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EDITORIAL LETTER

The Romanian Journal of Society and Politics' special issue of 2022 is centred on the Eastern and South-Eastern European (ESEE) Fanel Network's international academic conference - "The Other Europe? Resilience and Assertiveness in our region" which took place on the 14th- 15th of January. The conference provided a much-needed forum for female International Relations and related subject specialists to discuss important sociological and political issues affecting the Eastern, South-Eastern, Black Sea Region, and Central Europe sub-regions.

The knowledge of women working in International Relations, Economics, or Social Sciences is typically ignored in debates, even though the complex terrain of vulnerabilities and threats necessitates an integrated response from policymakers and intellectuals. Even when considering specific solutions, masculine worldviews frequently dominate the assessments and discussions. Women are usually asked to uphold strict gender norms. Through the conference, the Network sought to support and elevate women's voices in the region, address important issues, examine common regional concerns, share expertise, and come up with solutions as a group.

During the past decade, we have witnessed a progressive shift in the international world order, with the remergence of the military sector of security at the forefront of the global competition for power. The 2008 war in Georgia, followed by the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, escalated to a full-fledged illegal and unjustified invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 have signalled a growing offensive posture of the Russian Federation, incompatible with the rules-based international order. These evolutions were coupled with intensified hybrid warfare, growing vulnerabilities and threats associated with the rule of law, corruption, weak institutions, the role of minorities, unstable political environments etc., which need to be further analysed to truly understand the regional dynamics.

The promotion of alternative international frameworks of cooperation, the growth of vocal opponents of the West, the use of covert tactics to further the illiberal agenda, and the introduction of funding schemes with no apparent conditionalities attached have all blossomed over the past ten years. The Covid-19 pandemic, environmental concerns, illiberal inclinations, and digital developments are today's problems for those advocating to defend democracy and the rights of all people. As a macro-region made up of the Central and Eastern European member states of the European Union, the Western Balkans candidate and potential candidate countries, as well as the wider Black Sea Region, all these dynamics significantly impact the Eastern and South-Eastern European countries.

Given the historical legacies of these sub-regions, it was important to have meaningful and inclusive debates to discuss different issues of common interest therefore, the conference included three FANELS: (I) Regional inequalities and their socio-economic consequences, (II) Established and new regional cooperation formats and initiatives inside and outside the EU, (III) International games in the region. Competing interests in ESEE and their consequences.

For the special issue, we chose an article representative for each FANEL. The first one refers to the EU's role and perception as a resilience promoter and whether and how Georgia's case exemplifies resilience in the face of external "shocks", contending that the Georgian government's attitude and political narrative are influenced by immediate security threats and the vulnerability of state institutions. The second article tackles the issue of the political and economic repercussions of Russia's and China's actions in relation to the process of enhancing EU strategic autonomy, taking into consideration the complementarity between the security and economic dimensions. The third one aims to discover the migration phenomenon and motivations to return, highlight best practices from the private sector that can be implemented by the government, and develop a brain gain model to attract talent back into the country.

Prof. LILIANA POPESCU, Ph.D. Founding editor of the Romanian Journal of Society and Politics President of the ESEE Fanel Network Board

EU RESILIENCE BUILDING POLICY: THE CASE OF GEORGIA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ASSOCIATED TRIO

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ABSTRACT

Acknowledging the increased security challenges in Eastern Europe, this paper aims to unpack the role and perception of the EU as a resilience promoter; and whether and how Georgia's case illustrates resilience while dealing with external 'shocks'. This article argues that the demeanour and political narrative of the Georgian government is influenced by immediate security threats and the vulnerability of state institutions. At the same time, it finds that societal resilience is a positive source of transformation in the country. The article employs discourse and content analysis to identify whether Georgia's official position has been in line with the quickly changing European integration dynamic.

Keywords:

■European Union ■Resilience policy ■Ukraine ■Georgia ■Associated
Trio

Introduction

Over the past year, security threats in Eastern Europe achieved an unprecedented level. The European Union (EU)'s foreign policy and resilience-building policy towards its Eastern neighbours changed its significance, architecture and perspective. This paper aims to analyse how the EU conceptualises resilience in its policy and how it reflects in Georgia, one of the members of the Associated Trio, together with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The primary question addressed through this research is whether the resilience policy has added value for the Eastern Partnership countries. To do so, the paper focuses on deconstructing the architecture of resilience in the case of Georgia, figuring out its primary layers and construction to better understand the sources of resilience.

Resilience as a concept is understood as the capacity to inherently change, transform and reform, while facing social, economic and political crises. The Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries deal with several local and external threats and share the experience of limited statehood, where state

The concept of resilience in the EU scholarship: theoretical framework

The definition of resilience is a contentious issue in both theory and practice. Interpretations are not unequivocally contradictory but rather complementary. The ontological understanding of resilience states that it is not merely about the conceptual and methodological definition, as it may have multiple meanings (Bourbeau, 2018). The most recent approaches in the literature explain that resilience analysis could outline a system's vulnerabilities to various types of shocks, which explains its capacity to resist, recover, and transform by following a new development pattern (Pascariu and Rouet, 2019).

The dynamic vision of resilience evolved to return to the initial balance and transform substantially (Martin and Sunley, 2014). Regional economic resilience is defined as "the capacity to withstand or recover from shocks to its developmental growth path, if necessary, by undergoing adaptive changes to its structures and its societal and institutional arrangements, to maintain or restore its previous developments path, or transit to a new sustainable path" (Martin and Sunley, 2014).

In international scholarship, resilience is considered a form of governance, where the responsibility is shifted onto the governed (Walker and Cooper, 2011). This approach explains the EU's strategy to integrate the resilience concept into its foreign policy and, in this manner, respond to vulnerabilities beyond its borders.

According to the pragmatist theory in the EU scholarship, resilience directs attention to new possibilities and opportunities for transformation (Juncos, 2017). Fostering the resilience of democracies within and beyond the EU borders to consistently live up to the values, the EU's credibility and influence do not replace the EU's transformative and rule-based approach towards third states (Grabbe, 2006). The case of Georgia demonstrates that the EU's rule-based and value-based approach is an integral part of its resilience.

While acknowledging the EU as one of the principal actors in Eastern Europe and Georgia, executing its normative (Manners, 2002) and transformative power (Grabbe, 2006), the primary objective of this paper is to focus specifically on the self-portrayal of the EU as a resilience promoter (Nitoiu, 2018). The EU's actorness and effectiveness cannot be taken for granted, given its nature as a multilevel and semi-supranational polity (Niemann and Bretherton, 2013). The EU's external policy procedures and instruments, as well as its claim to represent an actor globally, have significantly developed in the recent past (Niemann and Bretherton, 2013). Acknowledging the value of the empirical findings concerning the critical approaches to the EU as a normative power (Tocci, 2008), the implication of values in the transformative process of EaP countries is considerable. Concerning the EU's role and performance, the EU scholarship and studies go far beyond the actorness and consider the effectiveness of EU action, including the "capacity-expectation gap" (Hill, 1993). The concept of coherence is one of the most fervently discussed factors associated with the effectiveness of the EU external policy (Gebhard, 2011).

The EU's global effectiveness also depends on its ability to communicate its policies with its partners. Therefore, whether defined as a soft, normative or transformative power, the EU's influence is found in a complex mix of economic attractiveness, interdependence, the promotion of international norms and the potential of deepening integration processes for the EaP countries (Grabbe, 2006; Manners, 2002; Manners 2010). Promoting resilience, as the EU's foreign policy priority, is a readaptation of the EU's communication language for achieving changes at the domestic level.

To conclude, resilience rethinks external governance strategy from a perspective that involves "self-governance" and not necessarily a "conduct of conducts" (Foucault, 2007). The EU's vision of its external governance strategy focuses on resilience and aims at (1) interest-driven and pragmatic relations; (2) a more responsive and adaptable approach to partners' needs to deal with the "predictable unpredictability" (Korosteleva, 2018: 2). Introducing this concept, the EU has emphasised the importance of bottom-up policies in transforming and adapting third states on the international scene.

Integration of resilience policy in the EU's strategic documents

For over three decades, the EU's actorness in Eastern Europe faced several crucial crossroads. While the EU aspires to play a more significant role in its Eastern neighbourhood, external and internal threats impact its foreign policy priorities. One of the EU's main foreign policy objectives is to support resilience in and beyond its formal borders. From the EU's perspective, resilience is the synchronisation of effort and shared responsibility of the EU institutions, member states, partner countries and civil society.

Ongoing security threats require an enhanced EU policy vision to achieve the transformation of the states' and societies' fragility and vulnerability into resilience. The EU scholarship permanently claimed the need to upgrade and modify the neighbourhood strategy of the EU to advance transformative processes in neighbouring countries by adapting their economies and societies to European standards (Pascariu and Rouet, 2019; Korosteleva, 2018).

The concept of resilience, as a comprehensive and complex notion, was integrated into the EU foreign policy in 2016. The European Union referred the resilience as a "multilayered concept" and underlined the versatility of its support (EEAS, 2016). The resilience of the EU's foreign policy strategies refers to a new form of governmental logic (or rationality), emphasising the complexity and uncertainty (Juncos, 2017: 7). The EU explicitly mentioned in its Global Strategy that fostering external resilience reflects the interests of the EU citizens and is reciprocally beneficial, more precisely:

"It is in the interests of our citizens to invest in the resilience of states and societies [...] a resilient society featuring democracy, trust in institutions, and sustainable developments lies at the heart of a resilient state" (EEAS, 2016: 23).

The notion of resilience doubles some methodological pioneering on the part of the EU and complicates its delimitations of the concept (Korosteleva, 2018). According to the EU's official strategic documents, resilience is defined as "the ability of state and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises" (EEAS, 2016: 23).

The EU's Global strategy of 2016 addressed resilience policy and defined its strategic vision toward the Eastern neighbourhood. More precisely, the EU recognised the willingness of Eastern Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) countries for closer relations, while highlighting its transformative power as an attractive partner and conceptualising resilience as a priority in the ENP and beyond. The EU also declared resilience as a multilayered concept by noting that the EU will support different paths

of resilience and defined vulnerable elements of resilience in the context of its Global Strategy towards East and South and targeted governments, societies, economies, climate and energy. The EU aims to achieve resilience within its borders and beyond. In its 2016 Global Strategy, the EU increasingly integrated the resilience of states and societies in and around Europe.

The EU's strategic approach to resilience building focuses on ten significant methodological aspects, which include: strengthening resilience is a means, not an end; understanding the resilience factors helps in planning effective responses; resilience requires tailor-made approaches; tracking and responding to vulnerabilities that require identification and construction of positive sources of resilience; resilience is about transformation, not preserving the status-quo; resilience requires a political approach and risk-informed programming; flexibility and adaptability are core principles of resilience; early warning needs to link to early actions; the complex interdependence between actors requires a broader analysis of strengths, vulnerabilities and pressures (European Commission, 2017: 23-24).

The EU acknowledges that "the primary responsibility [of the governments is] integrating resilience into national and local policy frameworks lies within each country. However, the EU and its Member States can support the strengthening of resilience through raising the issue as an integral part of its political dialogue, including at the highest level" (European Commission, 2017: 23-24).

Resilience building increases the legitimacy and effectiveness of the EU's external action by directly engaging targeted countries. Therefore, the EU's foreign policy instruments acquire new meanings (Wagner and Anholt, 2016: 4), and the EU's foreign policy, as a comprehensive approach, requires several elements to work: local ownership, capacity-building, partnerships, responsibility and a joint approach (Juncos, 2017: 8). Those elements acquire upgraded meaning under the resilience paradigm, especially local ownership. The concept of responsibility is also an essential part of resilience-building, since, on the one hand, the EU takes responsibility foremost within its formal borders and surrounding regions while recognising that there are no quick solutions for the crisis (EEAS, 2016: 17).

The reference to surrounding regions concedes the EU's increased role in its near neighbourhood and promotes the role of the EU as a responsible and reliable actor. At the same time, it complements its matching and interconnection with the local ownership. However, more emphasis on local ownership does not imply removing responsibility from the EU. Building resilience constitutes a value-based notion. Therefore, the actors involved in this process have joint responsibility for the consequences of the policies pursued, even if it is not equal.

Consequently, the state's resilience, as a bottom-up approach, implies the existence or formation of local practices and experiences, in conjunction with local ownership and responsibility, while the EU stays as an attractive mentor and reliable partner, providing external support. The EU recognises its restricted capacity to provide top-down changes and shifts its foreign policy strategy – "take it or leave it" – with a new pragmatic approach, "take whatever you are capable of taking", where tailor-made and locally designed decisions facilitate closer cooperation with the EU.

Resilience-building in the framework of the Eastern Partnership

The EU's objective since the introduction of its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004 is to support the region's political, economic and security stability and prosperity EU's projection of stability in Eastern Europe is broadly based on its internal resilience-building experience. Anticipation of crises and shocks in the EU's neighbouring countries drives the evolution and adaptation of new policies in the EU. For mitigating security threats, promoting stability and capacity building, the EU developed specific policies with appropriate tools and instruments. In order to enhance the partner's national capabilities and make them agile, adaptive and resilient, the EU synchronises its efforts with NATO (Ratsyborinska, 2022).

The EU's global strategy to promote resilience beyond its formal borders was instrumentalised in the EaP framework towards its neighbouring Eastern countries in the post-2020 priorities. The EU's comprehensive foreign policy agenda aims to increase trade, growth and jobs, invest in connectivity, strengthen democratic institutions and the rule of law, support the green and digital transitions, and promote fair, gender-equal and inclusive societies. The differentiated understanding of the resilience concept, priorities and country-specific needs implies the comprehensiveness of renewed agenda for recovery, resilience and reform in the Eastern Partnership countries.

The Eastern Partnership countries already have a format of both bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the European Union. The primary objective of the EaP was to expand and intensify relations with Eastern European countries, which initially developed through the ENP (Wolczuk, 2011). However, it was understood as a geopolitical project over the years, facing multiple crises in the region (Nitoiu, 2019). Thus and thereof, the EU expected changes on the domestic levels of Eastern European countries, according to the founding goals of EaP: (a) political association, and (b) gradual economic integration into the internal market of the EU. Under this goal, the EaP framework seeks to support political and socio-economic reforms of the partner countries and to facilitate the approximation with the EU (Council of the European Union, 2009).

Even though the six of Eastern Partnership countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia) have much in common, it is worth mentioning that substantial differences appear among them, despite their common legacies, and in the nature and pace of their relations with the EU (Longhurst and Nies, 2009; Wolczuk, 2011). The reform processes in the EaP countries are context-dependent, and it is up to each partner country to determine its transformation path (Delcour and Wolczuk, 2013).

Dealing with vulnerable systems in tackling various shocks is one of the priorities within the EU's partnership with Eastern European countries, and it is not by chance that the concept of resilience has increasingly become present in European foreign policy, especially regarding the Eastern neighbourhood (Pascariu and Rouet, 2019). By integrating the resilience concept in the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) framework, the EU contemplates taking actions to lead the region towards consolidating a more differentiated and tailor-made approach aimed at reaching the goals of the EaP. It is based on the EaP's bilateral and multilateral experience in dealing with regional and domestic developments. The revision of the EU's foreign policy design attempted to reflect and respond to momentous challenges in the Eastern neighbourhood, including the Russian occupation of Georgian territories in 2008, the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas in 2014. Through the EaP framework, the EU wanted to achieve the gradual consistent and sustainable strengthening of democracy, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms (European Commission, 2017). In addition, by offering economic integration to the Associated Trio, more prosperity in the region was envisioned.

In 2021, the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy presented a proposal for the Eastern Partnership priorities and based this framework on five long-term objectives, with resilience at its core, reflecting the vision for the future of the Eastern Partnership outlined in March 2020 (European Commission, 2021a). The *Joint Communication:* Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020: Reinforcing resilience – an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all and the Council Conclusions on the Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020 set out resilience as a new overarching policy and its long-term objectives: economy and connectivity, good governance and the rule of law, environmental and climate resilience, support to digital transformation, and fair and inclusive societies (European Commission, 2020).

Recent events in the Eastern Partnership countries demonstrate that resilience building is consistently challenged in the region by Russia's aspiration to increase its military presence in the Eastern Neighbourhood of the EU. By accepting the application for membership from Ukraine and the

Republic of Moldova, and recognising Georgia's European perspective, the EU not only recognised the European identity of the Associated Trio but also provided unprecedented support to the European future of those countries. Geopolitical developments influenced the decision of the EU to enlarge and promote resilience to counter the vulnerability and fragility of the associated countries.

The EU's readiness to enlarge and open its doors to the Associated Trio (Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia) within the EaP framework emphasises the resemblances of the respective countries' institutional, political and legal experiences. An unexpected wave of enlargement considers national peculiarities on the one hand and, on the other hand, not only differentiates but also reinforces the implication and essence of the internal experience. Thus, the EU expects to promote resilience in complementarity with the country's internal political agenda and legal order, within the framework of European integration and presumes to promote resilience as expected. In this manner, it responded to the "capacity-expectation gap" debate about the membership perspective of the EaP countries.

Contrary to the EU resilience-building goal, the Russian Federation employs aggressive foreign policy tactics against sovereign Ukraine and Georgia. Increasing military presence, constant destabilisation in Eastern Europe, and the creation and military support of conflicting zones prevent all EaP countries from accessing NATO and reduce their capacity to integrate into the EU (Ratsiborynska, 2016). Russian presence has been identified in all six Eastern Partnership countries (Ratsiborynska, 2016), which represents a major threat to their security and resilience.

The resilience policy is an umbrella policy resulting from the Eastern Partnership, instrumentalised in its core objectives and priorities. Achieving resilience in Eastern Partnership countries implies the accumulation and development of domestic experience in all areas and policies of governance and, at the same time, upgrading its framework. The essence of resilience policy is the recognition of differentiated experiences in Eastern European countries, but common regional challenges of the Associated Trio cannot be neglected. Without the European integration process, the resilience policy alters its quality and relevance, which has been granted jointly by the European Union and the Eastern Partnership countries.

Recent narratives of resilience: the case of Georgia

The state's resilience, separately from the European integration policy, is inherently the target of any member states and even EU's partners, being part of domestic development policy and order to some degree. Resilience employs several understating: firstly, it explicitly shifts the primary responsibility;

secondly, it has an outstanding exposure to societal resilience. A multidimensional resilience assessment tool is offered by the Democratic Resilience Index, incorporating four dimensions: political; media/civil society; economic; external affairs (Global Focus Centre, 2021). For the purposes of this article, the external affairs indicators are relevant, implying addressing the crisis' trigger and determining resilience while facing a sudden shift (Democratic Resilience Index, 2021: 8).

Resilience as a goal implies the state's obligation to enshrine it into the national strategic documents. Georgia shares the vision of a united society and a common national resilience (MOD Strategy, 2021) while acknowledging the importance of closer coordination with NATO and cooperation with the EU relevant structures as a key for security and defence (MOD Strategy, 2021). The case of Georgia illustrates that resilience-building could be an inherent part of the Euro-Atlantic integration discourse.

European integration is characterised by methodological difficulties related to both the terminology and the existence of favourable outcomes, including resilience policy. The Association Agreements constitute a key bilateral element of the EaP initiative to foster resilience in the Associated Trio countries (Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia), given that it enhances the legal and political relations between the partner countries and the EU. The Association Agreements are the most extended and detailed documents of their kind that include detailed and binding provisions from the partner countries to align their laws and policies with the EU *acquis*. Therefore, they signal a shift from soft law to hard law commitments and export the EU's extensive regulatory framework in the EaP countries (Delcour and Wolczuk, 2013). Even though Association agreements signed with Associated Trio are highly technical documents, their implementation enhances the societal linkage with the EU.

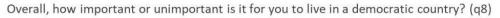
The resilience-building process in Eastern Europe faces various impediments. Georgia and Ukraine are dominated by factors related to weak governance and socio-economic underdevelopment (Kakachia, Legucka and Lebanidze, 2021). In the political history of Associated Trio, crises have occurred in various spheres of governance: the presence of distorted checks and balances between branches of power, a politicised judiciary, numerous political crises in Georgia (2009, 2011 and 2020), or the Euromaidan protests and near governmental breakdown in Ukraine in 2013-2014 (Lebanidze and Kakachia, 2017; Kuzio, 2009; Corman and Schumacher, 2021). Social inequality, unemployment and widespread poverty radicalise societies and political elites (Kakachia, Legucka and Lebanidze, 2021).

The EU's external action measurement towards the Republic of Moldova shows (1) A narrow and minimalist conception of resilience-building; (2) The need for accountability of the local elites to

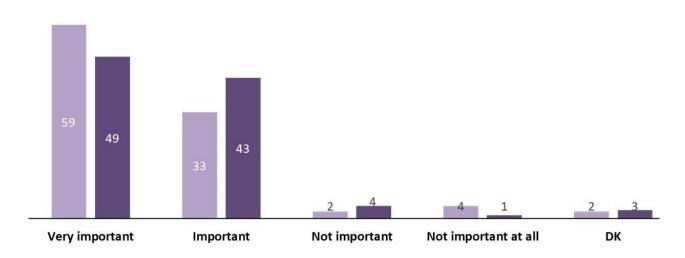
pursue corresponding reforms, and (3) The absence of a clear-cut resilience-building strategy (Corman and Schumacher, 2021; Moga, et. al. 2021). The authors explain that the EU resilience-building attempts in Moldova between 2014 and 2020 were a "function of domestic scope conditions and the extent to which governing elites' reform rhetoric was perceived as credible by EU stakeholders" (Corman and Schumacher, 2021).

When analysing the example of Georgia, democracy remains very important (59%) and essential (33%) to the Georgian population. However, every second citizen says Georgia is not a democracy (NDI, 2022b). In addition, the majority is not satisfied with the government, institutions and leaders (NDI, 2022b). According to Transparency International Georgia, informal governance, the weak oversight role of the parliament, and a high level of corruption impede democratic processes in the country (TI Georgia, 2021). The majority of the Georgian population says that Georgia is not a democracy, while 92% consider living in a democratic country as important (NDI, 2022b). In contrast, the Georgian society increasingly (83%) supports the government's stated goal to join the EU (NDI, 2022a).

Democracy remains important for Georgians



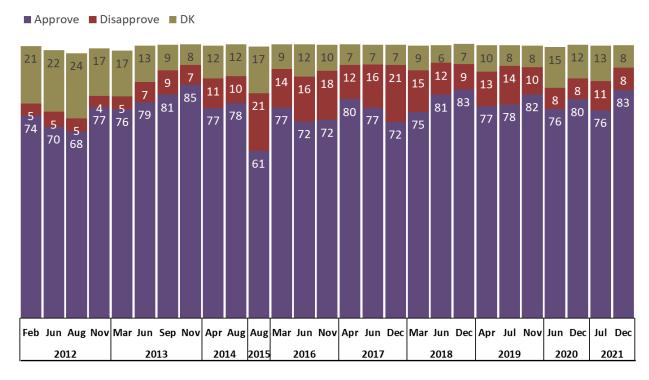
■ December 2018 ■ December 2021



Source: NDI 2022b

Georgians continue to demonstrate resilient support for EU membership

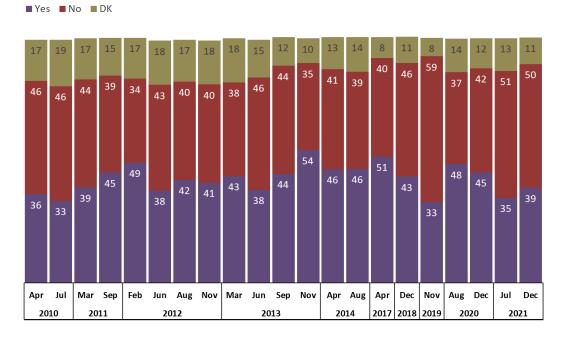
Do you approve or disapprove of Georgian government's stated goal to join the EU? (q27)



Source: NDI 2022b

Every second citizen says Georgia not a democracy

In your opinion, is Georgia a democracy now? (q9)



Source: NDI 2022b

Achieving resilience requires the existence and interaction of processes and institutions, domestically and externally, as a mandatory objective for the Eastern Partnership countries. Framing the foreign policy and security role towards neighbouring countries reflects the official discourse of the respective country; as the case of Romania shows its external behaviour has been impacted by the EU and NATO membership discourse (Moga *et al.* 2021).

In addition to domestic shocks, there are external threats to the security and economy of Georgia and Ukraine. Russia's aggressive foreign policy and imperialistic aspirations are increasingly countering the potential of further Euro-Atlantic integration of the countries concerned.

The resilience of the Ukrainian government and people is reflected in the countering of the Russian aggression against Ukraine that is continuously undermining Ukrainian identity, particularly since 2014. The Ukrainian society and government demonstrated an EU value-based resilience (Ciolan, 2022). The implementation of the Association Agreement (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), granting also visa liberalisation, notwithstanding their technical character, become fundaments of relations between the EU and Ukraine, and their implementation becomes a political goal as a manifestation of the countries' European choice (Ciolan, 2022).

The Russian Federation's aggression is also having a growing impact on Georgia's societal resilience. In the ongoing geopolitical developments, Georgia considers Russia a potential danger to its national security and stability, as it continuously undermines Georgia's chosen path toward Euro-Atlantic integration (MOD, 2021:9). The increasing military presence of Russia in Georgia poses threats to the peace and economic development of Georgia, and in the broader image, to the region. Russia's aggression against Georgia and Ukraine allows it to increase its military presence and establish an effective platform for power projection (Khokrishvili and Lebanidze, 2022), while Georgia is acknowledging that its main foreign policy objective is to join the EU and NATO (MFA Georgia, 2019).

The resilience-building process achieved its limit within the EaP framework. Therefore, the EU uses its most effective leverage to act as a resilience-builder in the region and open the door for enlargement (European Commission, 2022e). The EU's recognition of Georgia's membership perspective was an unexpected and positive shock for the society and government. The insufficiently prepared application of Georgia kept the country from receiving the EU candidate status (European Commission, 2022a). However, in this historical momentum for the European integration of Georgia, societal demand and pressure on the government increased through permanent manifestations and a joint declaration of the

civil society to follow-up on the European Commission 12-point recommendations for receiving candidate status (RFERL, 2022; OSGF, 2022). Thus, societal resilience in Georgia played the role of backbone in the process of the EU's new enlargement wave and as a positive source of resilience in the country.

Georgian society demonstrates a realistic understanding of the democratic backsliding of Georgia, in addition to its permanently decreasing trust in state institutions (NDI 2022b), as examined above. Measuring the interdependence between the EU and Georgia is a multidimensional endeavour and beyond the scope of this research paper, but several key aspects foster societal resilience: 1. Implementation of the AA/DCFTA; 2. Visa Liberalisation and its tangible benefits for society; 3. Increased trade relations with the EU; 4. Effective and increased engagement of the civil society in the European integration process; 5. EU's financial assistance in various sectors.

Consequently, Georgian societal resilience after the negative shock of the Russian invasion in Ukraine and as a result of the positive shock of the recognition of the European perspective confirms the following tendencies: (1) Increasing identification and self-perception as Europeans; (2) Increasingly support for European integration as a rational choice for prosperity; (3) Increasing demand for democracy; 4) Socialisation of European values – successful examples of the linkage with the EU and EU-related processes. European values, norms and principles are internalised in Georgia on a societal level; as far as positive and negative experiences of shocks, societal resilience was the backbone and driver of the country's foreign policy decisions. The civic movement Back to the European family, as an example of a socialisation paradigm, on the one hand, support broad societal support for the European integration path while countering Russian propagandistic narratives in Georgia. Additionally, the Georgian society is sending messages and aiming to strategically communicate with the EU to compete with the governmental ambiguous political positioning, demonstrating the state's vulnerability.

Conclusion

Resilience constitutes an inherently dynamic concept, capturing the complexity of reality and inevitably targeting the different perspectives of domestic transformations of countries. The introduction of the resilience concept in the Eastern Partnership framework of the EU constitutes a recognition of the complexity of change, which does not itself replace the transformative policy instruments of the EU. The objective of the EU towards the Eastern Partnership countries is peacebuilding, democracy, protection of human rights and the rule of law, which is not achievable with

regard to the Associated Trio countries without a clear membership perspective. Acknowledging the increasing security threats in the EU neighbourhood that also imposes an immediate threat to the EU, the Union opened its doors to the Associated Trio, reaffirming the EU's resilience-building position in Eastern Europe.

This research is limited to the case of Georgia, which draws the line between governmental and societal resilience. It argues that the Georgian government displayed its vulnerability in dealing with external positive and negative shocks, like the EU membership perspective and the Russian war against Ukraine. While society has different standings from the government, that could be a positive source of resilience.

Due to the limited research focus, the paper is not dealing with identifying resilience concerning internal and external shocks (typology, level, duration, intensity) and their measurement. In comparison, it captures the weaknesses of the Georgian political system signalling institutional fragility and weak governance, as well as the gap between societal and governmental resilience.

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THE WESTERN BALKANS - AN AREA OF GEOPOLITICAL

COMPETITION

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the strong interdependencies and vulnerability of the EU, especially when in competition with other external actors. On the other hand, the slow pace of reforms and the increasingly uncertain domestic context, coupled with the growing influence of external actors and the EU's own internal difficulties and divergent positions of the Member States have complicated the enlargement environment.

However, starting with the "geopolitical Commission" led by President Ursula von der Leyen and in light of so many challenges, the Western Balkans are in the spotlight again, for both the EU and other external actors, such as Russia and China.

The paper focuses on the political and economic implications of the actions of two external actors (Russia and China) in correlation with the process of strengthening EU strategic autonomy, taking into account the complementarity between the security and the economic dimensions, as well as the impact of the war in Ukraine and its spill over effect in the Western Balkans that need to be approached separately, considering the vast implications and potential disruptive effect on the security and stability of the region.

On the EU side, starting with the revised enlargement methodology (2020), aimed at boosting the enlargement process more predictably and dynamically, a credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans has been re-established, even more so, that the revised methodology was followed by a series of processes aimed at promoting investment and socio-economic integration for the region, Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans alongside with its Green and Digital Agenda being among them.

Keywords:

Introduction

The three decades of protracted transition were meant to transform a region of instability, multidimensional conflicts and potential crisis into a European best practice of multiculturalism and resilience.

Placed in the waiting room for so much time, numerous speeches were heard about the EU's desire for enlargement and greater integration of the Western Balkans, but concrete results have been long overdue and the uncertainties have turned the region into an area of geopolitical competition. In the absence of significant progress and the presence of *Enlargement fatigue*, regional security of the Western Balkans was negatively influenced while the EU's leading role in the region and credibility have been placed under a question mark, not only by societies in the region but also by the external actors which, in the pursuit of their interests are prone to use all EU's vulnerabilities and indecisiveness for their advantage.

In light of more recent challenges, the Western Balkans (WB6) are in the spotlight again, for both the EU and other external actors, such as the US, Russia, China, and the Gulf States, with the Covid-19 pandemic highlighting the strong interdependencies and vulnerability of the EU, especially when in competition with other external actors.

On one hand, the Western Balkans' role in China's geopolitical agenda is also increasing alongside the offensive Chinese investment in what is set out to be an important corridor and the gateway to Europe for its new Silk Road (Belt and Road Initiative). And this is precisely the reason why, unlike Russia, China does not appear to hinder the accession path of the Western Balkans, at least not directly, for now.

Even though economic by their nature, investments in infrastructure, underpin China's geopolitical interests in the region by building increased trust and economic dependency in the long term.

On the other hand, even if the Belt and Road Initiative constitutes a core component of China's foreign policy, the Chinese approach in the region is revolving more around economic objectives, while the EU has a more ambitious plan for the Western Balkans region. Thus, alongside investing billions of euros in the region in the coming years, mainly through the Economic and Investment Plan and IPA III multi-annual budget, with a strong focus on long-term strategic investments in the key sectors, such as energy, the EU objectives are mainly political: to foster peace, stability, democracy and the rule of law in the Western Balkans.

Even though the ties and strings attached to the WB6 relations with China might have implications for the EU enlargement process environment, since the investment needs are quite high in the region, the EU should take advantage of these investments, while supporting the countries from the region to pursue European values and standards in the process of public procurement (environmental standards, state aid, transparency, conflict of interest, economic debt, etc.). This can be done and is already implemented through various institutional and multi-level dialogues between the EU and the WB6.

Since both EU and China will remain significant economic actors in the Western Balkans region, as economic and infrastructure development is a common objective, the EU and China are poised to work together for the development of the region, with more efforts being done by the EU to ensure that all investments are sustainable and compatible with EU interests, standards and values.

Although less involved in WB6 economies (according to the European Commission (2019), only 6.6% of the foreign direct investment in the region comes from Russia, whilst the EU accounts for 61%), Russia has created for itself the image of both an alternative and a protector and main supplier of gas and energy.

As Russia remains the most challenging actor for the EU, on all levels, where the strategic autonomy concept must rely on the "act (...) with partners wherever possible" part of the definition, this can be seen rather as an opportunity for EU's strategic autonomy, as there is no better incentive to increase EU's capabilities. As there is no better argument for a balanced partnership with the US than the risk of an increased Russian influence and threat.

Hence, rebalancing transatlantic relations will benefit both the EU on its path to increased strategic autonomy and a stronger position in the WB6 and US in keeping in check the Russian aggressiveness and advancement in the political and economic realms.

In 2017, ahead of a European Council meeting, speaking about the correlation between the EU's impact in the Western Balkans region and the credibility of the enlargement process, HR/VP Mogherini pledged for a stronger determination from the Member States in this process stressing that "the Balkans can easily become one of the chessboards where the big power game can be played" (Mogherini, 2017).

After the financial crisis (2008), China's global and regional presence has been developing at a very high pace - the bigger picture and the long-term implications should always be kept in sight. Especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, when global dependencies became more evident than ever.

Leveraging on the increasingly uncertain context and the EU's internal difficulties, China took the opportunity to strengthen its influence and image in the region through "health diplomacy" (Fazal, 2020), a newly discovered soft power tool shared with Russia in the Western Balkans.

Having had a centuries-long constant presence in the region, Russia could not shy away from such an opportunity presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, to increase their bilateralism and ultimately weakening the international institutions and solidifying their relations with the WB countries.

Internally, the considerable length of the EU decision-making process and divergent positions of the member states and hence the inability to reach a consensus, represent a struggle and an obstacle for both EU's strategic autonomy and the enlargement process.

While for both strategic autonomy and EU accession, political consensus among the Member States is needed, the causal link between the stabilization, accession and EU integration of the Western Balkans and the achievement of the European Union's strategic objective of becoming a global player is very clear. Thus, the EU must show both the ability and that it has the means to provide stability and security in its immediate vicinity if it wants to be credible in being able to project these at a global level.

Moreover, being a global player with strategic autonomy means that it would be able not only to protect but also to promote its values, standards and interests at a global level and be able to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners whenever possible (European External Action Service (EEAS), 2016) to obtain the security in all its forms, the EU must show that it has the power of doing so firstly in the Western Balkans, the most advanced countries on the accession path.

The result of not being able to provide security and stability in the WB6 and of not being able to promote its values and standards in these countries would not only result in a delayed integration process of these countries but would also have a negative effect on the EU's credibility and ability to be a global actor.

It was the wars in Yugoslavia that triggered a shift from declarations to concrete actions in the field of strategic autonomy. That missed "hour of Europe" (Luxembourg Foreign Minister, Jacques Poos, 1992), which showed the entire world the European gap between capabilities and expectations, a clear image of the fact that achieving a credible EU foreign and security policy relies also on appropriate military capabilities, as stated in the St. Malo declaration (signed in December 1998 by British primeminister Tony Blair and French President Jacques Chirac, who met to advance the creation of a European security and defense policy. It was issued as a response to the armed conflict in Kosovo in the late 1990s, in which the international community, and especially the European Union and its member states, were perceived to have failed to intervene to stop the conflict).

Federica Mogherini (2019), former High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, emphasized that to achieve its goal of stabilizing the European continent and making war impossible within it, the European Union must unite Europe by integrating the states of the Western Balkans, stating that "the European Union will become a strong global player only if it integrates the Western Balkans".

The need to ensure security and stability, where the security challenges and negative influences of external actors are highly visible, is one of the strong reasons for revitalizing the enlargement process. On the other hand, security and stability are also at the core of the new "Europe's moment" (European Commission, 2020), underpinning strategic autonomy, a process being led by the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy and the EU Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (General Secretariat of the Council, 2022).

As in 2021 strategic autonomy cannot be limited only to security and defence, the paper is not addressing directly the complementarity with NATO and the defence and security dimension of strategic autonomy but rather its political and economic implications and its connection with the enlargement process. As the concept of strategic autonomy, in 2021, could be defined as the EU's capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible in order to achieve security in all fields of action and all its forms (economic security, security of the critical infrastructure, digital security, etc.), dissemination of EU standards and promoting the EU values globally, while acting on previously agreed goals and commitments.

Moreover, reducing dependencies and vulnerabilities, and counteracting possible actions delaying both the enlargement process and the strengthening of the strategic autonomic of the EU are only possible through an increased resilience of the EU and of the WB6 region.

By increasing resilience, the EU is not only targeting the ability to meet current and future challenges, within and outside its territory, but is also creating a space for its autonomy to grow and this is recognized also by the EU Strategic Agenda 2019-2024, where the need for EU autonomous action is highlighted, in expressing its ambitious: industrial and commercial policy, green and digital transition and neighbourhood policy (European Council, 2019).

The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission, Josep Borrell (2020) gave a clear direction for a broader understanding of the concept and its economic and political implications, expressing the need for a more effective strategic autonomy "widened to new subjects of an economic and technological nature". This was also emphasized by the President of the European Council, asserting the need for stability and

dissemination of the EU standards in order to achieve "less dependence, more influence" (Charles Michel, 2021).

In the pursuit of attaining all its ambitions, enlargement and strategic autonomy included, the EU has tried consistently to reconcile the many ethnic, religious and cultural differences in the Balkans, while its stabilisation efforts are encountering an ever-growing influence from Russia and China, leading to continuous tensions in the region.

The Dragonbear strategic alliance, coined by Velina Tchakarova (2016), while pursuing its strategic interests and tackling their shared threats is also particularly being used for antagonizing the population in a said country or region and creating tensions in the society, through political interference, disinformation, propaganda and FDI (The Kremlin Playbook, n.d.).

Whether a non-ideological, pragmatic alliance or a new model of systemic coordination, the Dragonbear is here to stay and most likely will further shape the international environment in the years to come (Liliana Popescu & Răzvan Tudose, 2021).

Nonetheless, this alliance has a friction potential lying in the geopolitical interests of third countries, with Russia fearing Chinese penetration in its traditional spheres of influence, such as the Western Balkans. This trend was also visible during the Covid-19 pandemic, with disruptions in the supply chains and closed borders between Russian and China (Ellyatt, 2020), the competition on the ground in the Western Balkans between the two, trying to dispatch as many medical supplies as propaganda, constantly increasing.

Part one of this research paper aims to review the means of cooperation and the means of the influence of both Russia and China and how these are influencing the Western Balkans region and the enlargement process.

Part two focuses on the needed course of action for the EU in the coming years from the perspective of strengthening its strategic autonomy and revitalising the enlargement process and the impact of these processes on the Western Balkans countries.

From a methodological point of view, the paper has a constructivist approach which aims to offer a better understanding of the geopolitical environment and its dimensions and implications for the Western Balkans countries, based on three principles: personal experience, active learning and social interactions (Richey et al., 2010). Even though an exhaustive and in-depth analysis of all the elements of the multilevel research on the proposed subject goes beyond the scope of this paper, focusing on the bigger picture and following a constructivist design (Lunenburg, 1998), can bridge the research-

practice gap. According to constructivist design theory, learners actively construct their knowledge, rather than simply absorbing ideas spoken to them by teachers based on their background, experience and skills. Hence, making connections with previous experiences and constructing knowledge based on these experiences creates an active learning environment. Critical thinking skills and social interactions allow for new understandings based on personal experiences and the exchange of ideas which can shape perspectives and consolidate the new information.

The methodology of the paper is based on the empirical review of the available primary literature and analysing of the relevant contexts, focusing on the practical implications and future perspectives of the increasingly harmonized new forms of Russian-Chinese operations, as these may influence both the process of enlargement and the strengthening of EU's strategic autonomy.

The limitations of the present paper are driven by the analysed period, which ends prior to the start of the war in Ukraine (24th February 2022) and concerns specific areas of analysis as well as other key actors influencing the Western Balkans region. While acknowledging the influence of the US, Turkey, and the Gulf States, the paper restricts itself to China and Russia and the EU cooperation and competition in the Western Balkans, with a focus on the latter objectives of strategic autonomy and enlargement.

I. EU chessboard in its quest for Strategic autonomy

In times of crises, be it economic (in 2009), migration (in 2015) or the Covid-19 pandemic (ongoing), all eyes were on the EU's capacity to adequately respond, and find solutions and political and financial resources. Therefore it is only normal that the Geopolitical Commission, the term itself implying a new level of engagement of the EU in the global realm, acting in a geopolitical rapidly evolving environment, needs to find those partners and those alliances which will help not only protect the EU's values and interests but also promote them and work for their advancement.

Broadening the understanding of the concept of strategic autonomy from defence and applying it as a horizontal principle underpinning the EU's recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic, steering the EU towards a more resilient, sustainable and fair Europe, is key in the coming years, in order to strengthen EU multilateral action and its position in relation to the external actors.

The new international competition is increasingly basing itself on digital and technological supremacy. The digital transition and the European data and technological sovereignty, alongside critical infrastructure resilience and security of supply chains, are key economic and political objectives, as relevant to the EU's autonomy as to the enlargement policy. Investments are required not only in

capability-development, cutting-edge research and innovation but also in increasing independency in critical technological sectors and securing the technology space from cyber warfare.

The President of the European Council, Charles Michel (2020) stated on Twitter that "European strategic autonomy is goal #1 for our generation. For Europe, this is the real start of the 21st century" which is also recognized in the 2019-2024 Strategic Agenda, where EU's need to "act autonomously" is also being highlighted, together with its ambitions - industry and trade policy, green deal, digitalisation, neighbourhood policy, just to name a few.

In order to reach all its ambitions, the EU must have both the means and the money, while the entire process may be hindered by internal and external factors.

Internally, the considerable length of the EU decision-making process and divergent positions of the member states and hence the inability to reach a consensus, represent a struggle and an obstacle to increasing the EU's strategic autonomy, such as the case when Eastern and southern EU member nations were threatening to blockade sustainable finance taxonomy (Simon, 2021) and for pursuing enlargement policy objectives, that have been obstructed by Hungary (Brzozowski & Makszimov, 2021).

As an example of the EU's struggle to reach a consensus, the Carbon Adjustment Mechanism, proposed by President Ursula von der Leyen at Davos in January 2020 (Khan & Rachman, 2020), meant not only to deliver the objectives of the green transition but also to ensure a level playing field between EU producers and non-EU countries, which do not share the same climate ambitions, such as China, the world's largest emitter of carbon that has committed to reducing its carbon emissions by 2060 and India, the world's third-largest carbon emitter, by 2070 (Simon, 2021), was not adopted by the EU by January 2022.

Concerning the enlargement policy consensus, the veto of France in 2019 (Gotev, 2019) and Bulgaria in 2020 (Rettman, 2020) caused not only a delay in the process and distrust at the level of the WB6 societies, that the accession process is not only merit-led but also political-led by Member states individual approaches and interests (Institut Jacques Delors, 2021), but also had a potential impact on the security of the region and that of the EU. Speaking about Bulgaria's veto on accession talks with North Macedonia, the German minister for European Affairs, Michael Roth considered that "anything else [than a swift IGC] would be a very severe political mistake at the expense of stability and security in the Western Balkans, and that ultimately would massively endanger the security of Europe as a whole - and all should be aware of that".

Also, as all global actors are reviewing their dependencies and trying to identify alternatives, especially after the Covid-19 crisis, a more in-depth analysis and a multi-angle approach needs to be done in relation to the external actors' geopolitical interests and their impact on the EU integration of the Western Balkans countries and strengthening EU's strategic autonomy. Hence, deviating from the EU standards (environmental, procurement, transparency, etc.) and values (human rights, democracy, etc.) when implementing investment projects with external actors' financial resources might impede the accession process and hinder it. Likewise, entering into a debt trap, which might translate into economic leverage and coercion, as well as having strategic and critical infrastructure investments done in the WB6 by external EU actors, might create a gap between EU expectations in the accession process and the actual progress of the region. All of these have a negative impact on the EU's objective of achieving strengthened strategic autonomy. As explained at the beginning of this paper, not being able to export its values and standards into its neighbourhood and not being able to support the needs of the region in order to wean off its dependency on the external actors' investments, might lead to a loss in EU credibility and in its means to deliver on its objectives.

While for both strategic autonomy and EU accession political consensus among member states is needed, the causal link between the stabilization, accession and EU integration of the Western Balkans and the achievement of the European Union's strategic objective of becoming a global player is very clear. Even more so, for both processes, the EU has to face the challenges posed by both Russia and China, from arm-struggling Member states for health supplies to energy blockades and from politically motivated investments to bribery and media manipulation.

In more recent years, other challenges were added to the context and a need for the strategic autonomy concept to evolve once again was clear. The increased influence and interference within the EU and in its immediate neighbourhood (Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries) of the external actors, such as China and Russia have brought the subject back on the European agenda, but this time even more multifaceted.

In *A New Industrial Strategy for Europe* (2020), it is mentioned that "Europe's strategic autonomy is about reducing dependence on others for things we need the most: critical materials and technologies, food, infrastructure, security and other strategic areas". They also provide Europe's industry with an opportunity to develop its own markets, products and services which boost competitiveness" (Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, 2020). Moreover, throughout 2020, the European Commission incorporated the strategic capacities, capabilities and responses in several of its

initiatives, with the aim of indirectly defining strategic autonomy in the sense of autonomy to do something, rather than autonomy from something. The focus is placed on increasing the resilience of the European economy and industries and their capacity to respond to the needs of EU citizens by themselves and on the strategic assets crucial for EU security, hence for its autonomy.

Thus, in key blueprints for the digital transition, the European Commission speaks about achieving more and better strategic capacity while investing in the strategic sectors and capacities enabling the development of digital solutions at scale with interoperability and connectivity being key building blocks of the digital transition (*Shaping Europe's digital future*, 2020; *A European strategy for data*, 2020; *On Artificial Intelligence - A European approach to excellence and trust*, 2020).

In other policy papers, such as the EU Foreign Investment Screening Mechanism, Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, and Communication on the Trade Policy Review, more emphasis is placed on the economic transformation, geopolitical instability and the need for an "open strategic autonomy", namely increasing EU's ability to make its own choices and shape the world according to its strategic interests and values (Valdis Dombrovskis, 2020).

While both the EU and the Western Balkans should remain open to foreign investments, they should do so while safeguarding the strategic assets, critical infrastructure, critical technologies and inputs which are essential for security or public order. The European Commission Vice-President stated that "If we want to achieve an open strategic autonomy, having an efficient EU-wide investment screening cooperation is essential. We are now well equipped for that" (Valdis Dombrovskis, 2020. And when speaking about the "equipment" to do so, we are considering the 18 projects and programmes which are of essential interests for the EU and which could be affected by an inefficient screening system of FDIs and these are: European GNSS programmes; Copernicus; Preparatory Action on Preparing the new EU GOVSATCOM programme; Space Programme; Horizon 2020 including research and development programmes and joint undertakings or any other structure including actions therein relating to Key Enabling Technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics, semiconductors and cybersecurity; Horizon Europe, including research and development programmes and joint undertakings or any other structure; Euratom Research and Training Programme 2021-2025; Trans-European Networks for Transport (TEN-T); Trans-European Networks for Energy (TEN-E); Trans-European Networks for Telecommunications; Connecting Europe Facility; Digital Europe Programme; European Defence Industrial Development Programme; Preparatory Action on Defence Research; European Defence Fund; Permanent structured cooperation (PESCO); European Joint Undertaking for ITER; EU4Health Programme.

If between 2013 and 2015 the concept of strategic autonomy was almost exclusively linked to the defence industry, it was later defined as an ambition to reach "an appropriate level of strategic autonomy" to "ensure Europe's ability to safeguard security within and beyond its borders" (EU Global Strategy, 2016).

In order to seize this new "Europe's moment", three objectives are placed at the core of the EU strategic actions: security, dissemination of EU standards and promoting of the EU values, and all three are just as valid when speaking about enlargement and strategic autonomy and all of them highly impacted by both Russia and China or by their joint cooperation (European Commission, 2020). Both countries seem to complement and support each other in their actions concerning the EU and the Western Balkans, while both are in a frontal collision in terms of strategic interests, but also in terms of values with the EU and both threatening the security and stability of the EU and its immediate neighbourhood.

In terms of security, the focus is placed on technology, defence, economic, and energy security. This is due to the advancement of new technologies and ever-increasing digitalization, which has been experienced more than ever during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Moreover and just as important in the processes of enlargement and strategic autonomy, is the EU's capacity to export and impose its values and standards globally, and this ranges from data protection to the newly introduced climate standards that can be summed up to "the lower your compliance with standards, the more restricted your access" (President Charles Michel, 2020).

While increasing its international influence and presence, the EU has to show firstly the ability to infuse its values and its standards in its immediate neighbourhood, as these are also meant to strengthen the resilience of its Western Balkans partners and ensure full adherence to EU's objectives along the accession path.

While greater political commitment is required from the EU Member States, the entire enlargement process is meant to guide the needed reforms as the Revised Enlargement Methodology and Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans countries are key blueprints in the policy dialogues and implementation processes. Effective and strong strategic autonomy means more than climate neutrality, digital sovereignty and EU standards and values and its implementation in various dimensions requires more than clear objectives and political declarations.

EU competencies backed up by the financial means to deliver are the key tools for promoting the EU values globally. According to the *Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) – Performance* (2021), the EU is set to spend 1.074,3 billion euros for its objectives to be fulfilled in the Multi-Annual Financial Framework 2021-2027, having an envelope of 14,16 billion euros, to which amounts from

Recovery and Resilience plans (723,8 billion euros) and Economic Investment plans (9 billion euros) dedicated to the Western Balkans are added, with a potential to mobilise up to 20 billion euros in public and private investments in the next decade. Thus, the EIP will deploy significantly more investments in the region than China has done since 2012.

From the Thessaloniki European Council Summit (2003), which set EU enlargement as a priority for the integration of the Western Balkans, to the statement ahead of the EU-Western Balkans summit on 6th of October 2021 "the Western Balkans belong to the European Union. It is in our common interest, but I also believe, it is our destiny" (European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, 2021), the EU has had a compelling leading role in the region, protecting and promoting its values and interests and addressing the geopolitical challenges over the years.

Reflecting on Bulgaria's veto to approve the opening of the intergovernmental conference [IGC] with North Macedonia, the German minister for EU Affairs stated that it was a "very severe political mistake at the expense of stability and security in the Western Balkans and that ultimately would massively endanger the security of Europe as a whole", acknowledging thus the role the Western Balkans are playing in the security field for entire Europe.

The Central and South Eastern Europe energy connectivity, the Green Agenda, and the Energy Community are not just tools for energy transition and climate action in the Western Balkans but also tools for EU strategic leadership.

This is why the Next Generation EU (NGEU) recovery instrument and all EU-funded programmes, from the mainstream in the member states to Economic Investment Plan in Western Balkans, have clean energy and green deal as central instruments, with concrete actions and intermediary milestones.

As the coronavirus pandemic brought along an economic crisis and disruptions in the supply chains, the focus on building a stronger, sustainable and more resilient economy in the EU increased. And this is not something to address in the short term, only through NGEU, as a temporary measure after the pandemic, as the perspective of the EU on the global market faces increased weaknesses if something is not changed in its longer-term economic growth. From research and innovation, SMEs, and digitalisation to space projects, all fields could benefit from more investments and ultimately from the benefits of strategic autonomy.

Along with increasing and protecting its domestic production, a strong trade policy could deliver the set objectives, by using for example the border carbon adjustment mechanism. This would ensure that the carbon content of the goods imported at a lower price than the one on the domestic market of the EU does not lead to unfair competition for its producers and will also force the trading partners to

pursue the same ambitious goals in the field of climate change. Also, when discussing the EU's strategic autonomy in the context of trade policy, the focus should be placed on multilateralism and on defending its interests.

As the EU is a strong defender of multilateralism, hence in strong interdependence with other global actors, it must also ensure that its strong strategic autonomy is expressed in a well-functioning multilateral international economic system. That is precisely why, along with the economic measures, the external actions of the EU are of paramount importance in building a stronger strategic autonomy, which can further defend multilateralism. As the former HR/VP Mrs. Federica Mogherini (2017) stated: "We achieved security through cooperation. We built peace with multilateralism. This is the strength of the European Union" and this idea is followed-up by the European Commission in its priority - stronger Europe in the world".

As addressed from the very beginning of this paper, the concept of strategic autonomy is also about the EU's capabilities to pursue common goals in relation to the main external actors. And these efforts may be hindered by the new bipolarity in the international system US-China and by the bilateral relations of the Member States with the external actors.

The 2021 Strategic Foresight Report, released by the European Commission in September 2021 is tackling all the key challenges and global order shifts in direct correlation with the opportunities for the EU's global leadership. What can be delivered and by when remains to be seen.

II. Russian headache

Since the Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation between the Soviet Union and the European Communities (1989), the cooperation between the two was marked by several EU enlargements (2004, 2007, 2013), among other challenges, with security, energy and of all sorts, being at the core of this relation.

Even though not directly opposing the enlargement process, Russia openly recognizes through Ambassador Vladimir Chizhov that "we want to be sure that whatever they do with the EU, be it accession, or association, or whatever, doesn't infringe on our traditional relations" (Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the European Union, 2017).

While the role and intentions of Russia in the Western Balkans are well known (Secrieru, 2020), since it has been strongly involved in the region since the 19th century, so is its inability to offer an economic perspective and a real alternative to the EU (EU Trade Relations With Western Balkans, 2020). However, the threats it poses to the region's and EU's stability and security should not be

underestimated. While pursuing its "near abroads" and restoration of its sphere of influence foreign priorities, Russia is able to deploy in the Western Balkans all the soft power tools and skills aimed at disrupting, disordering, weakening and dividing the societies and their relation with the EU, creating thus a zone of hybrid warfare and instability.

Thus, Russia uses the Western Balkans as a tool to dissipate the "West's" attention from its "near abroads" policy and divide their stabilization efforts between the former USSR space and the WB6 region.

As a traditional regional actor in the Western Balkans, and its third largest trading partner, accounting for 4,7% (EU Trade Relations With Western Balkans, 2020) and 6.6% FDI, in 2018, Russia's influence in the region, however, is measured as well through its historical cultural and religious ties (Zeneli, 2020).

Nevertheless, even if its economic engagement is limited, it should be emphasized that it's focused on strategic sectors, such as energy, with Gazprom the main gas supplier of the region and massive purchases of local refineries, metallurgy and banking. While some Western Balkan countries are 100% dependent on Russian gas such as Serbia (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V., 2018), North Macedonia and Bosnia & Herzegovina (Statista, 2022), these countries are also "benefiting" from profound political influence - for example, the constant undermining of US and EU attempts to provide solutions on Kosovo, the political crisis in North Macedonia underpinned by the "wiretapping scandal", encouragement of the secession rhetoric for Republika Srpska or even allegedly covert actions for the attempted coup in Montenegro during its 2016 elections (Higgins, 2016).

This business-political partnership Russia is nurturing ensures that the strategic political objectives are underpinned by economic leverage and coercion (Bechev, 2019).

Moreover, as stated at the beginning of this paper, Russia remains the most challenging actor for the EU both with regard to its internal affairs and with regard to the enlargement policy, as political consensus among the Member States is needed for both strategic autonomy and the enlargement process and the Russian influence projected also on the EU member states can dramatically hinder it.

Thus, with very high capital flows abroad, growing consistently since 2005 to around 1 trillion USD (Conley et al., 2019) and large shares of European companies' exports and profits made in Russia, it can not only influence but also block and distort entire markets and industries, through an extensive network of companies and subsidiaries throughout EU. Some of the countries particularly exposed are those where the Russian FDI increased exponentially, from 5.4 billion euros in 2006 to close to 160 billion euros at the end of 2017, such as Italy, Austria, and the Netherlands, where the assets of Russian

companies rose from 13.2 billion euro in 2007 to around 96 billion euro in 2017 which are in fact the countries gaining more profits from their relation with Russia. Here, the best example is the Austria Raiffeisen Bank, with more than 78% of its 2014 profits made in Russia (Conley et al., 2016).

Another growing way of exercising its influence in the EU is through high-level political figures, such as Former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, who joined Gazprom at the end of his mandate, Former French Prime Minister François Fillon, who recently joined the board of Russian giant Sibur, Austrian chancellors and foreign ministers, who supported Russian gas pipeline projects opposing the application of EU market rules, such as Former Austrian Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl, appointed in the board of directors of the Russian oil company Rosneft or Former Austrian Chancellor Christian Kern appointed in the board of directors of the Russian railway company or Former Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel, board member of Lukoil, just to name some of the most prominent. Unlike China, which in pursuit of its foreign policy objectives deploys economic and financial resources in the region, Russia is not aiming at constructing anything.

With a myriad of tools from disinformation, fake news and propaganda to politically motivated investments and political interference aimed at eroding democratic institutions through bribery and corruption, Russia seems committed to destabilizing the Western Balkans region, exploiting its weakness and undermining its European path, while not having the means or resources to become a real alternative to the EU.

III. China: systemic rival or EU partner in the Western Balkans

While in economic terms the EU was the main partner of the Western Balkans, for both exports (81 %) and imports (58 %) in 2021 and only 3.2% of export and 11.6% of imports with China (Eurostat, 2021) in 2021, 61% of the FDI is coming from EU (The Regional Cooperation Council, 2022) and less than 10% from China (Zweers et al., 2020), the economic alternative provided by China in the region, with huge loans provided by Chinese banks is creating a financial dependency leading to an environment of an increased political influence (Stojkovski et al., 2021). And this process entails also the abandonment of the EU values and standards, such as environmental and good governance (Rankovic, 2021).

Taking advantage of the opportunities existing in the 2010s, with Chinese increased economic development, manufacturing capacity, big investment needs in the Western Balkans, China's investments in the Western Balkans can be easily transposed into foreign policy objectives, with the Land–Sea Express Route (LSER), as a component of the Belt and Road Initiative, playing the central

role in strengthening the capacity of the port of Piraeus to act as a hub for EU-China trade (World Markets Daily, 2021).

Moreover, acknowledging Serbia's role in the region it should be said that China did not take a particular interest in the development of all WB countries at the same pace, but rather focused its investments and loans where political gains were in sight and all WB countries have a certain degree of diplomatic and economic relations with China and correlated loans attached to this relationship, with the majority of the Chinese investments contributing to LSER. Activities focused on building motorways, resource extraction and steel production, are all part of a strategic network of investments supporting Chinese interests in Europe.

While pursuing its interests, China made a tempting offer for the Western Balkans countries, an alternative to the more rule-based investments of the EU in the region, with promising commitments of 2.4 billion US dollars in FDIs alongside 6.8 billion US dollars in infrastructure loans, without taking any interest in transparent tendering, economic benefit and environmental impact (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020).

With a total of 32 billion euros estimated to have been invested by China in the WB6 during 2009-2021 (Branislav, 2022) and with the Belt and Road Initiative serving as the main framework for these investments, China has increased its presence in the region giving rise to concerns regarding EU standards and values (environmental and public procurement standards, human rights, etc.).

Chinese offensive in the region, with its complementary initiatives and investments, culminating with the launch of the '16+1' initiative in 2012 (now known as the "17+1" with Greece joining in 2019), created also a source of political leverage over national governments in the region while placing itself at the EU doorstep, with countries like Greece, Italy and Hungary joining the BRI (Hillman, 2021). The high-speed railway linking Budapest to the Port of Piraeus via North Macedonia and Serbia, which is also part of LSER, is just one step clear in this direction and is being built by a consortium of Chinese state-owned company alongside a Hungarian company, with a 2.1billion US dollars loan from Export–Import Bank of China (Frese, 2019). Not only that these connectivity networks are facilitating exports from China to the EU and decrease the time in which these are available on the EU market (Wang, 2022), but they are also important in supporting Chinese investments in the EU which have considerably increased (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, 2020).

Nevertheless, the future of Chinese investments in the Western Balkans, relies however on its relations with the EU, as all these are meant to facilitate access to the European market.

On the EU side of things, there are 103 product categories in electronics, chemicals, minerals/metals, and pharmaceutical/medical products in which the EU has a critical strategic dependence on imports from China, however, China's overall importance for the EU in investment and trade, is still relatively minor (Policy Department for External Relations Directorate General for External Policies of the Union, 2020), when compared to the US, for example. China would have much more to lose from a deteriorating relationship with the EU, which is not only a half of billion-people market but also one of the largest foreign investors (Zenglein, 2020) even though rather concentrated at a small number of member states and companies (Kratz et al., 2022).

In 2003 China and the EU agreed on the establishment of a strategic partnership, issuing policy papers laying down expected goals (Callahan, 2007), with culminated with the European Commission adopting policy paper "A maturing partnership: shared interests and challenges in EU-China relations", in which the goal of assisting China in its transformation as a reliable partner in the international realm, incorporating EU values of good governance, accountability, transparency and human rights is set.

While the European Commission's Joint Communication on the Elements for a new EU strategy on China (2016) remains the cornerstone for EU engagement, it was the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation which presents the full potential for enhancing cooperation and the shared responsibilities for promoting peace, prosperity and sustainable development, consolidating and deepening the strategic partnership based on the principles of equality, respect and mutual trust.

The comprehensive strategic partnership from the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda was complemented by the Joint communication of the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy EU-China – A strategic outlook (2019).

In this paper, the EU defined China for the first time as being a "systemic rival", joining the US on this view and posing many questions on the future of the relations and their global impact. Underpinning this consideration is a series of factors which caused the deterioration of the EU-China bilateral relations, such as trade measures against the single market, as pointed out in the Strategic outlook. Hence, considering the impact on the EU's set of values and standards of the alternative models for governance promoted by China, based on which the status of a systemic rival was considered, the EU position requires a "whole-of-EU" approach, requiring full unity in all formats of cooperation with China, ensuring consistency with EU law and policies.

Moreover, in the strategic outlook a 10 points plan was set out, in order to find the right balance of policy approaches for the relationship of EU-China in the current global context. Moreover, the

objectives embedded in the strategic outlook are also reflected in the EU's vision for strengthening its strategic autonomy in the years to come and the correlation between the two will be further elaborated.

Just one year after the strategic outlook was issued, the EU concluded the 7 years long negotiations on the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) between China and the EU, which is still pending for ratification in the European Parliament.

If and when the implementation of CAI will be effective, it is set to be the most ambitious Agreement with China, which will guarantee an unprecedented level of access to EU investors and EU companies in China and commit China to rules on state-owned enterprises, transparency, labour and environment, etc.

On the other hand, China's economic activity in the Western Balkans, while opaque and ecologically questionable, has contributed to the growth of many economies in this region, at the cost of socioeconomic and fiscal sustainability. Even if Chinese investments in the Western Balkans can serve a political role (Newton, 2022), China's growing ability to engage in economic and political coercion has mostly taken the form of possibility rather than concrete action so far (Zeneli, 2019).

The strong dependencies on China shown more than ever by the EU and WB6 during the Covid-19 pandemic require fast responses not only in terms of reducing them but also in terms of swift and clear steer in the EU political dimension.

Since the very beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, China tried to position itself as a leading global actor in the response actions, having been the first country to experience the outbreaks and the lockdowns, having a strong manufacturing position globally for healthcare supplies and ultimately being the first to roll out the "vaccine diplomacy". It seems that China fully understood the meaning of "In the midst of every crisis, lies great opportunity", since it was precisely in the aftermath of another crisis (financial) in 2008 when it asserted itself as a strong global actor, Western Balkans included.

The already highly asymmetrical relationship between the Western Balkans and China has become even more multi-dimensional with the COVID-19 pandemic (Vangeli, 2021), with "mask and vaccine diplomacy" added to the Chinese support for the region, the pandemic was in fact an enabler of more influence in the WB6 countries.

Even though much less than the support from the EU dedicated to the fight against the coronavirus pandemic in the region, the medical supplies coming in as early as the 21st of March 2021, reinforced China's position in the region, showing that now more than ever, a common stance on China is needed

among all member states, as they can no longer afford to remain divided on all China issues (Chrzová & Čermák, 2020).

And this coordination was already enabled at the level of EU Member States, while they addressed the need for coordination safeguarding the green transport corridors and the coordinated movement of persons through the Covid green pass.

Thus, while looking for new ways for deterring the influence of external actors in this area of so many competing interests, the EU should also take advantage of the pandemic crisis lessons and build further on them.

Hence, as climate challenges have no borders, pretty much as Covid-19, this might be the next common goal, on which member states could work together without divergent positions, showing both political will and strategic vision, in supporting non-EU member states decarbonising their economies and invest in climate change measures, while tackling also the challenges posed in this field by the external actors, such as China.

Moreover, in order to show its commitment and that it has the necessary means for addressing investments needs in building resilient, smart and quality infrastructure while observing all EU values and standards, the European Commission and the EU High Representative launched the Global Gateway (2021), aimed at boosting smart and clean investments in sectors as digital, climate and energy, transport, health, education and research, mobilising up to 300 billion euro.

Conclusions

Defending multilateralism over the years brought the EU into a position of increased economic interdependence which now also has high political stakes. EU's capacity to act autonomously is deemed effective when the decisions and their implementation do not depend on the external actors, with which the EU may choose to cooperate in the attainment of its objectives, but rather depend on the EU's capacity to act, in a unanimously and strategically manner. Therefore, the entire process of strengthening the strategic autonomy and WB6 integration is underpinned by the political will of the Member States and their capacity of pursuing common goals, applying the whole-of-Europe approach in relation to the external actors and in pursuing its interests globally.

China's economic activity in the Western Balkans has contributed to the growth of many economies in this region, truth be told, at the cost of neglecting socio-economic and fiscal sustainability. Moreover, China's investments in the Western Balkans can serve a political role, influencing these countries towards a path farther from the EU's objectives in the region, and hindering their road towards

accession. But China's growing ability to engage in economic and political coercion has mostly taken the form of possibility rather than concrete action so far.

However, this influence will quickly diminish with the implementation of the Chinese "dual circulation" economy strategy, triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, at a time when the EU is revitalising the accession process, through the Revised Enlargement Methodology, designed to jump-start the enlargement process in a more credible, predictable and dynamic way. Moreover, with the Brdo Summit Declaration, "The EU reconfirms its commitment to the enlargement process and its decisions taken thereon, based upon credible reforms by partners, fair and rigorous conditionality and the principle of own merits" (European Council, 2021).

Thus, in order to bring peace, prosperity and stability to the region, the European Commission proposed a process based on mutual trust and clear commitments from both sides, with a focus on implementing fundamental reforms in the field of rule of law, democratic institutions and economies.

With a consensus among the member states and a whole-of-EU approach, the EU can take things to a whole new level in its relation with China, having already created the tools working across different policy areas and sectors, as shown above. Moreover, strong cooperation with China in order to promote common interests at the global level can only be beneficial for both parties.

Unlike China, the political influence of Russia in the region and at the level of the EU has only a destructive purpose, fuelling nationalist tendencies, "anti-" sentiments and disruptions, horizontally, at the level of the entire society (Bechev, 2019). As an example, by fuelling the nationalist and secessionist current in Bosnia & Herzegovina, Russia shows once more that it is using Republika Srpska as a lever in its strategy to destabilize the Western Balkans. And the pro-Putin protests organized in many cities of Republika Srpska, including Banja Luka, Trebinje and Bratunac, heavily publicized by the Kremlin-served media, are yet another proof of Russia's instrumentalisation of this entity. For its eternal conflict with the West, the Balkans represented a space where Russia tried to divert and divide the energy of its rival from the scene of the main battle for its interests, namely the eastern space.

In essence, Russia has no direct interest in any of the Balkan countries, except as a market for its energy sources, but there is plenty of room there to spread and maintain instability, sowing mistrust in Western structures, constantly working to maintain tensions, primarily ethnic and religious.

In 2019, Vladimir Putin's adviser put this approach in brief and blunt words: "Russia interferes in your brains, we change your conscience, and there is nothing you can do about it" (Maza, 2019).

Strategic partners of the EU or not, systemic rivals for the EU or not, the EU needs to find common solutions rather than diverging visions and approaches for its engagement with external actors (Mogherini, 2014; European Commission and the EU High Representative of the Union for Foreign affairs and Security policy, 2019).

Rather than just preventing disruptions and deepening fragmentation, the EU should rapidly find ways to adapt to a swiftly changing global environment and enhance its efforts to infuse its rules, standards and values in a more pragmatic manner in its relations with the external actors, as this is rather a question of survival of the European project. Otherwise, the EU is running the risk of becoming irrelevant in the new global order.

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BRAIN GAIN - RETURN MIGRATION STIMULATION PUBLIC POLICIES. AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH USING CORPORATE MANAGERIAL TOOLS STRATEGIES.

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ABSTRACT

Economies with an unstable political environment have difficulties retaining talents within the country. Romania, for example, has been experiencing an acceleration of the migration phenomenon for the past 30 years. While the Romanian economy is rapidly growing, according to all stats, talent migration is still an actual phenomenon. One of the reasons for the brain exodus, especially in the highly qualified labour segment, is the faulty management of public services: education, healthcare, and infrastructure is lagging behind Western Europe.

The article aims to highlight best practices from the private sector that can be implemented by the government and to develop a brain gain model to attract talent back into the country.

Keywords:

■Brain gain ■Return migration ■Public policies ■Innovation

■ Managerial tools

Introduction

The migration phenomenon is as old as humanity itself. Economic, environmental, social and political factors cause individuals to leave their native country in quest of higher standards of living in the destination country. These factors can be extended to economic and financial constraints, high unemployment rates, low public service quality, economic, financial and political instability, inadequate employment opportunities, national conflicts or wars, opportunities for a better future, proximity to family, natural disasters, weather conditions, and others. (Wallace, 2002; Carling, 2016). According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), there were 281 million migrants worldwide. The estimated 281 million people living in a country other than their countries of birth in 2020 was 128 million more than in 1990 and over three times the estimated number in 1970. (IOM, 2022).

Romania is one of the countries that contribute significantly to the above stats starting with the fall of the communist regime. After this milestone in the history of Romania, migration emerged as a crucial socioeconomic phenomenon, with the majority of the diaspora concentrated in OECD countries. In addition, the OECD reported in 2019 that the Romanian diaspora is the fifth largest in the world.

Regardless of the fact that it is a significant phenomenon with both social and economic repercussions, Romania lacks a national strategy or comprehensive public policy designed to motivate citizens to return.

Based on exploratory research and literature review insights, the current paper aims to discover the migration phenomenon and motivations to return and develop a brain gain model that will test in future quantitative research.

The paper is structured into six sections, which emphasize the following topics: Migration phenomenon in Romania; Managerial strategies for retention and attraction of talents; Public policies for return migration stimulation example of European Countries; Methodology; Brain gain model - an innovative approach using corporate managerial strategies; Conclusions.

1. Migration phenomenon in Romania

Roughly 6 million Romanians have emigrated from within Romania's borders in the last 30 years, with the top destination countries for Romanian migrants being Germany, Italy, Spain, and United Kingdom. In the first 25 years, this phenomenon's positive economic and cultural consequences far

outweighed the negative social impact. In time, however, the share of remittances in the Gross Domestic Product decreased to 2% in 2020, and the economic impact of these inputs has significantly reduced. The negative consequences of the migration phenomenon have worsened. In the short term, migration pressures the labour market, causing the deficit to expand. In the long run, migration translates into a demographic decline that will continue to unbalance the labour market and lead to the collapse of the public pension system. Currently there is no national strategy in place to halt and reverse this tendency. Romania's economic condition has significantly improved, and some of the causes of migration have disappeared.

Thus the present study attempts to explore three dimensions connected to the phenomenon of migration. First, it aims to explain why the migration flow (that accelerated after joining the EU) persists; second, it seeks to understand the reasoning for which segments of Romanian populations living abroad would be eager to return to Romania; and third, it targets to serve as a mechanism of developing public policy concepts that would encourage Romanians to return home.

1.2. Talent migration

The European Union defines brain drain as a loss: "The loss suffered by a country as a result of the emigration of a (highly) qualified person" (European Commission, 2008). The phenomenon, characterized by the migration of highly skilled professionals in search of better living standards, better wages, better professional opportunities, and recognition, is not new. It became visible in healthcare (Mejia, 1981), where international migration first appeared in the 1940s when many European professionals emigrated to Great Britain and the USA.

All Eastern European countries are affected by it, and Romania is no exception. The intensity of the brain drain has increased after joining the EU and has transformed into an exodus of vast proportions that affects the standards of life of the citizens who are still living within the country's borders. For example, according to official statistics, the country has a deficit of 20.000 doctors (leaving 52% of the Romanian communities with no skilled medical help), a 50.000 IT specialists, 400.000 engineers and 4000 architects.

The loss severely affects the quality of life of the Romanian population: an insufficient number of doctors leads to poor health services, which leads to an increasing emigration that will stimulate further brain drain, thus spiralling down a phenomenon that needs a robust governmental intervention to be curved, or that will eventually lead to a nation fail (Acemoglu, Robinson, 2012).

The cost of the brain drain phenomenon is not just an immediate loss, but an opportunity or economic cost, skilled individuals that create value add elsewhere while creating a cost for the country that has invested in educating and skilling them into the professionals that eventually leave it.

2. Managerial tools for retention and attraction of talents

Historically, companies are developing strategies to attract and retain talent. Nowadays, in a competitive business environment, it is more challenging to have talented and competent employees than material resources since skill is considered the most valuable asset to businesses (Kaewsaeng-on et all, 2021). Since the late 1990s, the highly-skilled workforce has become fundamental to a successful knowledge economy (Wang, Miao, 2019).

Goffee and Jones (2007) define talents as individuals with potential, knowledge, ideas, and cognitive skills. If these skills are put to work in the organization, they complement other resources. Therefore, talent is considered a key factor for companies to remain competitive and successful.

When it comes to talent strategies, companies consider two aspects: retention and attraction. Retention is defined as all practices, policies, and strategies developed to retain the best employees (talents). On the other hand, attraction refers to all of the above with the scope to attract the best employees in the company.

From a public policy perspective, both retention and attraction are worthy of consideration. The more the public sector invests in all that brings added value to the happiness of its citizens, the more the migration rate will be diminished. Those who left the country will return and invest their talent in the homeland's economy. In parallel, it has already become a cliché that it is cheaper to retain a customer than gain a new one. Both companies and state authorities should focus on retention.

One of the objectives of the paperwork is to develop a model of brain gain based on the talent attraction strategies used by the companies. In the following, relevant specific approaches used by theoreticians and researchers in the domain will be emphasized, to set a general framework for the studied topic and develop further research.

One of the tools companies are using is employer branding, and the tool we consider for the proposed model in section 5. The concept is based on the work of Ambler and Barrow (1996) and is helping to find the right talent and retain existing ones. Furthermore, keeping the current employee creates the premise for loyalty. But it is essential to be aware that employer branding is a valuable instrument for recruiting and retaining employees and not about developing the potential of the people working in a company.

Priya et al. (2021) list the benefits of employer branding:

- 1. Lower cost per hire;
- 2. Faster time to hire;
- 3. Lower Employee turnover;
- 4. Savings on salaries;
- 5. Helps to attract qualified candidates;
- 6. Improve company performance.

From the above-mentioned benefits, considering a governmental model for talent attraction, the most important are fifth and sixth.

Minchington (2006), Crous (2007), and Cheese et al (2007) consider that companies' leaders and human resources specialists value employer brand as a critical success factor for companies striving for competitive advantage in the talent war.

Cadorin, Klofsten, and Löfsten (2019) highlight in their study the importance of strengthening the relationships between business and government representatives at all levels to receive the necessary support for development, namely for talent development significantly - and extended limiting talent migration and developing policies for brain return.

An interesting parallel can be made between employer brand and country reputation (this comprises more than the awareness factor as stated below).

The paper "The impact of a country's reputation in the economic development of a nation" (Săniuță, 2020) presents the dimensions of the reputation and image of the country as closely related to the notion of the country brand. Simon Anholt (2011), who is considered one of the pioneers of the development of the country brand concept argues that a nation's reputation is built by exchanging material and immaterial values. According to S. Anholt, countries are building their reputation through an exchange of material and immaterial values through the following six communication channels:

- Governance public opinion on the competence of the government, its honesty, and the
 perception of the commitment to regional and global issues. An important aspect to
 consider is the quality of life, an indicator that the FutureBrand-Country-Index
 measures;
- 2) Population the reputation of the country's citizens regarding competence, openness to foreigners, and friendly attitude. Alongside these factors are also prominent and respected figures from science, politics, sports, art, and media;
- 3) Culture and heritage public perception of national heritage and culture;

- 4) Investment and immigration the power to attract people to live, work, and study; the perception that people have regarding the quality of life and business environment;
- 5) Tourism the level of interest in visiting the country;
- 6) Export the public image of a country's products and services that also involves the creation of well-known brands that highlight the country of origin and position the nation in the minds of consumers (e.g., Made in Germany, Made in Sweden, etc.) (Săniuță, 2020).

As can be seen, when it comes to talent, attraction is not only the companies' job but also the state has an important role.

The construction of a solid country brand (not only promoting some tourist places) is a good start for attracting talent and for migration return, as it is about economic and social development.

3. Public policies for return migration stimulation example of European Countries

While building a national strategy in this respect, policymakers must have a few key elements in mind:

- 1. The demographic structure of the target groups structural traits that can improve the results of their efforts, that if correctly identified, can generate a high impact (International Center for Migration Policy Development, 2019):
 - a. The demographic structure of the target groups structural traits that can improve the results of their efforts that, if correctly identified, can generate a high impact (International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2019);
 - b. Timeframe the time spent abroad by the migrant: return occurs most frequently in the first two years of living abroad and is significantly after five years;
 - c. Lifecycle and age the young and the senior age migrants tend to return more often;
 - d. Education the return movement graph is U-shaped, with the unskilled and highly educated individuals accounting for the most significant part of it.
- 2. The success of the migration project depending on the migration objective (professional, financial, or personal). Studies (Battistella 2018; Constant & Massey, 2002; Dumont & Spielvogel, 2008) show no clear decision-making criteria. It varies based on many individual

factors; both well-integrated and failed-to-integrate emigrants have been observed to remigrate.

3. The evolution of the political, economic, and social conditions in the origin country, conditions that have determined the migration decision in the first place.

Most European countries have not approached Return Migration as a specific topic. At the same time, no other European Union member state has indeed experienced an exodus of the same magnitude and impact as Romania since 1990. Romania has lost approximately one-quarter of its population in the last 30 years to Western European countries - this is why Romania must focus on the return migration policies as part of a strategic area of interest and development and intensify efforts. Only a few European countries have built comprehensive strategies that should be carefully studied and used as best practices.

Spain

The Ministry of Labour, Migration and Social Security is the body that built and now owns the *Policy Plan de Retorno a Espana* and sees it as a solution to the labour shortage, a responsibility, and a Constitutional obligation. It was not designed in an office. Instead, it was based on thorough research based on workshops and focus groups with Spanish emigrants in Germany and UK, meant to understand what are the main drivers for the return decisions, what they see as inhibitors, and t needs to be changed in the originating country to stimulate a comeback; interviews with Spanish citizens that already returned, investigating what drove them to decide and what were the main obstacles in their reintegration efforts; and consultations with the business and political environment, to understand their needs. The result of the research is Spain's strategy to attract back (but not limited to) skilled professionals, a comprehensive collection of 50 measures:

- 1. Twenty-seven measures to support professional projects;
- 2. Fourteen measures to support the planning of the return and the reintegration efforts;
- 3. One measure to ensure psychological support;
- 4. One measure to support a positive and inclusive return environment;
- 5. One measure to facilitate access to the European Solidarity Corps;
- 6. Six measures to support collaborative institutional management of the plan.

The strategy attempts to have a holistic approach, to understand and address the various perspectives and needs of each actor involved; to facilitate the reintegration of return migrants, to understand their main challenges and offer concrete institutional, informational, social, and psychological support, one informative platform and a guide to help the individuals find their way back to and in the home country.

Poland

While Poland does not have a single consolidated political plan and strategy, as Spain does, the Polish Government has acknowledged the need to stimulate the return migration since 2006, and policymakers have launched several programs to address the matter. It represents a constant preoccupation and an evergreen topic on the political and public agenda (International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2019).

A Return Programme has been released in 2007, managed by the Ministry of Labour, consisting of a set of six areas of engagement:

- 1) Fiscal measures, designed to avoid double taxation for citizens who have worked abroad and are returning home;
- 2) Educational support for the returnees;
- 3) Institutional transformation training for public service workers;
- 4) Support services for the returning migrants dedicated website, support in finding jobs;
- 5) The Returner practical guide;
- 6) Focus on brain gain in close collaboration with specific target highly skilled professional groups.

The Polish Migration Policy released in 2011 does not aim to stimulate the return migration but rather to create a positive environment for the individuals who decide to do so. The plan focuses on supporting the children of migrant families to integrate into the local school system.

The *Socio-economic* priorities of migration policy adopted in 2018 define the target categories that should be in focus and attracted back to the country (students and academics studying and working abroad) as well as a set of financial incentives for polish entrepreneurs to return and establish businesses in Poland.

In parallel, a five-year plan, the *Programme of Cooperation with Poland and Poles abroad*, in the years 2015-2020 was designed to support the Government's efforts to entice people of Polish nationality to settle back in the country and it includes financial programs, grant schemes and incentives, educational and language learning support for children, support for entrepreneurs, initiatives aiming to attract students studying abroad and job matching facilitation.

While the Polish strategy is not consolidated and lacks the institutional perspective, it does send a strong signal that the Government is working towards bringing a part of the Diaspora back home. The economic situation has significantly improved. Poland is the first ex-communist country to be ranked as a Developed Market. The country expects an increasing trend of repatriation in the upcoming period.

Latvia

The long-term *National Development Plan of Latvia* for 2014–2020 is a country plan that briefly mentions the importance of restoring the country's workforce and demography, stimulating return migration is identified as a strategic objective. In 2013, the Ministry of Economy drafted Proposals for return migration support activities that argue on behalf of the positive contributions to the economic needs and growth of the repatriation of Latvian nationals that left in search of better jobs and salaries.

The Latvian authorities identified the benefits of the re-emigration (labour, entrepreneurship) as having a more significant impact than the remittances, so their strategy focuses on encouraging return.

Return migration support action plan defines eight measures:

- 1. Supporting the migrants with information to reintegrate upon return;
- 2. Connecting companies and job seekers;
- 3. Obliging public authorities to promote job openings online ensures that Latvians living abroad have complete visibility on the available opportunities that are available in the country;
- 4. Brain gain young, educated abroad, highly skilled professionals have a dedicated measure;
- 5. Economic partnerships with diaspora members are promoted;
- 6. Support for the diaspora civic bodies which focus on keeping open communication between the country and its members;
- 7. Supporting the families of those who decide to return to reintegrate into schools or find jobs;
- 8. It defines the status of the Repatriate and the financial benefits that come with it: financial assistance for travel expenses, language learning, and six months of support in case of unemployment.

Latvia's strategy to repatriate some of its citizens is complex, approaching the matter from all angles. It actively communicates the need to attract people back home; it drafted and implemented a tactical plan and has promoted the legislation to support their efforts, proclaiming the Repatriation law. The purpose of the law is to create an inclusive and positive environment for those who wish to return, promote the idea of return migration among the members of the Latvian diaspora and establish the role and functions of the national and local authorities that support the process.

Romania

According to all statistics and official data, Romania is the European country with the highest population living abroad. The official numbers vary from 5 million (OECD) to 10 million (The national strategy for Romanians everywhere 2017-2020). While the exact number is difficult to estimate, it is

widely accepted that the migration phenomenon has transformed into an exodus. Surprisingly, it is also a country with no national strategy or coherent political policies to stimulate re-emigration. The approach mentioned above, a document that acknowledges the breadth and the intensity of the movement, is focusing on offering help to the diaspora communities, showing support in protecting the national identity or language and traditions conservation, but makes no statement of an intent to influence or trigger a return movement actively.

Dispersed initiatives and plans are launched, but not in a consolidated strategy or vision.

Diaspora Startup, an EU and the local Government co-funded program, offers non-refundable financing to Romanian migrants that wish to return to the country and start a business.

The most visible efforts in this respect are carried out by private initiatives and associations.

Repatriot, the initiative led by the Romanian Business Leader Association (RBL), is a non-profit, non-political body of Romanian entrepreneurs that seeks to reconnect the diaspora and entrepreneurs in the country. For the last six years, RBL has been running annual summits and conferences across the globe, think tanks, and initiatives to attract the diaspora's capital, know-how, and resources into the country, in an effort to stimulate return and investment. The remarkable efforts of this NGO are somewhat compensation for the lack of interest of the policymakers and authorities.

ReThink Romania is a private initiative that has brought together successful entrepreneurs with the mission of creating trust and mobilizing the energy of Romanians to fulfil the country's potential in the next 30 years - a vision for the country. One of the strategic objectives and courses of action they identified is gaining back the skilled professionals that have chosen to live abroad. The project is still being drafted.

The Multidimensional Strategy for Attracting Young people to Romania (SMART) Diaspora is the result of an extensive research effort that involved hundreds of Romanian students studying abroad. It is a statement, a public proposal to the Romanian Government, and a strategy that places talented people as the centrepiece of the country's development roadmap. The plan's four primary objectives are: promoting Romania as a career fulfilment destination, facilitating the return and integration of the students back home, supporting the young, highly skilled professionals in accessing jobs in the public and private sector and consolidating the connections with diaspora and external partners. It is a holistic approach that addresses all aspects of re-emigration: motivation, financial motivation, diploma and studies validation, job matching, information, integration facilitation, role and responsibility assignment, and diaspora mapping. The Government can effortlessly adopt it as a strategy, as it is a robust, well-researched, and documented strategy to boost brain gain movement.

4. Methodology

The current article is part of a study pilot based on exploratory research, and this is the first step to discovering insights about the migration phenomenon and motivations to return.

To better understand the topic for this exploratory study, the authors used the semi-structured interview method applied to 11 subjects that live abroad.

4.1. Objectives

The research scope of the study is to identify the reasons Romanian talent left the country and, based on the managerial best practices and success stories of public policies developed in other countries, to propose a model suitable for Romania.

The following research objectives are considered by the authors that would facilitate the achievement of the declared scope:

O1: Identification of the reasons for the migration phenomenon among talents;

O2: Identification of the return intentions and the motivations behind;

O3: Understanding the variables to be included in the Brain Gain Model.

4.2. Methods

To better understand the migration and possible return of those migrating abroad, the authors organized a series of online semi-structured interviews.

For this paper, the authors interviewed 11 persons who left Romania. The interview is the most used format for data collection in qualitative research and the methodology is the semi-structured interview. In qualitative research, one of the most widely used data collection methods is semi-structured interviews (Bradford, Cullen, 2012). This type offered the possibility to cluster the answers and allowed the authors to explore subjective viewpoints (Flick, 2009) and gather the subject's experiences related to migration and return migration.

Given the situation (subjects living abroad), the interviews were conducted online through the ZOOM platform (which allows video conferencing). The duration of an interview was about 45 minutes, and each of the respondents had to answer 12 questions.

4.3. Limitations

The study's main limitation is that the qualitative research is not statistically representative. Thus, the present paper is only a preamble for comprehensive quantitative research and a first step in developing a model of public policies based on managerial strategies.

Another limitation of the study is that the target audience is not structured in specific ages, professions, or income clusters.

4.4. Results of the qualitative research

The research was carried out based on semi-structured interviews with high educated 11 subjects based in Western countries. The profile of each person the authors interviewed is summarized in the table below:

Table 1: Profiles of interviewed subjects

	Gender	Age	Country of residence	Occupation
Subject 1	Female	39	Northern Ireland	Manager, IT Industry
Subject 2	Male	28	Netherlands	Engineer, IT Industry
Subject 3	Female	52	England	Operations Specialist, IT Industry
Subject 4	Female	40	Germany	Sales, IT Industry
Subject 5	Female	35	Germany	Sales
Subject 6	Male	41	Denmark	Supply Chain Director, Automotive
Subject 7	Male	37	Austria	Buyer
Subject 8	Female	42	Canada	Detailer
Subject 9	Female	41	Spain	Advertising specialist
Subject 10	Male	40	Netherlands	Engineer
Subject 11	Female	33	France	Police office

Source: the authors, based on interview responses

An important finding resulting from the interview relates to why the subjects decided to leave the country. This category appears to be more about gaining new experiences, personal or professional development, or escaping Romania's political and economic situation, including poor public services and corruption. The unique financial context was of little importance, while the general social and political environment mattered. These individuals are not searching for better economic benefits but rather for a social climate that allows them to grow.

Their perception of the advantages of living in their host countries refers to the quality of life: the superior quality of public services (health and education; infrastructure), better job opportunities, or even the people's positive attitude. The authorities will have to construct their strategy around improving the overall quality of life, education, and the health system rather than offering financial stimulants, as money does not seem to be at the centre of the "brain" migrants' interests anymore.

While in the public services area and overall quality of life, Romania cannot compete with Western civilization, it holds a winning card: it is still the home country for the families of those who chose to leave the country. All those interviewed indicated that they would consider returning home for their families if needed.

Being away from their families is one of the significant perceived disadvantages. So can be the host country's local weather, political or geographical features, and the difficulty of making friends or integrating, or the feeling of not belonging. While the advantages are rational, measurable indicators, the detriments seem to be of personal and emotional nature. It remains to be further studied, but one of our conclusions is that the most effective public policies in attracting talent back to the country will have to address sentiments instead of quantitative indexes.

A central talking point of the interview was around the reasons that would stimulate a reversed migration. The question "What would be the reasons for which you would return to Romania?" revealed that most of those who responded would return for their families in case of significant changes in mentalities, and changes in the political or social ambience.

One of the objectives of this interview round was to understand the current plans of the migrants concerning a comeback. All answers showed that the respondents have no mid-term intention to return to Romania. The immediate conclusion is that the return migration will not be triggered in the absence of an intentional approach and strategy.

A surprising question, however, revealed an interesting change of mind. When asked "Do you feel like you could contribute to an improvement in Romania's current state of economic, social, and political affairs? Would that constitute a reason to return?", the majority of the respondents, including those adamant about not returning to Romania, answered positively. The responses to this question expose a potential solution for policymakers looking to reverse migration. Further research will test the hypothesis that migrants would return if given a mission or a higher objective.

Other reasons that would trigger a return decision are linked back to the political context: corruption was in everyone's thoughts, and the respondents described a need for a profound country transformation (political, social, and cultural) that could determine the return.

The current research confirmed that the financial criteria are not critical or minor for brain gain movement. We conclude that the policymakers would have to focus on "story-telling", creating a vision for the country and assigning a mission to the "brains". These valuable citizens would return to contribute to a project rather than for money, and they would devote their efforts to the country's project rather than changing a job.

5. Brain gain model - an innovative approach using corporate managerial tools

Based on the current literature review, best practices, and the results of the qualitative research, the authors propose a model based on 16 attributes that are also used to measure the country's reputation (Reputation Institute, 1999, in Tisch 2017), in extension is what the employees of a company are looking for when they decide to stay or to have another experience, that is why the author considers the below model one effective also in brain return:

- Effective governance a safe place, ethical country, responsible participation in the community, development of progressive economic and social policies, creation of a favourable business environment;
- Attractive environment friendly and welcoming, beautiful country, attractive lifestyle and pleasant country;
- Developed economy contributor to global culture, high-quality products, and services, well-known brands, well-educated and reliable workforce, capitalization of education, technologically advanced.

The authors will test the model using a quantitative approach in further and extended research.

Conclusions

In the last 30 years, Romania has lost roughly 200000 inhabitants per year, which is a massive number for a country not in war or another conflict. Those who left Romania, especially talents, among other reasons, claim Romania's political and economic situation, including poor public services and corruption. Based on the literature review and the conducted literature review, the proposed model considers variables such as safeness, progressive economic and social policies, attractive environment, performing education system, advanced technology, and a well-educated and reliable workforce.

The authors acknowledge the limitations of the study and aim to develop a series of research to test the model and also to extend the literature review and the analysis of best practice policies addressing return migration. We will have to take into consideration also the phenomenon of great resignation (that should be a concern not only for companies but for the state too, as it can have an impact on migration/return migration policies). Remote working is another aspect to consider. It could be a catalyst for return migration as you can spend more time in the homeland and reassess the possibility of returning home or attracting talent from other nationalities. They should also conduct, and it can be done in partnership with the business environment and the academic one, diaspora research, and set a

legislative framework to enable the possibility of taking exit interviews of those leaving the country for more than one year.

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