security becomes important with the deepening of research on this concept. Since the sustainable and complete assurance of the security of the human individual cannot be car-

ried out without ensuring the security of the natural environment of the person's life, a new approach to the concept of human security is required, by highlighting its biocentric character, which comes to replace the anthropocentric character of the first attempts to theorize this concept of human security. Thus, human security with a biocentric specificity can be better understood as a new stage in the development of the theory regarding the assurance of security through the prism of individual interests, changing the emphasis towards ensuring the well-being of the human individual only in direct correlation with the sustainable assurance of the well-being of nature and the environment.

From a new perspective, the issue of human security refers not only to the primacy of protecting the interests of the person over those of the state, but, above all, it aims at protecting the quality or qualitative structure of the protected subject, that is, the human person. Similar to other sectoral types of security (economic, energy, food, banking, etc.), human security aims to protect, but also to amplify (unlike other sectoral forms of security) human qualities, those that contribute to increasing the person's appreciation of both his or her value in itself and in relation to society, through the prism of the usefulness and importance of the human individual for other people, for social progress, for preserving the environment, for protecting nature and the biosphere in a sustainable context. There is an obvious lack, both at the international level, but especially in the Republic of Moldova, of a normative and legislative framework adequate to the gravity of the situation created regarding the current low level of human security, an aspect that can be improved through the methodological and logistical contribution of theories regarding sociopolitical modernization, democratization, to counter the most serious security threats to the human person and contemporary society, which are analyzed through the prism of their relevance in a developmental and security sense. This lack of an adequate regulatory framework in the field of human security has led to the establishment of social and political practices harmful to the stability, prosperity, progress and cohesion of society, including that of the Republic of Moldova, such as those related to the tacit acceptance in the local society of some forms of corruption, nepotism or cronyism, the excessive tolerance of the population towards

bad governance and deviation from the moral norms of the political class and social elite, the indifference and disappointment of the electorate, in most cases, towards the need for personal involvement, as a civil society, in matters of public or national interest. At the same time, the promotion and entrenchment of social skills and habits, very often degrading for the human being and discouraging for the ordinary citizen, in relation to the civil servant, the state and the bodies supervising public and constitutional order, such as those mentioned, have emerged as a result of the low level of socio-political and security culture, both of the majority of the population of the Republic of Moldova, and of the political class and elites. This situation is due both to the moral and identity crisis in the local society, and to the lack of an adequate level of competence of civil servants and state representatives in the field of human security, human rights, but especially in that of socio-political modernization and democratization, as well as to their acceptable ignorance of international norms relating to the regulation of these areas.

In contrast, contemporary developments must determine the main stimulating factors for politicians, statesmen and civil servants to know and improve themselves in the field of knowledge and application of the norms, principles and imperatives of socio-political modernization, democratization and human security. Various threatening aspects to human development on a global level are coming together more and more often and are becoming more and more violent and dangerous for the social system, directly proportional to the amplification of adverse socio-political phenomena with an asystemic and disintegrating nature for good practices and harmonious relations within the security and socio-political system, as a consequence of the evolution of technical and scientific progress and the delay in solving the dilemmas of the democratic system against the background of the persistent competitive promotion of this model of governance in contemporary society to the detriment of other forms of organization, management and governance of the human community or contrary to the imperatives of society, somewhat divergent from the values and principles of traditional democracy, but fully justifiable from the perspective of the need for human survival in the conditions of the global crisis. Good governance, as a theory and social practice, must promote

human security through the entire regulatory framework, with an emphasis on the rights and needs of the citizen. It is assessed in terms of basic characteristics, such as:

a) Participation in governance, without discrimination, of both women and men, both directly and through institutions or representatives.

b) The rule of law, as the summum of a just legal framework implemented impartially. It also requires the protection of human rights, especially those of minorities.

c) Transparency, which implies: making decisions and implementing them in accordance with existing rules and norms; free circulation of information and making it available to those who are affected by these decisions; information is provided in understandable forms and means, etc.

d) Promptness, as a condition of good governance to provide all decision-makers with a reasonable plan of action, in accordance with the promises made and the interests of citizens.

e) Consensus orientation of all opinion formers in society. Good governance requires the mediation of the different interests expressed in society, in order to achieve consensus on what is for the good of society and on the way to achieve it.

f) Equity and inclusion for all members of society. This implies that all social groups, especially vulnerable ones, are given the chance to develop.

g) Efficiency, in terms of both the results of governance processes and institutions, and the use of natural resources and environmental protection.

h) Accountability, as a characteristic of the activity not only of government institutions, but also of the civil and private sectors of society. Accountability is closely linked to transparency and the rule of law.

If we were to analyze in detail the concept of human security, we consider it important to note that this notion has an eminently synthetic and complementary character with at least two other concepts such as human rights, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the issue of human development. Together, the three notions: human security, human rights and human development represent a harmonious conceptual complex intended to elucidate and explain the processes of human evolution and transformation in the context of the contem-

porary world, with all the challenges, dangers and threats they entail for the human person. Without human security, human rights and development lose their content and can no longer achieve the objective for which they were proposed – creating an adequate environment for evolution for both the human person and human communities. From another perspective, ensuring human security and human rights outside the development paradigm represents a useless occupation clinging to a static and unsustainable situation. Likewise, achieving human development and security of the human individual without an adequate level of ensuring respect for human rights becomes obsolete since individual rights and freedoms are considered less important or secondary to community rights, priority being given to the security and development of the state to the detriment and at the expense of the citizen. Of the three organically linked elements: human security, human rights and human development, the first of which appears the latest in the social and academic circuit, chronologically speaking. Human security, in fact, came to perfect the conception of the progress of contemporary human civilization, based on well-being, tolerance and individual freedoms.

Generalizing, we find that human security tends to encompass the other notions, transforming them decisively, in accordance with the priority of security and sustainability of efforts to achieve progress. Thus, all three elements: human security, human rights and human development become part of a single conception of safe and free development. In the same vein, former UN Secretary General K. Annan stated that we will not be able to enjoy security without development, we will not be able to enjoy development without security, and neither of them without respect for human rights [71]. In other words, the triumvirate of the 3 concepts represents the key to the success of the strategy of progress and the well-being of humanity on a global scale. At the same time, it is important to note that the conception of human security does not diminish the relevance of state security. Human security seeks to protect the individual and the society of which he is a part from a wide range of dangers, ranging from physical security to economic security and, more recently, environmental security. Human security does not only consider the survival of the individual or society. It seeks to grant individuals the freedom to make the decisions they want and to allow them to develop in the manner they choose.

The concept of human security is closely linked to the security of human development and human rights. Human development cannot take place without ensuring respect for universal human rights, and in order to ensure human rights, it is necessary to ensure the development of society and the individual, so that he understands their importance [72, p. 121].

Human security encompasses both concepts and transforms them, creating a unitary whole. But precisely because of the quality of human security to encompass everything related to human society, defining the concept is almost impossible, just as it is impossible to classify the needs of the individual in order of importance. Although the issue of the well-being of human civilization in conditions of safety and respect for the rights and freedoms of the person stands out as an older concern in the history of human thought, we believe that the human security paradigm has managed to bring a new breath of fresh air to security studies only in the last 3-4 decades, transforming and replacing the dominant, realistically-based conception of state security in a chaotic world, where only military force can ensure true protection [73, p. 16].

The increasing emancipation of civic spirit and civil society, the wide use and diversification of the spectrum of methods specific to societal engineering and electoral technologies used in political struggle, in the exercise of political power, as well as in the governance of society, contribute increasingly decisively and irreversibly to the expansion and opening of the field of social morality to new ideological horizons and the inclusion in the contextual complex of political debates, among the most established and traditional themes, topics with ethical specificity, with taboo status in traditional and provincial societies. The lack of an adequate regulatory framework in the field of human security has led to the establishment of social and political practices harmful to the stability, prosperity, progress and cohesion of society, such as those related to the tacit acceptance in the local society of forms of corruption, nepotism or cronyism, the excessive tolerance of the population towards bad governance and behavioral deviation from the moral norms of the political class and social elite, the indifference and disappointment of the electorate, in most cases, towards the need for personal involvement, as a civil society, in matters of public or national interest.

Security processes are subject to constant democratization trends, by virtue of global processes in which democratic values are gaining more and more ground. However, democratization is a fluctuating and discontinuous process, which can progress, stagnate or regress. The sociopolitical process of democratization becomes continuous and progressive only under certain conditions that meet system security, the general sustainability of the sociopolitical environment or / and the presence of the strategic vector towards a sustainable development of the society involved in the democratization process, with all its constituent components of social behavior. A mandatory condition of sociopolitical democracy directly refers to the procedure for identifying and designating elites, decision-makers and rulers who exercise political power by virtue of the mandate received from citizens.

Democratization of access to political and social decisions of cardinal importance for society, strengthening the legal system and the defense of human rights and freedoms, increasing the importance of the scientific substantiation of the governance process and socio-political projects, important mechanisms but which are far surpassed by the mediator role in establishing an efficient social control over the decision-making process in the socio-political sphere, strengthening and supporting the media as the fourth power in the state and that of the ethical expertise of the projects, policies and macro-social strategies proposed to be implemented in social practice by the political class.

Naturally and logically, a series of new concepts have been deduced and built regarding the safeguarding of humanity by overcoming the impasse in which human civilization finds itself at the contemporary stage of evolution, divided into several directions and approaches, depending on civilizational and political factors. Consequently, a series of normative fields and disciplines have been highlighted, with a real praxiological and applicative potential as practical institutional mechanisms with a significant social impact in the process of forming the political behavior of the human person.

Thus, in the context of the socioeconomic and political situation created at the contemporary stage in the evolution of humanity, which denotes a deep impasse in which human civilization finds itself, the emergence and development of various ethical concepts, based on traditional sociocultural structures and constructions, is affirmed as

a progressive vision, capable of identifying acceptable directions and ways to resolve the global crisis. In this way, the delimitation and consolidation of different ethical models is affirmed as an additional way of forming political behavior, through the diversity and originality of humanity's potential for self-evaluation, mobilization and self-protection in critical moments, such as the current period, dominated by the danger and threats of the global crisis.

Contemporary science seems to manifest itself as a solution to contemporary global dangers. Namely, the most advanced science and technologies represent a well-cohesive diversity of ideas and paradigms, methodologies and theoretical constructions, which are well developed and ready to be applied in practice, in the event of a possible crisis of human praxis and which, in extreme situations, would be able to provide substantial support and assistance to the effort of Homo Sapiens to find effective solutions in short periods of time, by educating it and forming adequate political-behavioral reactions. This is beginning to become, and in time will represent, a strategic direction for the development of future science. It is about the express increase in the capacity of science to be more mobile, more flexible, more malleable and more open to possible inconveniences and changes in the traditional principles of science. The unconventional, inventive and new are beginning to dominate scientific and profane thinking and, over a period of time, this principle will inevitably become exacerbated and exaggerated as a pillar of scientific knowledge of the future during the unprecedented crisis that will threaten humanity with its disappearance. The erosion of the basic pillars, of the fundamental postulates with the passage of time and with the change of priorities, is as natural and natural, within the development of science, as for the organization and functioning of the social body, in the perspective of reforming the set of political-behavioral models.

An efficient social control can be imposed in the field of applying advanced technologies in the security and defense sphere by establishing and institutionalizing the obligation of ethical expertise (similar to ethical expertise in research) of social, political, ecological or security projects, programs or projects, with implications in the sphere of protecting individual, group, state or regional and international integrity.

Therefore, the efficiency of security processes is directly correlated with the system of social values, with the system of moral norms, dominant in society, on the one hand, and on the other, it depends very much on the competence, professionalism and degree of respect for professional ethics specific to officials involved in organizing public debates, as well as on the individual morality and conscientiousness induced through education and socio-behavioral models that determine manifestations in the public space, examples to follow that determine and influence behavior both in the context of security processes and in the socio-political space, in the broadest sense of the term. Thus, for greater efficiency of security processes, by moralizing and bringing them into line with the norms and standards common to the international community, stricter control over compliance with legal norms by state bodies responsible for organizing and administering security processes is required, prompt legal sanctioning of committed violations, on the one hand, and on the other hand, more thorough monitoring is required, under conditions of fair transparency and legal and moral sanctioning, in case of deviations, through mass media bodies, by increasing publicity and media coverage of cases of unacceptable behavior.

Security, in the broadest sense, as a traditional human concern, both at the individual level and, especially, at the macrosocial level, denotes a clearly reactive character. Concern for security as a phenomenon and as a state of sustainable systemic balance of society appears simultaneously with the awareness of dangers and / or threats from different types, of either intrasystemic or extrasystemic origin, caused by various errors and inaccuracies related to the systematization, ideological coagulation or articulation of the purpose, methods and ways or instruments used to achieve the intended objective. Political pressure and influence has been specific since ancient times, to the organizational structures of human society. In the ancient writings of Greek or Chinese authors, strategies of discreet influence of political decisions with some protoelements of civil society and their implication in the political decision-making process are attested. Understanding the democratic mechanisms of political pressure is paramount, as well as its excesses, the differences between traditional and modern societies and what is the path to feasible governance.

Where individual interests and freedoms are maximized, human security and the common good represent a social and political priority, limiting abuse against citizens belonging to disadvantaged social categories. In this context, the concept of human security was a derivative of the constructivist concept of security that must be focused on the individual interests of the human person and not on the interests of the community or the state. The concept of human security was generated, mainly, by the need to resize the concept of security by emphasizing the special role of the human individual in the process of ensuring security, another basic source in the process of its emergence and foundation consisted of the need to find viable solutions to the contemporary global crisis and to the crisis in the field of defense and promotion of human rights, by initiating the resizing of the security element.

In the Republic of Moldova, in the context of the development by the end of 2023 and the implementation of a national security strategy that can harmonize a whole range of dilemmas from various social spheres, a dynamic correlation of various educational policies in the field of human rights, policies to combat corruption, to promote good governance, and to explicitly regulate the functions and relationships within the system should be imposed. national human security assurance, from various institutional components capable. In this way, it becomes likely that the Republic of Moldova will also become a space where personal rights will be fully respected, despite social, political or economic instabilities. The development and implementation in the Republic of Moldova of a national legal framework in the field of human security stands out as one of the most appropriate ways to improve the situation regarding the general paternalization of social relations in our country, ranging from interpersonal relations to economic or socio-political relations between voters and elected officials, with the final goal of promoting a viable system of Human security in the Republic of Moldova.

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CHAPTER 7.

STRATEGII PENTRU PARTICIPAREA CETĂȚENILOR LA PROCESUL DECIZIONAL EUROPEAN. TENDINȚE ȘI PROVOCĂRI

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Rezumat: *Lucrarea analizează evoluția și diversitatea mecanismelor de implicare în procesul decizional în Uniunea Europeană, evidențiind importanța consolidării democrației participative prin transparență, incluziune și dialog constant între cetățeni și instituțiile publice. Structura lucrării urmărește să evidențieze aplicabilitatea principiului participării cetățenești așa cum este evidențiat în documentele europene, în special în articolul 10 din Tratatul Uniunii Europene. De asemenea, studiul comparativ privind modul în care participarea cetățenească devine un instrument pentru democrația europeană, pentru stimularea dialogului democratic și pentru întărirea coeziunii sociale, arată diferențe semnificative în cultura participativă și în maturitatea instituțională a proceselor consultative. Țările nordice și vest-europene se disting prin modele bazate pe încredere, cooperare intersectorială și utilizarea extensivă a platformelor digitale de consultare publică. Privitor la România, aflată într-un proces de convergență, sunt reliefate provocări privind educația civică, accesul la informație și interoperabilitatea digitală. Digitalizarea participării cetățenești, prin platforme de e-consultare, vot electronic sau bugete participative online, devine astfel un instrument esențial pentru creșterea incluziunii și eficienței decizionale. Lecțiile învățate subliniază necesitatea unui cadru comun european care să îmbine bunele practici și inovația digitală cu principiile transparenței și responsabilității democratice.*
Cuvinte cheie: *strategie, participare cetățenească, proces decizional european, implicare civică, digitalizare.*

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STRATEGIES FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN EUROPEAN DECISION-MAKING. TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

Abstract: *The paper analyzes the evolution and diversity of the mechanisms of involvement in the decision-making process in the European Union, highlighting the importance of strengthening participatory democracy through transparency, inclusion and constant dialogue between citizens and public institutions. The structure of the paper aims to highlight the applicability of the principle of citizen participation as highlighted in European documents, in particular in Article 10 of the Treaty on European Union. Also, the comparative study on how citizen participation becomes an instrument for European democracy, for stimulating democratic dialogue and for strengthening social cohesion, shows significant differences in the participatory culture and in the institutional maturity of consultative processes. Nordic and Western European countries are distinguished by models based on trust, intersectoral cooperation and extensive use of digital public consultation platforms. Regarding Romania, which is in a process of convergence, challenges regarding civic education, access to information and digital interoperability are highlighted. The digitalization of citizen participation, through e-consultation platforms, e-voting or online participatory budgets, thus becomes an essential tool for increasing inclusion and decision-making efficiency. The lessons learned underline the need for a common European framework that combines good practices and digital innovation with the principles of transparency and democratic accountability.*

Keywords: strategy, citizen participation, European decision-making process, civic engagement, digitalization.

Introduction

Citizen participation in decision-making is a fundamental element of European democracy and an essential condition for strengthening the legitimacy of the European Union institutions. In a context marked by political, economic and social challenges, the active involvement of citizens contributes to increasing transparency, accountability and trust in European governance. Through participation, citizens not only react to public policies, but also become their co-creators, influencing strategic directions and priorities for action at European level.

The European Union has enshrined the principle of citizen participation in several fundamental documents, in particular through the Treaty of Lisbon (2009), which emphasizes that "decisions shall be taken as closely as possible to the citizen" (Art. 10 TEU). In this spirit, the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), introduced by Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union and governed by Regulation (EU) No 211/2011, provides a formal framework through which citizens can request the European Commission to propose new legislative acts.

This innovative instrument transforms citizens from mere recipients of European policies into direct actors in the decision-making process, stimulating democratic dialogue and social cohesion at Union level. The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) has thus become an essential benchmark for transnational civic engagement, offering concrete opportunities for collective expression and influence on the European agenda. Therefore, the analysis of strategies and challenges regarding citizens' participation in the European decision-making process must start from an understanding of this need for participatory democratisation and from an assessment of the effectiveness of current mechanisms, in particular the ECI, as pillars of a more open and inclusive European governance [3].

Although the European Union has developed a series of instruments aimed at bringing citizens closer to the decision-making process, such as public consultations, citizens' hearings or the European Citizens' Initiative, the experience of the last decade has demonstrated that these mechanisms, in their current form, are no longer sufficient to respond to the dynamics of contemporary society and the needs for authentic participation. First, the accessibility and visibility of these tools remain limited. According to Eurobarometer data [15], less than a third of European citizens say they are informed about the possibilities to get directly involved in the EU decision-making process. For example, the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), although innovative in concept, has been effectively used by a relatively small number of groups, and only a small proportion of the proposals submitted have led to concrete legislative initiatives. Procedural bureaucracy, strict technical requirements and the lack of clear feedback from the European institutions have limited the effectiveness of this mechanism.

Secondly, traditional citizen participation no longer corresponds to modern forms of civic engagement, based on digital communication, social networks and online activism. Citizens, especially young people, prefer fast, interactive and visible forms of participation, such as digital petitions, thematic campaigns or online deliberative platforms, instead of bureaucratic mechanisms, perceived as distant and difficult to access. Thirdly, the current geopolitical and informational context marked by disinformation, polarization and multiple crises (health, economic, climate), has eroded citizens' trust in European institutions. This decline in trust reduces the motivation to participate and accentuates the feeling of "democratic distance" between citizens and decision-makers.

Thus, European strategies regarding citizen participation must be reconfigured, in order to move from consultative to collaborative and co-creative participation. This involves: the introduction of interactive digital tools, based on transparency and immediate feedback; the integration of public consultation results into real legislative processes; systematic European civic education, which strengthens participatory skills; the development of permanent deliberative platforms, such as the European Citizens Panels, experimented with at the Conference on the Future of Europe. Only by adapting participatory mechanisms to current social and technological realities can the European Union achieve the goal of a genuine participatory democracy, capable of reflecting the diversity and real will of its citizens.

The objective of our chapter is to analyse the strategies adopted at European and national level to stimulate citizens' participation in the decision-making process, to identify the main trends and challenges and to formulate recommendations for strengthening civic involvement. The central question is: How can European and national strategies stimulate the real involvement of citizens in the EU decision-making process?

The methodology is one of documentary synthesis: relevant institutional norms, European strategies, current research on civic participation and digital trends are analysed. The limits of the work are related to the absence of an empirical study of its own, being focused on specialized literature and official documents.

The Conceptual Framework of Citizen Participation in European Decision-Making

Participatory Democracy and Active European Citizenship

The terms "participatory democracy" and "active European citizenship" reflect the idea that citizens should not only be represented, but also effectively participate in the decision-making process. Civic participation involves not only voting, but also consultation, deliberation and involvement in the formulation of public policies. Active citizenship refers to the deliberate and continuous involvement of individuals in public life, going beyond occasional voting, so that citizens contribute to the formulation, monitoring and evaluation of public policies and to the life of their communities (e.g. civic volunteering, protests, participation in organizations, transnational initiatives) [30].

A useful framework for understanding active citizenship is proposed by Hoskins et al. (2009), which measures it along four interconnected dimensions: (1) participation in representative democracy (e.g. voting, contact with representatives), (2) participation in community life (volunteering, local activism), (3) protest and social change (collective actions, mobilizations), and (4) democratic values (tolerance, trust in rights). This approach shows that active citizenship is not a single behaviour, but a set of measurable practices and attitudes.

European comparative studies show that patterns of engagement vary: some citizens are "active" through volunteering and community projects; others are "active online" or act through protest and thematic mobilization. Recent research on European youth identifies different patterns (fighter, activist, volunteer, backer, online, indifferent), suggesting that different strategies are needed to stimulate participation among diverse groups [10].

The concept of active citizenship has been criticized or nuanced from several perspectives: some authors warn that the idealization of "activity" can mask social inequalities; not all citizens have the resources (time, skills, digital access) to participate equally; consequently, policies that only promote "participation" can reproduce inequalities [1].

There is also a debate about the transformation of the concept into neoliberal rhetoric (where social responsibility is transferred to the citizen, rather than addressing structural causes). This observation frequently appears in the educational literature and criticism of civic "activation" policies [1].

In the European context, active citizenship acquires not only a national or local dimension, but also a transnational one (e.g. citizens' initiatives, participatory platforms, citizens' panels). European measures to stimulate participation must recognize the plurality of forms of engagement and provide infrastructure (civic education, digital access, institutional feedback) to transform engagement into real influence.

The Principle of Participation in the EU Treaties

The treaties on which the EU is based give citizens' participation an institutional dimension. For example, the Treaty of Lisbon states that the Union "shall be based on democratic representation and, in addition, on the direct participation of citizens" (Article 10 TEU). In line with this logic, mechanisms such as the right of petition, access to documents and the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) have been introduced.

Citizens' participation in the democratic life of the European Union is a fundamental constitutional principle, enshrined in the founding treaties of the Union and gradually strengthened in recent decades. This participatory dimension is based on the recognition that the legitimacy of European decisions depends on the direct and informed involvement of citizens in the process of drawing up public policies.

The first document to explicitly introduce the principle of citizen participation was the Maastricht Treaty (1992), by establishing citizenship of the European Union (Article 8, later Article 20 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union – TFEU). It grants citizens additional political and civic rights at European level, such as the right to vote and to stand as a candidate in elections to the European Parliament or in local elections in the Member State of residence.

With the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) and the Treaty of Nice (2001), the participatory dimension was strengthened by promoting the principles of transparency and decision-making proximity, paving the way for the Treaty of Lisbon (2009), a turning point in the explicit recognition of citizen participation in EU governance.

Article 10 TEU defines the democratic framework of the Union: "The functioning of the Union shall be based on representative democracy. Citizens shall be directly represented at Union level in the European Parliament. [...] Every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union. Decisions shall be taken as closely as possible to the citizen". (TEU, Art. 10, para. 1–3).

This formulation enshrines the principle of "local democracy", which implies not only indirect representation through institutions, but also the possibility of direct participation of citizens in defining policies.

Article 11 TEU details the instruments of direct democratic participation and establishes concrete obligations for the European institutions:

(1) "The institutions shall give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action."

(2) "The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society."

(3) "In order to ensure the coherence and transparency of Union action, the European Commission shall carry out wide consultations with interested parties."

(4) "At least one million citizens of the Union, nationals of a significant number of Member States, may take the initiative of inviting the Commission to submit a legislative proposal [...]" (according with Treaty on European Union, consolidated version, OJ C 202/1, 7.6.2016).

This article constitutes the legal basis for the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), introduced by Regulation (EU) No 211/2011 and subsequently updated by Regulation (EU) 2019/788, which simplifies the procedure and digitalises the collection of signatures. Through this mechanism, citizens can invite the European Commission to propose legislative acts in areas of EU competence, thus strengthening participatory democracy at transnational level [12].

Complementing the TEU, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) establishes complementary provisions: Art. 15 TFEU guarantees the transparency of the work of the European institutions and public access to documents; Art. 20 TFEU reaffirms the political rights associated with citizenship of the Union; Art. 227 TFEU recognises the right to petition the European Parliament, as a direct instrument of communication between citizens and the institutions.

These provisions reinforce the idea that citizen participation is not just a political principle, but a concrete legal right, supported by institutional mechanisms.

In more recent documents of the European Commission, citizen participation is integrated into a broader vision of deliberative and

digital democracy. The European Democracy Action Plan (2020) and the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021–2022) mark the transition from consultative participation to collaborative engagement, through instruments such as European Citizens' Panels, experimental deliberative spaces at European level [13].

Thus, the principle of citizen participation in the treaties evolves from an abstract legal norm to a practical dimension of European governance, adapted to the digital context and the need for direct involvement of citizens in the development of public policies.

European Strategies for Strengthening Citizen Participation
European Strategic Framework

A prominent example is the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP), launched by the European Commission on 3 December 2020, with objectives that follow to protect the integrity of elections, to promote democratic participation and combat disinformation [24]. EDAP proposes measures on the transparency of political advertising, the financing of European parties and cooperation between Member States for democratic resistance [4]. EDAP also recognises the importance of involving citizens and civil society organisations in policymaking (civic space and engagement) [15].

Also, in the area of citizen participation, a particularly important aspect is given by digitalization which can support the development of a "common European public sphere" through online civic engagement tools [22].

Good practices of citizen participation in the European Union reflect the diversity of democratic models and the capacity of Member States to adapt participatory tools to their own social and institutional realities. The comparative analysis highlights several major directions: strengthening civic dialogue, the use of digital platforms, the development of civic education and the implementation of permanent deliberative mechanisms.

Sweden – institutional partnership with civil society

The Swedish model is often considered a benchmark for participatory dialogue between the state and citizens. In Sweden, the decision-making process systematically includes public consultation (remiss procedure), through which draft laws or public policies are

submitted for analysis to organizations, institutions and citizens before adoption. This mechanism is regulated by The Swedish Administrative Procedure Act and aims at transparency and co-creation of policies. Local governments also frequently organize citizens' dialogues for urban planning, public services and local budgets [37; 29].

Germany – deliberative culture and integrated civic education

In Germany, participatory democracy is based on a mature institutional ecosystem. Public consultation mechanisms are strengthened by a dense network of civic organizations and educational foundations [5], which promote democratic skills and the critical spirit of citizens. Projects such as the Bürgerdialoge zur Zukunft Europas ("Citizens' Dialogues on the Future of Europe") organised by the Federal Foreign Office and the Bürgerforen (local deliberative forums) demonstrate an integrated approach to citizen engagement, combining deliberative participation with civic education (Federal Foreign Office, 2019; BpB Annual Report, 2021).

The Netherlands – participatory budgeting and local social innovation

The Netherlands promotes a model of "collaborative citizenship" (doe-democracy), based on the idea of active citizen involvement in local governance and urban development projects. Municipal administrations, such as those in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, implement participatory budgeting mechanisms and neighbourhood councils, in which citizens decide on the allocation of a share of local public budgets. These initiatives are complemented by open government platforms that provide transparent access to public data and consultation results. The Dutch model is often cited by the European Commission as an example of mainstreaming open governance principles [37; 16].

Ireland – mini-publics and collective deliberation

Ireland is renowned for its use of "mini-publics", randomly selected Citizens' Assemblies, which debate complex issues (e.g. constitutional reform, climate change, gender equality). The Irish model has inspired similar initiatives at European level, such as the European Citizens' Panels at the Conference on the Future of Europe. Independent evaluations show that these assemblies have contributed to increasing public trust in decision-making and reducing political polarization through deliberation based on arguments and expertise [27; 37].

France – citizens' councils and climate participation

France has recently developed the Citizens' Council for Climate [7], a relevant example of extended deliberative participation. This forum, made up of 150 citizens selected by lottery, had the mission of formulating legislative proposals to combat climate change. The results were partially integrated into the French legislation on the ecological transition (Loi Climat et Résilience, 2021), demonstrating the potential of the deliberative model for policymaking [37; 7].

The comparative analysis allows the identification of common features of successful models, particularly procedural transparency and clear communication on the impact of consultations on decisions; institutional feedback provided to participants, to maintain civic trust and motivation; participatory digitalisation (open online platforms, e-consultations, open data); permanent civic infrastructure (democratic education centres, NGO networks, public forums); integration of young people and vulnerable groups in decision-making processes.

Therefore, European good practices show that effective citizen participation requires a combination of political will, digital infrastructure, civic education and institutionalised deliberative mechanisms.

Non-governmental organisations and civil society networks play a key role in mediating between citizens and institutions, informing the public and mobilising for participation. For example, documents such as "Enhancing Citizen Participation in the EU" highlight that the decline in trust in institutions and the rise of populist parties make European civic participation more important than ever [22].

Particularities and Challenges for Romania

In Romania, citizen participation in European decisions remains limited due to the low level of public information, the distraction of attention to national issues, the weak representativeness of European mechanisms and socio-economic barriers. For example, the Real Instituto Elcano analysis highlights that EU participatory instruments "remain underused by the average European citizen"[2].

Citizen participation in Romania has experienced significant evolution since joining the European Union in 2007, being shaped by the processes of Europeanization, democratic consolidation and digitalization of public administration. However, civic involvement often remains fragmented and dependent on non-governmental initiatives or

socio-political circumstances. The foundations of citizen participation in Romania are enshrined in the Romanian Constitution (art. 2 and art. 30), which guarantees national sovereignty exercised by the people, as well as the right to free expression. These principles are developed through a series of specific normative acts, including Law no. 52/2003 on decision-making transparency in public administration, which establishes the obligation of authorities to consult citizens and legally constituted organizations in the process of drafting normative acts, Law no. 544/2001 on free access to information of public interest, which guarantees access to data and documents held by public institutions and National Strategy for Open Governance in Romania (2025–2030), which includes objectives related to digital governance and electronic participation (e-participation).

These instruments provide a formal framework for civic involvement, but, according to a report by the European Commission (2023), their application "often remains formal, without clear feedback mechanisms and without an administrative culture oriented towards dialogue" [14].

At the institutional level, public participation is facilitated through several mechanisms, like public consultations organized by ministries and local authorities, published on the *transparenta.gov.ro* platform, advisory councils attached to public institutions (e.g. the Economic and Social Council, the Youth Council, local civic councils), electronic platforms for legislative or budgetary proposals, such as *particip.gov.ro* and *bugetareparticipativa.ro*.

These initiatives contribute to increasing transparency, but effective citizen participation remains low. An OECD report [37] shows that Romania ranks below the EU average in the "inclusiveness of public consultations" indicator, although progress in the digitalization of the decision-making process is evident [37].

In the last decade, Romanian civil society has developed numerous voluntary and civic participation initiatives, which have contributed to raising public awareness, like advocacy campaigns for transparency and integrity, carried out by organizations such as Funky Citizens, ActiveWatch, Expert Forum (EFOR) or Freedom House Romania, spontaneous civic movements, such as the protests of 2012, 2017 or 2023, which expressed opposition to corruption and consolidated a new cul-

ture of public accountability, local participatory budgeting initiatives, launched in cities such as Cluj-Napoca, Braşov or Alba Iulia, which allow citizens to decide on a part of the local budget [16].

These examples demonstrate that civic participation in Romania extends beyond formal mechanisms, manifesting itself through a bottom-up dynamic and through the intense use of social networks as mobilization tools.

Although the regulatory framework is solid, there are several obstacles that limit the effectiveness of citizen participation. Among them, we mention the lack of a participatory administrative culture, in which public consultation is often perceived as a formality, the low level of civic literacy, especially among young people and rural areas, digital inequalities, which restrict access to e-participation platforms, the absence of institutional feedback, which leads to demotivation of citizens [39]. Thus, active participation is rather circumstantial and dependent on events with a strong emotional impact, rather than on a constant and predictable participatory mechanism. In recent years, Romania has begun to adopt measures to modernize public participation, in line with European standards. In this regard, the implementation of the unified digital public consultation platform, the development of a national framework for youth participation (National Youth Strategy 2023–2027), active involvement in the EUROPE DIRECT and Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programmes can be mentioned.

Looking ahead, strengthening citizen participation requires not only legal instruments, but also changes in mentality in the administration, investments in civic education and transparency in the decision-making process. As a recent report by the European Economic and Social Committee states, "genuine citizen participation is an indicator of democratic maturity, not just a procedural exercise" [20, p. 7].

Current Trends and Challenges of Citizen Participation in the European Decision-Making Process

Digitalization of Participation

The digital transformation of European public administration has generated the premises of a new paradigm of citizen participation, in which the virtual space becomes a fundamental tool for dialogue, con-

sultation and co-creation of public policies. Within the European Strategy for a Digital Society [12], digital participation (e-participation) is considered a pillar of open governance, along with transparency and free access to information.

The digitalization of participation is not limited to the use of technology for administrative purposes but aims to reshape the relationship between the state and the citizen, by stimulating direct involvement in the decision-making process, facilitating online debates and creating a connected democratic community at European level.

Digital tools democratize access to the decision-making process. Online consultation platforms, such as "Have Your Say" (European Commission) or "Particip.gov.ro" (Romania), allow citizens to formulate opinions, contribute to the evaluation of policies and monitor public decisions.

According to the OECD Digital Government Index report (2023), Member States that have developed integrated e-participation platforms have recorded a 30–40% increase in citizen involvement in public consultations.

Digitalization facilitates the traceability of decision-making processes and access to open data. Platforms such as the Open Data Portal or the EU Data Strategy Hub allow for real-time monitoring of institutional decisions. Thus, technology contributes to strengthening institutional accountability, reducing the risk of non-transparent decisions. A relevant example is the "Digital Democracy Network" initiative launched by the Council of Europe (2022), which promotes the use of technology for responsible and ethical public deliberation.

Digital tools also enable deliberative participation through innovative methods, such as interactive surveys, online participatory budgeting, digital deliberation forums or European Citizens' Panels in hybrid format. They foster a collaborative democracy, based on the co-production of public policies (co-design), expanding the sphere of influence of citizens on decisions. For example, during the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021–2022), over 50,000 citizens participated digitally in debates and proposals through the futureu.europa.eu platform [13].

Risks and Challenges of Digitalizing Participation

Although digital platforms promise inclusion, in practice, inequalities in access to technology (known as *the digital divide*) can amplify social exclusion. Elderly people, residents of rural areas or vulnerable groups participate significantly less in online consultations. In Romania, only 32% of citizens interacted online with public institutions in 2023, compared to the EU average of 70% [26]. These disparities affect democratic representativeness and can create an imbalance between active and marginalized voices in the digital space.

Online participation sometimes risks becoming superficial, limited to signing petitions or expressing brief opinions, without a deep understanding of the issues. The phenomenon of clicktivism or slacktivism transforms civic involvement into a symbolic gesture, with no real effect on public policies [33]. This tendency reduces the quality of deliberation and can lead to a form of passive participation, uncorrelated with concrete change in decisions.

The digital space facilitates the rapid circulation of information, but also the spread of disinformation and polarizing discourse, which can undermine trust in public institutions. According to a study by the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO, 2022), 46% of European citizens have encountered false information related to EU political decisions. This reality requires the development of digital skills and media literacy, as well as ethical mechanisms for moderating and verifying information in the virtual public space.

Even when citizens participate digitally, the lack of clear feedback from institutions reduces trust and motivation. The European Court of Auditors report (2021) highlighted that only 37% of European online consultations include a public response on how citizens' opinions have been integrated into decisions.

For the digitalization of participation to reach its democratic potential, a balanced strategy between innovation and accountability is needed. Key elements identified in the literature and EU documents include digital and civic education, to increase skills in critical use of platforms, institutional interoperability, to integrate e-participation systems at local, national and European levels, transparent feedback mechanisms, to validate citizen engagement and data protection, and digital ethics, to guarantee trust in the online participatory space. As

the OECD (2020) points out, "digital participation must be designed not only for efficiency, but for inclusion, trust and democratic legitimacy" [37, p. 12].

Conclusions and Directions for Action

Citizen participation in European decision-making is both a democratic necessity and an institutional challenge. Strategies such as EDAP or civic education programmes provide a solid framework, but implementation must take into account digital trends, citizen diversity and structural barriers.

Recommendations for consolidation can be summarized as follows:

a) promoting European civic education from school and through public campaigns.

b) increasing institutional transparency and facilitating access to the decision-making process (documents, consultations, feedback on what has been done with suggestions).

c) using inclusive digital participation platforms, with attention to equal access and data security.

d) actively involving civil society and partnering with European institutions to mobilize citizens, especially young people and marginalized groups.

e) monitoring and evaluating participation strategies, with clear performance indicators to measure effects over time.

Ultimately, citizen participation cannot be just a formal objective, it must become an integral part of the EU decision-making process, to ensure legitimacy, efficiency and democratic cohesion.

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EPILOG

DEZINFORMAREA CA INSTRUMENT AL DECONSTRUCȚIEI DEMOCRATICE: INFLUENȚA STRATEGICĂ A RUSIEI ÎN EUROPA DE EST. CAZUL ALEGERILOR PREZIDENȚIALE DIN ROMÂNIA

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https://doi.org/10.59295/sdcri2025.08

Rezumat: *Democrațiile se întemeiază pe vocea poporului, deoarece cetățenii sunt cei care, periodic, în funcție de cadrul constituțional, se adună pentru a vota anumite partide sau persoane care vor forma o majoritate sau vor ocupa anumite funcții. În contextul constituțional al României, acest lucru s-a întâmplat în anul 2024, un an istoric în care toate rundele de alegeri — locale, pentru Parlamentul European, prezidențiale și parlamentare naționale — au avut loc în decursul aceluiași an. Totodată, anul 2024 va rămâne unul memorabil în istoria democratică a României, fiind pentru prima dată de la căderea regimului comunist când o rundă de alegeri a fost anulată din cauza acuzațiilor de dezinformare.*

Prezentul articol analizează influența dezinformării asupra democrației românești, campaniile frecvente de dezinformare pe care autoritățile naționale nu au reușit să le contracareze, precum și documentele care au stat la baza deciziei de anulare a scrutinului. De asemenea, articolul examinează contextul regional și presiunile pe care Rusia le exercită asupra Europei de Est prin război și război hibrid. Cazul României nu este unul izolat, ci doar un exemplu care a condus la o măsură excepțională pentru o țară democratică: anularea alegerilor prezidențiale. Presiunile pe care Rusia le exercită asupra statelor din Europa de Est, intervenind în politica internă în anii electorali, nu sunt însă o noutate, acestea fiind observate și în alte țări din regiune, cum ar fi Ucraina și Republica Moldova.

Cuvinte cheie: *democrație, constructivism, dezinformare, război hibrid.*

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DISINFORMATION AS A TOOL OF DEMOCRATIC DECONSTRUCTION: RUSSIA's STRATEGIC INFLUENCE IN EASTERN EUROPE. THE CASE OF ROMANIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Abstract: *Democracies are built on the voice of the people, as they are the ones who, from time to time, depending on the constitutional framework, gather to vote for certain parties or persons who will generate a majority or will occupy certain functions. In the Romanian constitutional landscape, this happened in 2024, a historic year in which all rounds of elections – local, European parliamentary, presidential, and national parliamentary — occurred during one year. Also, 2024 will remain a historic year in Romania's democratic history, as it was the first time since the fall of the communist regime that a round of elections was annulled due to claims of disinformation. The present article explores the influence of disinformation on Romanian democracy, the frequent disinformation campaigns that national authorities failed to address, and the documents that ultimately led to the decision to annul the election.*

Also, the articles dig deeper into the regional landscape and the pressures that Russia is putting on Eastern Europe through war and hybrid warfare. The case of Romania is not an isolated one; it's just one that led to an extraordinary measure for a democratic country: the annulment of presidential elections. But the pressures Russia is putting on Eastern European countries, interfering in national politics during election years, are not new and have been seen in other Eastern European countries, with notable examples in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova.

Keywords: democracy, constructivism, disinformation, hybrid war.

Constructivism is a theory of international relations developed in response to realism and neoliberalism, positing that international politics is defined by ideas, norms, and identities. Alexander Wendt stated in 1992 in his famous affirmation that "anarchy is what states make of it"[1], pointing to the fact that the structure can be modified if states view some conflicts through a different lens. The core idea is that international reality is a social construct, in which not the objective structure but perceptions and interactions define how states will behave in different international contexts [2, p. 5].

According to Martin Griffiths: „*Constructivists focus less on substantive issues than the broader problem of how changes in states' identities and interests can shift the culture of IR from one of conflict to one of cooperation*" [3, p. 5]. While the primary purpose of constructivists was to understand the pathways to construct an international relations environment based on peace, thus to understand the social dimension and the way new ideas can shape the international reality, we must acknowledge that the same concepts can be used by international structures of powers that would like to shift the focus from a peaceful approach to a conflicting one.

In this context, Constructivism, as an international relations theory, offers a framework for understanding disinformation, its purpose, and the substantial need to finance it. In history, influencing people's perception over certain events, ideas, or contexts was considered important enough to invest time and money. If we look at communist propaganda, it served as a means to construct new social perceptions that would lead to the *Hommos Sovieticus*, the new communist man, with the new communist perceptions based on new communist education, a new communist culture, a new communist art and literature [4].

In democracies, changes in individual perspectives about what's happening in international or national politics can generate a movement strong enough to overthrow the state's orientation through a change in political regime, which can then lead to a change in how the state will behave internationally. If the voice of the people dictates the state's direction through voting, then the battle for people's minds and hearts has a strong enough stake to be worth fighting for. And this can only be done through information or disinformation campaigns, for which the social media environment has provided fertile ground to disseminate ideas quickly and credibly, with the sole purpose of changing people's perceptions of current events.

Disinformation is part of hybrid war and thus becomes a security issue that the state's security system must address. In this case, we don't talk about false information or fake news; we talk about more complex aspects in which investments are considerable and, most of the time, are carried out by international actors as part of foreign direct interference.

From this perspective, we can use that as a hypothesis, the fact that some powers are using this information as a way to deconstruct democracies, and the deconstruction is done at its very core by attacking the value systems, the core institutions, and the democratic way of life in order to achieve political objectives

We already know that the current international system is changing. Its core structures with the dominant powers is challenged by new states that at certain point were in the center of power at international level, such as Russia, or other powers, regional or emerging powers, that have the ambition to become and be recognized internationally as a dominant power. This aspect is not what we understand from what countries are doing, but it's what they acknowledge in their international activities or in their speeches.

The Moscow Declaration of the Council of Heads of States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization from 10 November 2020, states as keywords the following: „international relations are passing through a stage of profound transformation, consolidation of new political and economic power centers, and formation of the World War order on the principles of multipolarity" [5]. This intergovernmental organization, established in 2001, comprises states such as the Republic of Kazakhstan, the People's Republic of China, the Russian Federation, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Uzbekistan, and the Republic of Tajikistan. Later, India, Iran, or Pakistan joined the organization. So, if we look at the Russian Federation, which is using hybrid war as a tactic, we must wonder if its activities in Eastern Europe are a purpose *per se*, or a means to renegotiate its position at the international level, along with other states that have the same objective. While war is costly and can take time, disinformation can help drive bottom-up change in democracies that will advance Russia's ambitions at the international level. In accordance with this declaration, Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine and the negotiations that followed are all means and not the purpose *per se*. Russia is using the war in Ukraine to reaffirm its status as a great power, and it's not merely an end goal.

In this context, the disinformation campaigns play an important role. It is doubtful that Russia will start a war with European Union countries and NATO countries. But if a change in political view in any of these countries could shift their outlook at the international level, it could destabilize those systems or even lead to their implosion.

The case of the Romanian elections stands as a testimony of what a disinformation campaign can generate in the medium term in a democratic country. The annulment of the elections is an unprecedented move in a democratic country, where voters should dictate the new elected officials or parties. But what happens if the electoral process is gravely distorted by foreign direct interference through disinformation campaigns? As things are still unfolding, it's challenging to have a clear, comprehensive picture of what happened, but we can piece together a credible picture from the information we already have.

Institutional approaches to disinformation campaigns and the first round of elections

In November 2024, the first round of the presidential election took place. They were surrounded by intense national contestations and tensions, which escalated with the prior rounds of the election. Disinformation campaigns were visible throughout 2024 and in 2023 [6]. The report of the Romanian intelligence service and the Ministry of Internal Affairs reveals the strategic use of this information to destabilize the democratic processes in Romania. The Constitutional Court of Romania found that the evidence was sufficient and that the distortion of the Romanian democratic system was considerable, and annulled the first round of elections. The decision came as a shock to the Romanian and international communities. Being a striking decision, it was approached from different perspectives: some focusing on the need for the measure in the particular international and national context, and others discussing occult theories and the intention to impose a particular candidate.

Romanian Service of Information "detected coordinated campaigns using algorithms, false accounts, and preferential platform treatment". In numbers, these activities included 5,000 TikTok accounts, hashtags (#CG11), Telegram coordination, bot evasion, and foreign funding. The platforms used and actors involved were identified as: TikTok, Telegram, Discord, FameUp, Bogpr, FA Agency. SRI also identified Cyber attacks, SQLi, XSS, and credential leaks. These activities generated an intense, artificial surge in the Calin Georgescu candidate, who claims he never spent one dime on his presidential campaign. Nevertheless, the campaigns were paid for, and money was used on social media accounts to boost the candidate's image online [7].

Romanian External Service focused on the tactics that Russia used and that were already documented in other countries, for interference in democratic processes and the campaigns of this information that Russia supported with regional narratives concerning the European Union or NATO, or targeted decisions by the Romanian government or other governments in the region. While focusing less on the technical aspects of generating this information, the Romanian external service focused more on Russia's known tactics and narratives [8].

The Ministry of Internal Affairs identified campaigns of emotional and identity manipulation via influencers and scripted scenarios, with the potential to influence the general population on the eve of the elections. Also, it identified 130 TikTok accounts, influencers, marketplace extremists, and criminal networks—the platforms used by the accounts created to generate disinformation were TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and influencer platforms [9].

The Constitutional Court of Romania, through its decision, validated the legal impact of this information on electoral integrity. This decision is a pilot decision in Romania, but also at the international level, and it recognizes in a legal manner the impact that disinformation can have on democracies and how disinformation campaigns can distort the electoral process. The constitutional court of Romania talks about electoral distortions in such a manner that they are incompatible with democratic norms. They retrained the need for election annulment based on the constitutional violation [10].

The Presidency report gathers more complex information, is published last, and discusses a historic disinformation campaign that discredits institutions and generates polarization through anti-EU and NATO narratives. These disinformation campaigns were drawn through social media but also through sovereigntist parties, who promoted hostile narratives and generated systemic risk in Romanian democracy. Apart from the platforms already indicated in the previous documents, the presidential reports and media in general, and the political networks that supported the disinformation, which led to the annulment [11].

Conclusions

While the information is still being gathered and the general prosecutor's office has finished its investigation into what happened and

indicted over 22 people in the case of the Romanian disinformation campaign that led to the annulment of elections, it is clear that the profound implications are far from being identified and addressed. The case of Romania is a blueprint for foreign direct interference through this information campaign in the context of an electoral process. One must acknowledge that the scale of disinformation could not have occurred without a foreign involvement, but also with negligence from national institutions that should have overseen the foreign involvement in national security.

This case, but also what happened in the Republic of Moldova and other Eastern European countries, calls for a conceptual framework that can explain the multidimensional activities at the international level and how they can be approached consistently and durably. While profound changes in the international relations system are ongoing and will continue for at least a decade, states can become vulnerable if they don't take the necessary measures in time.

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Printing executed at the “Print-Caro” printing house,
170 Columna Street, Chişinău