FROM COMMUNISM TO EUROPEAN GOVERNANCE



THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION'S SUPPORT FOR ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS IN ROMANIA, SERBIA, AND MOLDOVA

Claudia Bădulescu

CEU PRESS

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List of Abbreviations

ADR	*Autoritatea pentru Digitalizarea României* (Authority for the Digitalisation of Romania)
ANFP	*Agenția Națională a Funcționarilor Publici* (National Agency of Civil Servants) – Romania
ANI	*Autoritatea Națională de Integritate* (National Integrity Authority) – Moldova
ANI	*Agenția Națională de Integritate* (National Integrity Agency) – Romania
BTI	Bertelsmann Transformation Index
CARDS	Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CNA	*Centrul Național Anticorupție* (National Anticorruption Center) – Moldova
Commission	European Commission
CoTE PAR	Centre of Thematic Expertise on Public Administration Reform
Council	Council of the European Union
CSO	civil society organisation
CSR	country-specific recommendation
CPI	Corruption Perceptions Index
CVM	Cooperation and Verification Mechanism
DG	Directorate-General
DG EMPL	Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
DG ENEST	Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood
DG INTPA	Directorate-General for International Partnerships
DG NEAR	Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
DG REFORM	Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support
DNA	*Direcția Națională Anticorupție* (National Anti-Corruption Directorate) – Romania
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EaP CSF	Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum
ECA	European Court of Auditors
EEAS	European External Action Service

ENI	European Neighbourhood Instrument
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
ENPI	European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument
ESF	European Social Fund
ESIF	European Structural and Investment Fund
EU	European Union
EUPAN	European Public Administration Network
GDP	gross domestic product
HR	human resource
HRM	human resource management
HRMS	human resource management service
HRMIS	human resource management information system
ICT	information and communications technology
INA	*Institutul Național de Administrație* (National Institute of Administration) – Romania
IPA	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
MA	Managing Authority – Romania
MIP	Multiannual Indicative Programme
NAPA	*Nacionalna akademija za javnu upravu* / *Национална академија за јавну управу* (National Academy for Public Administration) – Serbia
NDICI-GE	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe
NRRP	National Recovery and Resilience Plan
NSRF	National Strategic Reference Framework
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OP AC	*Programul Operațional Capacitate Administrativă* (Operational Programme Administrative Capacity) – Romania
OP DAC	*Programul Operațional Dezvoltarea Capacității Administrative* (Operational Programme Administrative Capacity Development) – Romania
PAR	public administration reform
PAS	*Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate* (Party of Action and Solidarity) – Moldova
PFM	public financial management
PHARE	Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies
ReSPA	Regional School of Public Administration

RIA	Regulatory Impact Assessment
ROM	Results-Oriented Monitoring
RRF	Recovery and Resilience Facility
SAA	Stabilisation and Association Agreement
SCAP	*Strategia pentru Consolidarea Administrației Publice* (Strategy for Strengthening Public Administration) Romania
SEAP	*Sistemul Electronic de Achiziții Publice* (Electronic Public Procurement System) – Romania
SIGMA	Support for Improvement in Governance and Management
SNS	*Српска напредна странка* (Serbian Progressive Party)
SRSP	Structural Reform Support Programme
SRSS	Structural Reform Support Service
SWD	Staff Working Document
TA	technical assistance
TACIS	Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States
TAIEX	Technical Assistance and Information Exchange instrument
TO11	Thematic Objective 11
TSI	Technical Support Instrument
UCRAP	*Unitatea Centrală pentru Reforma Administrației Publice* (Central Unit for Public Administration Reform) – Romania
WGI	Worldwide Governance Indicators

Acknowledgements

Much more could be said – and much more time could be devoted – to investigating the role of the European Union (EU), and, more specifically, of the European Commission, in supporting administrative reform across post-communist Europe than a monograph allows. I have done my best, and I hope this book does justice to the complexity of the subject. The journey to research and write this book has been a long one – at times challenging, yet deeply rewarding – and many people and institutions have made it possible.

The idea for this project was born in Paris, while I was working as a project manager at the French *École Nationale d'Administration* (ENA, now the *Institut National du Service Public* – INSP), managing EU-funded projects supporting public administration reform in Central and Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans, and the EU's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood. I greatly valued this experience, but I came to feel that there was a need for sustained empirical research into the EU's efforts to support democratic governance through administrative reform across diverse domestic contexts and policy instruments. With the support of colleagues and collaborators at ENA, I decided to embark on a doctoral journey at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, Italy, where I was able to dedicate myself fully to the research on which this book is based. My deepest gratitude goes to Professor Brigid Laffan, who recognised the potential of this project and supervised my doctoral research at the EUI. Her intellectual rigour, generosity, and unwavering encouragement shaped both this work and the scholar behind it. The monograph reached its final form during my postdoctoral fellowship at Maynooth University in Ireland, where I greatly benefited from the guidance and support of Professor John O'Brennan. This research would not have been possible without institutional and financial support. I gratefully acknowledge funding from Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland (Grant No. GOIPD/2025/1654) during my postdoctoral fellowship at Maynooth University, as well as support from the Romanian Grant Authority and the EUI during my doctoral studies.

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Thank you, all!

Cereți și vi se va da; căutați și veți afla; bateți și vi se va deschide.
Că oricine cere ia, cel care caută află, și celui ce bate i se va deschide.[1]
– Noul Testament, Sfânta Evanghelie după Matei, 7:7–8

1 'Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened' (Matthew 7:7–8).

PART I

From Communism to European Governance: An Overview

The legality, rightfulness, transparency, effectiveness and efficiency of public action are nowadays the pillars upon which the legitimacy of public bodies is founded in democratic societies.

– OECD-SIGMA (2009, p. 17)

1. Introduction

Abstract: The fall of communism in 1989 marked the beginning of a far-reaching effort to reconstruct state institutions and redefine governance across Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. This chapter introduces the central puzzle: why, after two decades of sustained European Commission support – expertise, funding, and conditionality – have the public administrations of Romania, Serbia, and Moldova still failed to converge on European standards of professional, accountable governance? It defines the analytical focus on public administration reform (PAR) as distinct from broader regime transformation and introduces the book's comparative design across an EU member state, a candidate, and a neighbourhood state. The chapter previews the book's central argument – that Commission support can initiate reform but cannot sustain it without domestic political ownership – and outlines its contribution to debates on Europeanisation, enlargement, and governance reform.

Keywords: Europeanisation; public administration reform; post-communist transition; EU enlargement; administrative capacity; conditionality

Foreword

I was born in Romania in 1991, two years after the fall of communism, but I grew up inside its afterlife. My parents' accounts of the old regime were not abstract history; they were sensory and specific: ration cards, queues for bread and sugar, the hush imposed by fear of the *Securitate* – the secret police. A small, telling measure of the before/after divide runs through my mother's pregnancies. In 1987, when my sister was born, my mother gained only seven kilograms; with me, after 1989, she gained 20. Bananas, chicken thighs, and other foods that now seem banal had appeared as rare markers of normality in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the communist regime.

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Such memories echo the lived experience of millions across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Western Balkans who endured the harsh life under authoritarian rule. Basic necessities were frequently unmet or rationed. Socially, everyday life was tightly controlled and permeated by propaganda. Education, media, and cultural institutions all served as tools to indoctrinate citizens with communist ideology. Personal freedoms – of expression, religion, or movement – were heavily curtailed. While the regime did provide certain social benefits, such as guaranteed employment, nominally free education and healthcare, and subsidised housing, these were undermined by poor quality and pervasive nepotism and corruption. Access to scarce resources and professional advancement often depended on loyalty to the Communist Party rather than merit, breeding public mistrust in state institutions. Thus, by the 1980s, the communist administrative apparatus in countries like Romania, Serbia (then part of Yugoslavia), and Moldova had become what I like to describe as an entrenched, giant octopus that infiltrated all aspects of society. Its tentacles – manifest in rigid bureaucracy, secret police, and party patronage networks – stifled transparency, efficiency, accountability, and the rule of law. This was the reality that would have to be confronted in the post-1989 transition.

For my family and many others, the fall of Ceaușescu's dictatorship in December 1989 was more than a political turning point – it was an emotional rupture with a repressive past. Across the region, 1989 ushered in a wave of hope. People imagined a future of open society, prosperity, and freedom after decades of fear and deprivation. Yet the euphoria of newfound freedom was soon tempered by a daunting question: How do you transform a system of governance built on control and secrecy into one that upholds democracy, serves citizens, and earns their trust?

Scope and Conceptual Focus of the Book

Of all the dimensions of the post-communist transformation, this book takes up the one that proved least glamorous and most stubborn: public administration reform, and the slow effort to align it with European principles of public administration. Under the communist regime, public administration was primarily an instrument of control, not service. The ruling Communist Party held a quasi-monopoly on power and resources, and ordinary citizens were isolated from the machinery of government. Decades of such rule entrenched a deep mistrust in state institutions – a legacy that did not disappear overnight in 1989. In Romania and its neighbours, the

early 1990s thus began with bureaucracies ill-suited to democracy: the same communist officials often maintained their hierarchical offices, following rigid procedures and lacking any concept of transparency or accountability to the public. The challenge of reforming these institutions was not merely technical; it was a generational project of cultural change.

For scholars and policymakers alike, understanding how former communist countries reinvented their public administrations after 1989 is of considerable significance. It is a story of domestic struggle, but one in which an external actor – the European Union (EU), acting through the European Commission – looms particularly large. After the collapse of communism, the EU stepped in to support administrative reforms across CEE and the Western Balkans, as part of helping these countries transition to democratic governance and preparing them for future EU membership. The Commission offered expertise, funding, and a vision of governance based on European principles of public administration – such as the rule of law, transparency, and accountability. For countries like Romania, which joined the EU in 2007, these principles became concrete benchmarks on the road to accession. Even for countries outside the EU's immediate enlargement plans, such as Serbia or Moldova, aligning with European administrative principles and standards was pursued as a step toward closer ties with the Union.

The stakes here are not only domestic. The EU is a comparatively thin governance system: it relies on its member and partner states' administrations to implement its law, absorb its funds, and uphold its standards. A state that cannot administer competently cannot spend EU money well, enforce the *acquis*, or function as a credible member or partner – which is precisely why the Commission came to treat administrative capacity as its own concern, not merely each country's. Yet while the impact of European integration on national administrations has attracted significant scholarly attention, the Commission's proactive effort to build state capacity and drive public administration reform across these states, and over time, has not. This book provides a lens onto the Commission's strategies and actions in an area where it holds weak formal competence. Despite that weakness, the Commission nonetheless developed a normative and policy framework that it deployed to drive reform at the domestic level of candidate states, neighbourhood states, and – more recently – member states.

The central theme of *From Communism to European Governance* is to understand the extent to which the European Commission acted as a driving force behind administrative reforms in post-communist states, and where its influence met its limits. This book investigates this question through a comparative analysis of three countries – Romania (an

EU member state), Serbia (a candidate state), and Moldova (an Eastern neighbourhood state) – over the period 2000–2020. By examining two decades of reform efforts, the study traces how the European Commission's public administration reform (PAR) toolkit evolved in tandem with each country's domestic developments and changing relationship to the EU. It delves into EU-funded programmes – from Twinning projects pairing local officials with EU experts to financial assistance conditioned on institutional changes – all aimed at instilling European principles and best practices in governance. Crucially, it assesses not just what the Commission attempted to do, but how those efforts were implemented and what impact they had on the ground. Its central finding is that the Commission can set reform in motion, but cannot, on its own, make it stick: where domestic political ownership was absent, even well-designed, well-funded support produced reforms that were formal, shallow, or reversible.

While debates about post-communist transformation often centre on democracy, the rule of law, or corruption more broadly, this book adopts a more specific analytical focus: public administration reform (PAR) – i.e. deliberate institutional change to the structures, procedures, professional standards, and human-resource and management systems of the executive administrative apparatus through which governments implement public policy. This includes civil service professionalisation, merit-based recruitment, policy coordination mechanisms, administrative planning capacity, financial management systems, regulatory quality frameworks, and administrative oversight structures. PAR intersects with – but is analytically distinct from – related domains. Rule-of-law reforms concern judicial independence and legal oversight; anti-corruption policies focus on integrity enforcement and accountability mechanisms; e-government initiatives address digitalisation and service delivery; and governance more broadly refers to the overall system of steering and coordination within a polity. In practice, however, these domains often overlap within administrative reform programmes, particularly in EU-supported initiatives where civil service reform, integrity mechanisms, regulatory quality, and digitalisation are pursued simultaneously. Accordingly, when this book discusses corruption control, judicial oversight, or digitalisation, it does so insofar as these elements are embedded within administrative reform strategies and institutional capacity-building processes. The analytical core remains the structure, professionalisation, coordination, and functioning of executive public administration systems over time.

The comparative design of this book is guided by three analytical expectations derived from the literature on Europeanisation, conditionality, and

institutional change. The first hypothesis is that EU-supported PAR produces sustainable institutional change when domestic political ownership and administrative commitment align with well-targeted Commission support. The second hypothesis is that the strength of EU leverage across EU integration modalities (member state, candidate state, neighbourhood state) shapes the depth and sustainability of administrative reform outcomes. The third hypothesis is that communist legacies and contemporary political incentive structures condition the absorption and sustainability of EU-supported reforms. These hypotheses structure the empirical analysis that follows. Rather than presenting the case studies as descriptive country reports, each chapter evaluates how these mechanisms operate in practice, identifying where EU intervention produces sustainable institutional change and where reforms remain partial, reversible, or institutionally unabsorbed.

This book contributes to three strands of scholarship. First, it advances research on Europeanisation by examining post-communist administrative reform not as a by-product of democratisation, but as a distinct institutional transformation process with its own mechanisms and constraints. Second, it bridges enlargement studies and neighbourhood policy analysis by comparing countries operating under different EU incentive modalities – member state, candidate country, and Eastern neighbour – within a unified analytical framework. Third, it develops and applies an Input–Throughput–Output lens to assess not only the design of EU support instruments, but also their implementation dynamics and tangible institutional outcomes over a 20-year period (2000–2020). By combining longitudinal analysis with cross-case comparison, the book offers a systematic assessment of the European Commission's capacity to generate sustainable institutional change in domestic public administration.

The analysis reveals a contingent and politically mediated process. The European Commission developed an expanding toolkit to drive reforms in line with European principles of public administration – a framework it built jointly with the SIGMA (Support for Improvement in Governance and Management) programme, and which is centred on merit-based recruitment, political neutrality in the civil service, and transparent, accountable governance. Yet, the uptake of those reforms depended greatly on domestic political will, institutional legacies, and, in the cases of Serbia and Moldova, the mediating weight of geopolitical pressures. Drawing on extensive evidence – from official documents and evaluations to interviews with reform actors in Belgrade, Brussels, Bucharest, Chișinău, and Paris – the book provides a comprehensive picture of how international influence and local context interact in shaping administrative change. Through the

comparative lens, we see how Romania's trajectory differed from Serbia's and Moldova's, yielding structured insight into the design, implementation, and results of EU-driven reform assistance.

Across the three cases, the Commission served as a powerful external catalyst, providing normative guidance, financial incentives, and technical resources for reform, but it could not single-handedly overcome entrenched domestic obstacles. Romania's bureaucracy, despite the country's EU membership, continues to struggle with politicisation and other legacies of its communist-era administrative culture. Serbia's protracted and uncertain EU accession process has allowed its leaders to commit only partially to structurally demanding reforms, and Moldova's pro-European aspirations are continually tested by internal political divisions, institutional fragility, and sustained external pressure from Russia. In each case, the limits of reform were set not in Brussels but at home, by political will, inherited legacies, and, for Serbia and Moldova, the pull of geopolitics.

All of this carries urgent relevance for today's debates. The EU is once again actively pursuing enlargement, with the European Council having reaffirmed the membership perspective for the Western Balkans and granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova in 2022. The lessons from Romania, Serbia, and Moldova remind us that EU accession is not just a diplomatic negotiation, but a profound state-building challenge. Enlarging the EU means ensuring candidate countries have the capacity to implement and uphold the Union's laws and values. In an era when democratic governance is under strain, understanding how to entrench transparency, accountability, and efficiency in public institutions is more critical than ever.

This topic also carries geopolitical weight. EU support for good governance in its neighbourhood increasingly intersects with strategic competition with Russia in Eastern Europe. As this book shows, efforts to embed liberal-democratic administration sometimes run up against these broader geopolitical currents. The European Commission, in trying to foster reform, must balance its normative objectives with pragmatic considerations of stability and security. Appreciating this balance of principles and pragmatism is crucial as the EU refines its approach to enlargement and neighbourhood policy amid ongoing conflicts and rivalries.

From Communism to European Governance is a scholarly investigation that stems from a keen awareness of what poor governance under authoritarianism means in human terms: the stifled hopes and daily struggles I witnessed in my own family and community, even decades after the fall of communism. That awareness has been a driving force throughout this research, reminding me that behind every institution are real people whose

lives are shaped by how governments function – or fail to function. In this book you will encounter detailed analyses of the European Commission's PAR toolkit and its implementation in each country. I encourage you to view those details within the broader story outlined here: the difficult but crucial journey of reforming governance in the shadow of communism, and the role of the European Commission in supporting the transition from communism to European governance, and eventually deeper and wider European integration. My hope is that this book enriches academic and policy discussions on EU enlargement and institutional reform, and offers practical lessons for those working to support democratic governance. Ultimately, the success of reforms aligned with European principles will not be measured by formal compliance with external benchmarks, but by their sustainability in practice and their tangible impact on citizens' lives.

Structure of the Book

From Communism to European Governance adopts a structured approach that blends historical analysis, policy study, and empirical investigation. The book is divided into four main parts. Part I (of which this chapter is a part) sets the stage by exploring the historical context and early efforts to Europeanise post-communist governance, with a particular focus on Romania, Serbia, and Moldova. Chapter 2 examines the communist legacies in these countries and the imperative for administrative reform in the 1990s, providing a deeper look at mechanisms of legacy persistence and at the post-1989 reform constraints. Part II then shifts to the European Commission's perspective on PAR in post-communist countries, tracing the development and institutionalisation of the PAR toolkit. Chapter 3 reviews the state of the art on Europeanisation and administrative reform studies, and it outlines the research and methodological approach guiding this study. Chapters 4 and 5 delve into the genesis of the Commission's PAR toolkit: Chapter 4 covers the evolution and gradual institutionalisation of EU support strategies under different 'modalities' of association between the EU and a state, i.e. pre-accession, association, and post-accession modalities, while Chapter 5 maps out the key actors, instruments, and resources that constitute the toolkit. Together, these chapters illustrate the approach the Commission crafted to export its governance norms and how this became embedded in EU policy frameworks.

Part III of the book presents detailed case studies, applying the PAR toolkit analysis to the three countries of interest. Each chapter (6, 7, and 8) is devoted

to one country – Romania, Serbia, and Moldova, respectively – examining the content of EU support: the input, i.e. the funding, technical assistance, and reform recommendations provided, the throughput, i.e. the implementation of EU support on the ground, and the output, i.e. its tangible results and outcomes, over the period 2000–2020. In these chapters, the reader will gain in-depth insight into the unique challenges and achievements each country experienced. Chapter 6 considers how Romania's public administration evolved from the immediate post-Ceaușescu era through EU accession and beyond. Chapter 7 explores the interplay of post-conflict state-building and EU-driven reform conditions in Serbia, a country that has had to rebuild institutions amid political volatility. Chapter 8 analyses Moldova's case, a country outside the EU, highlighting how Europeanisation efforts proceed in a neighbourhood state without the near-term prospect of membership, and how domestic politics in the Moldovan context mediate the impact of EU assistance.

Following the case studies, Part IV provides a comparative analysis and draws broader lessons. Chapter 9 assesses the impact of the Commission's PAR toolkit across the three cases, identifying common patterns, key differences, and the cumulative results of two decades of EU intervention in the countries' administrative reforms. It evaluates the primary drivers that facilitated progress – ranging from credible EU leverage and well-targeted support to genuine domestic ownership and committed reformist leadership – alongside the persistent barriers that impeded change. These constraints include weak or inconsistent political will, the diminishing of EU leverage once membership is achieved or absent, and inherited communist administrative legacies and limited state capacity. Chapter 10 builds on these findings to offer strategic recommendations for policymakers. These proposals are directed at both the EU institutional level, suggesting how the Commission might recalibrate its support to foster sustainable reforms, and the domestic level, outlining how national governments and stakeholders can more effectively harness external assistance to build lasting reform momentum. This part is crucial for understanding what has worked, what has not, and how future efforts might be made more effective. It effectively connects the book's scholarly analysis to practical considerations for improving governance reform strategies moving forward. Finally, Chapter 11 reflects on the overall findings of the book and then turns to the future, outlining a vision for the next decade of administrative reform. It considers how evolving enlargement dynamics, geopolitical tensions, and shifting domestic political configurations may reshape reform trajectories, and what adjustments in EU strategy may be required to foster more resilient,

merit-based, and citizen-oriented governance. The conclusion also situates the findings beyond the three cases, reflecting on what they reveal about the EU's broader capacity to act as a transformative force in post-communist and neighbouring states.

2. Communist Administrative Legacies and Post-1989 Reform Constraints

Abstract: This chapter develops a historical-institutionalist framework for analysing public administration reform (PAR) in post-communist Europe and establishes the domestic context shaping later European integration influence and reform efforts. It identifies three core institutional logics of communist systems – politicised authority, hierarchical centralisation, and entrenched informal governance – and shows how these shaped administrative capacity and expectations of state authority. It then explains the persistence of these legacies after 1989 through path dependency, elite continuity, politicisation, capacity constraints, and low institutional trust. Finally, it situates reform within the political economy of early transition, where macroeconomic shocks, party system volatility, and distributional conflict created both openness for reform and institutional vulnerability, highlighting the difficulty of sustaining reforms.

Keywords: historical institutionalism; politicisation; path dependence; institutional persistence; state capacity; post-communist transition

Core Features of Communist Administrative Systems

Historical legacies consist of habits, modes of conduct and repertoires of action, both in terms of human behaviour and institutional structures and traditions that are handed down across time (Wittenberg, 2015). This includes, in this study, the institutions, organisations, and elites, including their habits and modes of conduct, that persisted from the communist regime throughout the present-day economy, politics, and society. The impact of historical legacies on preferences, interactions between actors, and institutional traditions and structures of governance systems cannot

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be overstated. Particularly in the case of former communist countries from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Western Balkans, these legacies are especially important for shaping preferences regarding administrative reform, European integration, and democracy. Therefore, it is crucial to consider historical legacies when trying to understand post-communist politics and European Union (EU) integration dynamics.

The communist regimes that governed CEE and parts of the Western Balkans in the 20th century were characterised not only by one-party political dominance and centrally planned economies, but also by distinctive administrative systems that profoundly shaped state capacity, institutional incentives, and patterns of governance. While these regimes varied in their degree of repression, economic performance, and internal pluralism, they shared several structural features that had lasting implications for post-1989 public administration reform (PAR). Communist administrative systems were structured around three mutually reinforcing institutional logics that shaped the trajectory of post-1989 reform: the politicisation of administrative authority, extreme hierarchical centralisation, and the institutionalisation of informal governance practices (Kitschelt, 2003; Meyer-Sahling & Van Stolk, 2015).

The first defining feature was the systematic fusion of party and state. Administrative authority did not derive from legal-rational legitimacy in the Weberian sense, but from political loyalty and ideological alignment. The Communist Party exercised hierarchical control over ministries, agencies, and local administrations, erasing any meaningful distinction between political direction and bureaucratic execution (Goetz, 2001; Goetz & Wollmann, 2001). The nomenklatura system institutionalised this fusion by linking career advancement to party approval rather than professional competence (Meyer-Sahling, 2009a). In such a system, administrative neutrality was not merely absent; it was structurally incompatible with the logic of governance. Bureaucratic discretion was constrained by political command, and compliance replaced professional autonomy as the primary behavioural norm.

Second, communist administrations were characterised by rigid hierarchical centralisation. Decision-making authority flowed vertically, and coordination across administrative units was mediated through political hierarchies rather than institutionalised horizontal mechanisms. Even in formally federal arrangements, such as Yugoslavia, the operative logic remained top-down and party-mediated. Central planning reinforced this architecture: ministries implemented production targets and the centre determined resource allocation, limiting institutional learning and discouraging adaptive

problem-solving (Painter & Peters, 2010; Pakulski, 1986). The result was not merely inefficiency, but a structurally embedded dependency on central approval that inhibited innovation and local initiative.

Third, informal governance practices coexisted with and often supplanted formal administrative rules. Patronage networks, personal loyalties, and exchange-based relationships structured access to positions and resources (Bunce, 1999; Kitschelt et al., 1999). While formal procedures existed, they were frequently subordinated to informal arrangements that blurred the boundary between public office and private benefit. Over time, this duality between formal hierarchy and informal patronage normalised personalised governance. Administrative systems thus operated through both visible institutional structures and less visible relational networks, complicating later efforts to introduce rule-based, impersonal bureaucratic norms. These institutional logics produced administrative systems lacking Weberian neutrality, horizontal accountability, and performance-based management. Law functioned as an instrument of political control rather than as an autonomous constraint (Goetz, 2001). Professional expertise, while present in certain sectors, remained subordinated to ideological reliability (Kitschelt et al., 1999). Public administration was therefore oriented toward command and compliance rather than service provision or regulatory governance.

These structural features were not uniform across all communist regimes. Kitschelt et al. (1999) distinguish between bureaucratic-authoritarian, national-accommodative, and patrimonial variants of communism, each leaving distinct institutional legacies. Bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes combined intense repression with relatively formalised state structures; national-accommodative regimes allowed limited pluralism and some decentralisation; patrimonial regimes were characterised by pervasive informality, corruption, and personalist rule. The typology is useful for capturing variation, but all three regime types left behind governance structures in which administrative authority remained politically mediated and weakly constrained by impersonal rules. Bureaucracies were instruments of ideological control and resource distribution rather than service-oriented public institutions. Administrative careers were embedded in political patronage structures, and decision-making processes prioritised compliance over innovation.

When communist regimes collapsed after 1989, these administrative systems did not disappear; personnel, informal networks, organisational routines, and incentive structures persisted. Even where formal institutional reforms were adopted – such as new constitutions, revised civil service laws, or the decentralisation of frameworks – the underlying administrative

cultures and practices proved more resistant to change. The following sections examine how these legacies persisted and how they structured the constraints and opportunities facing reform processes in the post-communist era.

Mechanisms of Legacy Persistence and Institutional Reproduction

If communist administrative systems shared a set of structural characteristics, the question that follows is why and how these features persisted after the collapse of one-party rule. The end of communism in 1989–1991 represented a dramatic political rupture, yet administrative systems rarely experience rupture in the same way that regimes do. Instead, they tend to change gradually, constrained by inherited organisational routines, personnel networks, and incentive structures. To understand post-communist PAR, it is therefore necessary to examine the mechanisms through which institutional legacies endure.

Historical institutionalism provides a useful starting point. Institutions are not merely formal rules; they are durable systems of norms, expectations, and practices that structure political behaviour over time (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Pierson, 2004). Once established, institutions generate path-dependent trajectories: earlier choices create increasing returns, making alternative institutional paths more costly or politically difficult to pursue. In post-communist settings, the administrative apparatus inherited in 1989 constituted such a path-dependent structure. Reformers did not design new institutions in a vacuum; they operated within organisations staffed by individuals socialised under communist norms, accustomed to hierarchical authority, politicised appointments, and limited accountability.

Meyer-Sahling (2009a) conceptualises this process as 'legacification', emphasising that communist-era administrative patterns were reproduced through both cognitive and institutional mechanisms. On the cognitive level, civil servants and political elites carried forward learned behaviours, informal practices, and expectations about authority and compliance. Professional norms under communism prioritised loyalty, obedience, and risk avoidance. Even where legal reforms introduced merit-based recruitment or depoliticisation, these deeply ingrained behavioural dispositions proved resistant to change. Moreover, they shaped how new rules were interpreted and implemented. On the institutional level, organisational structures, reporting hierarchies, and personnel systems often remained intact or were

only partially reformed. The persistence of these arrangements created continuity beneath formal change.

A key mechanism of persistence was the survival and adaptation of political–administrative elites. In many post-communist states, regime change did not entail a wholesale replacement of administrative personnel. Former communist officials frequently retained positions within ministries, local administrations, or state-owned enterprises, either directly or through informal influence (Grzymała-Busse, 2002; O'Dwyer, 2006). Even where new political actors entered government, they often relied on existing bureaucratic cadres due to the absence of trained alternatives. This continuity limited the transformative capacity of early reforms and contributed to hybrid administrative systems combining new legal frameworks with old practices.

Informal networks also played a decisive role. As Kitschelt et al. (1999) and Bunce (1999) observe, communist regimes fostered patronage-based systems of resource allocation. Access to housing, employment, and consumer goods often depended on party affiliation or personal connections. After 1989, these informal networks did not dissolve; rather, they frequently adapted to new political and economic contexts. In some countries, former nomenklatura elites transformed themselves into economic oligarchs or political brokers, leveraging their administrative experience and connections to capture emerging markets or influence privatisation processes (Grzymała-Busse, 2007). The boundary between public office and private interest remained porous, particularly where regulatory institutions were weak. Such informal governance practices undermined efforts to build impartial, rule-based administration and constrained the absorptive capacity of reform initiatives.

Another mechanism of legacy persistence lay in the sequencing of democratisation and administrative reform. In most post-communist states, political liberalisation and competitive elections preceded the consolidation of neutral civil service systems. As O'Dwyer (2006) argues, this sequencing created incentives for newly elected parties to politicise the administration in order to secure electoral advantage and distribute patronage. Without an already established Weberian bureaucracy to buffer political competition, the civil service became an arena of partisan contestation. This dynamic reinforced rather than dismantled politicisation, even as formal civil service laws were adopted (Goetz, 2001).

Administrative capacity deficits further complicated reform. Communist systems, despite their extensive bureaucratic apparatuses, did not cultivate skills associated with regulatory governance, policy coordination in market economies, or service delivery in pluralist societies. The transition to market

economies required new competencies in public financial management, regulatory oversight, procurement, and strategic planning. Yet ministries often lacked trained personnel, reliable data systems, and performance management tools (Verheijen & Coombes, 1998). In such contexts, the formal transplantation of EU-inspired legislation rarely translated into effective implementation. Limited administrative capacity constrained the depth of reform absorption and generated sustained dependence on external technical assistance.

Trust and societal attitudes also influenced reform trajectories. Decades of repression and surveillance under communist rule generated widespread mistrust toward state institutions (Mishler & Rose, 2001; Tismăneanu, 1997). Citizens frequently perceived public administration as an instrument of coercion or extraction rather than service provision. This mistrust affected both demand and supply sides of reform. On the demand side, limited civic engagement reduced bottom-up pressure for administrative accountability. On the supply side, civil servants operating within low-trust environments faced limited reputational incentives for professional performance. Institutional transformation in such contexts required not only legal change but also cultural shifts in expectations about the relationship between state and citizen.

Importantly, legacies did not operate uniformly across all post-communist states. Variation in regime type, mode of transition, and geopolitical positioning shaped the intensity and form of legacy effects. Bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes, national-accommodative systems, and patrimonial variants of communism generated different configurations of administrative capacity, corruption patterns, and elite cohesion (Kitschelt et al., 1999). Likewise, negotiated transitions, revolutionary ruptures, or conflict-driven collapses produced distinct distributions of political power and reform coalitions (Linz & Stepan, 1996). These variations structured the political opportunity space for administrative reform and influenced how external actors, particularly the EU, could exert leverage.

Legacies therefore function less as deterministic constraints than as conditioning structures. They shape incentives, define veto points, and influence the costs and benefits of reform for domestic actors. Where politicised patronage networks remained powerful, reform threatened entrenched interests and faced resistance. Where administrative traditions were more professionalised, reform initiatives encountered fewer structural obstacles. In all cases, however, sustainability depended on whether new institutional arrangements were internalised and embedded within existing administrative cultures.

The persistence of communist administrative legacies is thus best understood as the product of interacting mechanisms: path dependency, elite continuity, informal network adaptation, politicisation dynamics, capacity deficits, and societal mistrust. These mechanisms do not render reform impossible, but they condition its trajectory and sustainability. This perspective has important implications for assessing Europeanisation and EU-supported public administration reform. External conditionality and financial assistance can alter incentive structures, provide resources, and promote institutional models. Yet the absorption and long-term sustainability of these reforms are mediated by inherited administrative patterns and domestic political incentives. Institutional change that remains formal, i.e. limited to legislation or organisational charts, may not displace informal practices or transform deeply embedded norms. Conversely, where reform coalitions align with external incentives and legacy constraints are weaker or more malleable, reform may achieve greater consolidation. The following section examines how legacy-induced constraints shaped the initial reform environment after 1989 and structured the terrain upon which European Commission assistance for reform would later operate.

Post-1989 Reform Constraints and the Early Transition Environment

The collapse of communist regimes after 1989 constituted a moment of institutional openness. In historical-institutionalist terms, the transition represented a critical juncture: a period in which established political authority was disrupted and competing reform trajectories became possible (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Mahoney, 2000). Yet administrative change during such junctures is rarely linear. The central challenge for post-communist states was to transform the state while simultaneously stabilising basic governing capacity under conditions of economic shock, political contestation, and institutional uncertainty. This dual task created constraints that shaped not only the speed of reform, but also its long-term sustainability.

A first set of constraints derived from the political economy of the early 1990s. Across much of the region, the transition to market economies was accompanied by severe macroeconomic disruption: output collapses, inflationary pressures, fiscal stress, and sharp declines in living standards (World Bank, 1996). These conditions affected public administration reform in two ways. On the one hand, they reduced the resources available for administrative modernisation, including investments in training, pay

reform, and institutional infrastructure. On the other hand, they produced intense distributional conflicts over state resources at precisely the moment when regulatory and oversight institutions were weakest. The state became not only the object of reform, but also the principal arena through which economic winners and losers were produced.

The resulting governance environment was shaped by intense uncertainty and short time horizons. Newly formed party systems were often volatile; governing coalitions fragmented and reconfigured; and the durability of early reform commitments was far from guaranteed (Linz & Stepan, 1996). In this context, public administration reform frequently competed with more immediately visible political priorities, such as macroeconomic stabilisation, privatisation, security consolidation, and the management of social dislocation. Where administrative reform proceeded, it was often incremental and uneven, reflecting political constraints rather than technocratic design preferences.

Democratic competition intensified these dynamics. Competitive elections introduced new incentives for political elites to control administrative levers of power, especially in contexts where programmatic party competition was weak and electoral politics relied heavily on distributional strategies (O'Dwyer, 2006). This did not simply reproduce communist-era politicisation; it reconfigured politicisation under democratic rules. In many systems, public employment, procurement, and local administrative appointments became tools for building and maintaining governing coalitions. Civil service legislation thus entered an environment in which administrative neutrality was not yet institutionally anchored. The early democratic period therefore created a structural tension between the normative project of depoliticisation and the political logic of party building.

The functional demands placed on the state also changed radically. Communist administrations had been designed to coordinate central planning, enforce compliance, and administer hierarchical resource allocation. Post-1989 administrations were, instead, expected to regulate markets, manage public finances transparently, negotiate with international actors, and deliver services in pluralist societies. This transformation required new institutional capacities: budgeting and treasury functions, independent regulatory mechanisms, public procurement oversight, competition policy, and strategic planning capacity. Yet ministries often lacked the personnel, training systems, and organisational routines required for these tasks. Administrative reform was therefore not merely about adopting new laws; it was about building state capabilities under conditions of institutional flux (Verheijen & Coombes, 1998). Moreover, many transition administrations faced a double challenge:

they were expected to professionalise and depoliticise while coping with pay compression and fragmented remuneration systems that weakened recruitment and retention incentives in the civil service (World Bank, 1996).

The governance challenges of the 1990s were also shaped by patterns of economic restructuring and privatisation. The transformation of state-owned enterprises and the liberalisation of markets created opportunities for rent extraction, particularly where regulatory frameworks were incomplete and enforcement institutions were fragile. A substantial body of scholarship has shown that early transition contexts were vulnerable to capture by concentrated interests, producing forms of partial reform equilibrium in which elites benefited from stalled institutional consolidation (Grzymała-Busse, 2007; Hellman, 1998). Where such dynamics took hold, formal administrative reforms could coexist with persistent informal practices, and institutional redesign could be selectively implemented in ways that preserved political control over administrative rents.

In this environment, corruption and the blurring of public and private authority often expanded rather than contracted. This was not simply a moral failure but a predictable outcome of institutional vulnerability: weak oversight, limited enforcement capacity, and contested authority structures combined to create incentives for discretionary governance. Crucially, the presence of corruption did not block reform efforts but acted as a limiting factor on their durability. Anti-corruption agencies or integrity frameworks could be created rapidly, but their ability to constrain behaviour depended on deeper administrative and political incentive structures, including the insulation of oversight bodies from partisan control and the predictability of rule enforcement (Grzymała-Busse, 2007; O'Dwyer, 2006).

How transitions unfolded – through negotiated pacts, revolutionary ruptures, or conflict-driven collapses – also shaped the configuration of political authority and the coherence of reform coalitions (Kitschelt et al., 1999; Linz & Stepan, 1996). Where statehood itself was contested or where violent conflict and territorial disputes shaped political agendas, administrative reform was frequently subordinated to security and state consolidation concerns. Even where there was formal commitment to modernisation, institutional instability and competing priorities limited the depth of implementation. These variations did not mechanically determine outcomes, but they structured the opportunity space within which administrative reform strategies could be pursued and sustained. Importantly, these constraints interacted with societal expectations about the state. Post-1989 reforms aimed to construct administrations oriented toward transparency, accountability, and citizen-oriented service provision, but

demand-side pressures for such reforms were often uneven, shaped by low institutional trust and limited confidence that rule-based administration would be effective or fair (Mishler & Rose, 2001).

Taken together, the early transition period established a distinctive reform landscape: a mix of institutional openness and institutional vulnerability. Reform trajectories were shaped not only by inherited administrative structures and practices (discussed above), but also by the political economy of transition – economic crisis, party system volatility, contested authority, and the emergence of new rent-seeking opportunities. PAR was therefore embedded in the broader struggle to redefine the state's role, rebuild legitimacy, and redistribute authority in post-communist societies. From this perspective, reform sustainability becomes a particularly demanding criterion. It requires not only initial institutional change but the consolidation of new rules and practices under evolving political and economic pressures.

This early transition landscape also explains why external actors increasingly mattered. As states confronted capacity gaps and legitimacy constraints, international organisations became sources of expertise, financial support, and reform templates. It is against this background that European integration gradually emerged as a powerful structuring framework for administrative reform – reconfiguring incentives, benchmarks, and resources in ways that interacted with, rather than replaced, the domestic constraints outlined here. The next chapter turns to these Europeanisation dynamics and examines how EU influence over PAR operates across different integration frameworks.

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3. The Quest for Europeanising Post-Communist Europe

Abstract: This chapter develops the theoretical and methodological framework guiding the analysis of the European Commission's efforts to Europeanise post-communist public administrations. It articulates the central puzzle: Why has sustained EU engagement yielded only limited success in producing sustainable administrative transformation in Romania, Serbia, and Moldova? Drawing on scholarship on Europeanisation, administrative reform, and institutional change, the chapter advances a mechanism-based framework centred on three explanatory dimensions: domestic political–administrative alignment, variation in EU leverage across integration modalities, and legacy-heavy incentive structures. The chapter then operationalises these expectations through an Input–Throughput–Output framework and longitudinal analysis of reform programme cycles between 2000 and 2020, establishing the analytical architecture for evaluating the Commission's transformative capacity across distinct integration contexts.

Keywords: domestic ownership; EU conditionality; external leverage; reform sustainability; institutional change; incentive structures

Framing the Puzzle: Europeanisation and Reform Sustainability

Over the past two decades, the European Union (EU) has invested substantial political capital, financial resources, and technical expertise in promoting the reform of public administrations across post-communist Europe. Through enlargement conditionality, structured accession negotiations, association agreements, Twinning instruments, and administrative benchmarking frameworks, the EU – through the European Commission – has sought to

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reshape domestic executive institutions in line with European principles of public administration. The normative foundation of these efforts is a set of principles of public administration, developed by SIGMA[1] on behalf of the Commission from the late 1990s onward (OECD-SIGMA, 2014b). These principles define what a 'well-functioning administration' should look like: a professional and depoliticised civil service, efficient service delivery, sound policy development procedures, clear accountability arrangements, and robust public financial management (OECD-SIGMA, 1999; 2014b). To keep countries motivated through what is a demanding and protracted adaptation process, the Commission offers a graduated range of incentives – from financial and technical assistance to, ultimately, the prospect of full EU membership.

Yet, after more than two decades of EU assistance for reform, the results are puzzling. Romania joined the EU in 2007, gaining full access to the single market and participation in EU decision-making. Almost 20 years later, however, its administration remains characterised by high centralisation, persistent politicisation, and weak performance: a comparative assessment of public administration capacity across all EU member states placed Romania at the very bottom of the ranking (Thijs et al., 2018). Serbia has been the largest recipient of EU funds in the Western Balkans and has held candidate status since 2012, yet its accession negotiations remain stalled, with only two of 35 chapters provisionally closed. Widespread patronage continues to allow political elites to exert influence over the civil service, and no credible accession date has been set (European Commission, 2023). Moldova, which has received the highest rates of EU assistance per capita among all Eastern Partnership countries, obtained candidate status in 2022 – yet it remains Europe's poorest country, with high rates of administrative corruption, political instability, and institutional fragility (ECA, 2016a). In each case, sustained EU engagement and considerable investment have coexisted with persistent administrative deficits. The puzzle, then, is not simply that reform is difficult – it is that the scale of external support appears systematically insufficient to overcome domestic obstacles, even where the incentive of EU membership is formally on the table.

This puzzle raises two interrelated questions. On the EU side: Why does the Commission's increasingly sophisticated reform toolkit yield rather

1 The Support for Improvement in Governance and Management (SIGMA) programme is a joint initiative of the European Commission and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) established in 1992 to support former communist states in CEE in their transition to democracy.

limited results? On the domestic side: Why do governments that have formally committed to the European path continue to resist or hollow out the very reforms that alignment requires? Is limited progress primarily attributable to flaws in the design and delivery of EU assistance, or to the domestic political conditions under which that assistance is received? This book addresses these questions through a single, integrated research question: *Under what conditions does the European Commission's support for public administration reform produce sustainable institutional change in post-communist states, and what explains the variation in reform outcomes across Romania, Serbia, and Moldova between 2000 and 2020?*

The object of analysis is the Europeanisation of domestic public administration systems within the executive branch of government. The empirical focus lies on reforms affecting civil service systems (including recruitment, promotion, depoliticisation, and career stability), central coordination structures of government, administrative procedures, accountability arrangements, and the organisational capacity required for policy implementation. The analysis therefore centres on the institutional architecture and operational logic of executive administration.

This delimitation is essential for conceptual clarity. PAR intersects with adjacent domains such as judicial reform, anti-corruption policy, and broader governance quality, but it is not reducible to them. Judicial reform concerns the autonomy and functioning of courts and prosecutorial institutions; anti-corruption policy addresses integrity mechanisms and enforcement regimes; governance indicators aggregate multiple dimensions of institutional performance and democratic quality. While these areas overlap with administrative design – for example, meritocratic recruitment may affect corruption vulnerability – they are not treated here as dependent variables. The central analytical concern is whether EU-supported interventions alter the institutional configuration and behavioural routines of executive administrative systems, and whether such alterations are sustained over time.

Sustainability constitutes the core evaluative criterion of reform success. Europeanisation is not equated with formal legislative alignment or episodic institutional restructuring. Rather, it refers to the consolidation of administrative practices that endure beyond moments of intense external pressure, survive changes in political leadership, and become embedded in organisational routines. The distinction between formal compliance and sustainable institutional transformation is analytically decisive. Limited success, in this context, may manifest as reform adoption without consolidation, institutional redesign without behavioural change, or temporary alignment followed by reversal.

To address the research puzzle, the chapter develops a theory-guided framework grounded in existing scholarship on Europeanisation, conditionality, bureaucratic politics, and institutional persistence. Rather than treating EU influence as either determinative or negligible, the analysis situates reform outcomes at the intersection of external leverage, domestic political alignment, and historically embedded incentive structures. The following sections review and synthesise these literatures in order to derive a set of analytically distinct but interconnected expectations concerning the conditions under which EU-supported administrative reform is likely to become sustainable – or to remain partial and fragile.

Mapping the Field: Europeanisation and Administrative Reform

Europeanisation scholarship has long sought to explain why EU influence produces substantial institutional transformation in some contexts while generating only formal compliance in others. Early theoretical accounts conceptualised Europeanisation as domestic adaptation to EU-level pressures and opportunity structures (Börzel & Risse, 2003; Radaelli, 2000; 2004). Here Europeanisation is defined as the collective processes through which domestic institutions reform in line with European principles of public administration, both 'on paper' and in practice. Adopting Europeanisation as a valid 'analytical approach aiming to understand EU impacts on policy or polity' (Dimitrova, 2021, p. 299), this study seeks to understand how the Europeanisation of public administrations takes place, by considering the interactions and results of the interactions between European and national political and institutional actors involved in the transformation of former communist administrations in line with European principles of public administration.

In the enlargement context, the dominant explanatory framework for Europeanisation became the External Incentives Model (EIM), which posits that governments adopt EU rules when the benefits of compliance outweigh the domestic costs of reform (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004; 2019). Central variables in this model include the size and credibility of rewards, the determinacy of conditions, and the political cost of adoption. Empirical research on Eastern enlargement broadly supported this logic, showing that accession conditionality – combined with systematic monitoring and benchmarking – generated legislative and institutional alignment across candidate states (Börzel & Risse, 2007; Grabbe, 2006; Vachudova, 2005). Yet even within this context of strong leverage, variation emerged in the

depth and durability of reform outcomes. Post-accession developments in several member states demonstrated that compliance during accession negotiations offered no guarantee of sustained institutional consolidation once membership was secured (Dimitrova, 2010; Sedelmeier, 2014). This observation prompted refinements of the conditionality framework. Scholars increasingly recognised that external incentives operate through domestic political arenas rather than above them. The effectiveness of EU leverage depends on domestic veto players, reform coalitions, and the distribution of power within the state apparatus (Börzel & Risse, 2003; Schimmelfennig, Engert, & Knobel, 2003). Political elites may comply strategically in order to secure rewards while limiting deeper transformation that threatens established patronage networks or control over administrative resources (Dimitrova, 2005; Elbasani, 2013).

Parallel to incentive-based explanations, a second strand of literature emphasises processes of socialisation and norm diffusion. From this perspective, domestic actors may internalise EU norms not only because of material incentives but also through persuasion, learning, and professional interaction (Radaelli, 2004). Administrative networks, Twinning arrangements, and technical assistance programmes can foster epistemic communities that diffuse standards of professionalism and managerial practice. However, empirical findings on socialisation are mixed. While such mechanisms may contribute to incremental behavioural change, they often operate within pre-existing institutional constraints and cannot override entrenched political interests (Mastenbroek & Princen, 2010; Zhelyazkova et al., 2019). The literature therefore suggests that socialisation may reinforce reform when domestic incentives are supportive, but is unlikely to substitute for political commitment.

A third body of research shifts attention from external stimuli to domestic institutional configurations. Building on historical institutionalism, scholars argue that pre-existing administrative traditions, path dependencies, and informal governance practices shape how EU requirements are interpreted and implemented (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Pierson, 2004). In post-communist contexts, legacies of politicisation, hierarchical control, and patronage networks structure both the capacity and the incentives for reform (Grzymała-Busse, 2007; Kitschelt et al., 1999; Meyer-Sahling & Yesilkagit, 2011). These legacies do not determine outcomes, but they condition reform trajectories by influencing the distribution of costs and benefits among domestic actors. Where administrative autonomy threatens established political control over appointments or resources, reform resistance may emerge even under strong external pressure.

Importantly, the strength and credibility of EU leverage vary systematically across integration modalities. Enlargement negotiations are characterised by high conditionality, dense monitoring, and a clearly defined reward – EU membership. After accession, however, the EU's ability to sanction non-compliance diminishes significantly (Sedelmeier, 2014). In neighbourhood contexts, the absence of a credible membership perspective weakens the incentive structure further, shifting the balance toward softer forms of governance such as partnership agreements, financial assistance, and benchmarking (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2009). Comparative studies demonstrate that reform depth tends to correlate with the credibility and enforceability of external incentives, but also that leverage alone cannot guarantee institutional embedding (Börzel & Schimmelfennig, 2017).

Despite this rich body of scholarship, two analytical gaps remain particularly salient for the study of public administration reform with EU support. First, much of the literature focuses on legislative adoption or policy compliance rather than on the long-term sustainability of institutional change. The distinction between formal transposition and organisational consolidation – especially within administrative systems – has received comparatively less systematic attention. Second, studies often isolate explanatory factors – conditionality, socialisation, domestic politics, or legacies – rather than analysing their interaction. The sustainability of administrative reform is likely to depend on how external leverage interacts with domestic ownership and how both are filtered through inherited institutional structures and contemporary political incentive systems. Europeanisation outcomes cannot be explained by external incentives alone, nor by domestic politics in isolation. Instead, institutional transformation emerges from the interaction of EU leverage, domestic political and administrative commitment, and historically embedded incentive structures. The analysis developed in this book centres on reform sustainability as the critical outcome and integrates these explanatory strands into a unified framework. The following sections translate these insights into explicit analytical expectations concerning the conditions under which EU-supported PAR produces sustainable institutional change in post-communist settings.

Domestic Ownership and Administrative Commitment

While external incentives and conditionality shape the opportunity structure for reform, a substantial body of scholarship demonstrates that Europeanisation outcomes are mediated by domestic political and administrative

actors. EU influence does not operate directly upon institutional systems; it is filtered through domestic coalitions, veto players, and bureaucratic organisations that interpret, implement, or resist reform mandates (Börzel & Risse, 2003; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004; 2019). Consequently, the sustainability of institutional change depends not only on the existence of external pressure but also on the degree of domestic ownership and administrative commitment to reform objectives.

In enlargement studies, domestic ownership has often been conceptualised in terms of reform coalitions and political alignment with EU objectives. Vachudova (2005) argues that pro-reform political elites strategically embraced EU conditionality to strengthen their position vis-à-vis domestic opponents, thereby facilitating institutional change. Where governing coalitions were cohesive and electorally invested in European integration, EU rules were more likely to be internalised beyond formal compliance. Conversely, where political actors perceived reform as electorally costly or threatening to established patronage networks, compliance tended to be strategic and selective (Dimitrova, 2005; Elbasani, 2013).

However, political endorsement alone does not guarantee institutional embedding. Administrative reform – particularly in civil service systems, coordination mechanisms, and public financial management – requires sustained bureaucratic engagement. The literature on implementation highlights that the translation of formal rules into organisational practice depends on administrative capacity, professional norms, and internal incentives (Meyer-Sahling, 2011; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Even where legislation is adopted in line with EU standards, reform outcomes may diverge depending on whether administrative actors possess the resources, autonomy, and motivation to internalise new procedures.

Research on post-communist civil service reform underscores this distinction. Meyer-Sahling (2011) shows that reforms introduced under accession conditionality often produced improvements in formal merit-based recruitment and depoliticisation, but their durability varied across contexts and over time. In some cases, institutional safeguards were gradually strengthened; in others, political actors reasserted control through informal appointments or legislative amendments after accession pressures receded. This variation suggests that sustainability depends not merely on compliance at a single point in time, but on the consolidation of reform-supportive norms and routines within administrative organisations.

The bureaucratic politics literature further illuminates this dynamic. Public administrations are not passive recipients of reform directives; they are arenas of contestation in which actors pursue organisational interests and

defend institutional prerogatives (Peters, 2011). Administrative commitment involves more than technical capacity – it encompasses the willingness of senior civil servants and mid-level managers to defend reform principles against short-term political interference. Where administrative leadership aligns with reform objectives, EU-supported changes are more likely to be embedded in daily practice. Where bureaucratic actors are either politically dependent or organisationally fragmented, reform may remain superficial.

Moreover, reform sustainability requires alignment between political and administrative incentives. If political leaders endorse reform rhetorically but continue to rely on politicised appointments or discretionary control over administrative resources, bureaucratic actors receive mixed signals. In such contexts, formal institutional change may coexist with informal practices that undermine depoliticisation or meritocracy. The literature on partial reform equilibrium in post-communist settings (Grzymała-Busse, 2007; Hellman, 1998) demonstrates how elites may selectively adopt reforms that enhance international legitimacy while preserving domestic control over rents and appointments.

Europeanisation research has increasingly recognised this tension between formal compliance and substantive consolidation. Zhelyazkova et al. (2019) demonstrate that the transposition of EU directives does not in itself produce effective implementation; enforcement patterns remain contingent on the quality of domestic administrative structures and the degree of political commitment behind them. Similarly, Mastenbroek (2005) emphasises that compliance outcomes vary depending on domestic coordination mechanisms and bureaucratic professionalism. These findings resonate particularly strongly in the field of PAR, where institutional transformation demands changes in recruitment practices, performance management, inter-ministerial coordination, and budgeting routines.

Within this literature, however, the interaction between Commission support and domestic ownership remains under-specified. While studies acknowledge the mediating role of domestic actors, fewer explicitly analyse how the quality and targeting of EU support interacts with domestic political and administrative commitment. Financial assistance, Twinning arrangements, and technical expertise can reinforce reform coalitions and strengthen administrative capacity – but only when aligned with domestic incentives. Where Commission interventions are fragmented or insufficiently adapted to local administrative structures, they may fail to catalyse sustainable change even under favourable political conditions.

Taken together, these strands of scholarship indicate that the sustainability of EU-induced administrative reform depends on a critical alignment:

external support must coincide with domestic political ownership and administrative commitment. Ownership ensures that reforms are politically defended and administrative commitment ensures that they are organisationally embedded. In the absence of either dimension, reforms risk remaining formal adaptations to external pressure rather than consolidated institutional transformation.

This reasoning leads to the first analytical expectation guiding the empirical analysis: *Hypothesis 1: EU-supported PAR produces sustainable institutional change when domestic political ownership and administrative commitment align with well-targeted Commission support for reform.*

Conditionality, Credibility, and Integration Modalities

If domestic ownership and administrative commitment shape whether reform becomes embedded, the structure of EU leverage shapes the incentives under which domestic actors operate. Europeanisation research has consistently emphasised that the effectiveness of EU influence depends on the credibility, determinacy, and magnitude of external incentives (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004; 2019). In the enlargement context, conditionality operates through a highly institutionalised framework: accession negotiations are organised around clear benchmarks, structured monitoring, and the ultimate reward of EU membership. Under these conditions, candidate governments face strong incentives to adopt and implement EU rules in order to secure accession benefits (Grabbe, 2006; Vachudova, 2005).

The External Incentives Model (EIM) formalises this logic: it posits that compliance with EU demands is most likely when (i) rewards are sizable, (ii) conditions are clear and consistent, (iii) EU commitments are credible, and (iv) domestic adoption costs are manageable (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004; 2019). Empirical studies of Eastern enlargement largely confirm that the membership perspective created powerful reform incentives across policy sectors. In administrative domains, this translated into the adoption of civil service laws, the establishment of coordination mechanisms, and the restructuring of public financial management systems in line with EU expectations (Dimitrova, 2005; Meyer-Sahling, 2011).

Yet the enlargement experience also revealed important limits. First, compliance during negotiations did not uniformly translate into deep institutional consolidation. Sedelmeier (2014) shows that post-accession leverage weakened considerably once membership was secured, reducing

the EU's capacity to enforce continued reform. In several member states, administrative reforms slowed, stalled, or were partially reversed when domestic political incentives shifted. This suggests that leverage tied to accession is temporally bounded and that sustainability cannot be inferred from pre-accession compliance alone.

Second, the credibility of conditionality varies across integration frameworks. In neighbourhood contexts, where no clear accession pathway exists, the incentive structure differs fundamentally. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and associated instruments rely more heavily on financial assistance, partnership agreements, and political dialogue than on binding accession benchmarks (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2009). While such mechanisms may encourage selective alignment, they lack the transformative pull associated with a credible membership reward. Studies of neighbourhood governance reforms frequently find uneven compliance and limited institutional embedding in the absence of strong conditionality (Börzel & Risse, 2012).

Third, even within enlargement, the effectiveness of conditionality depends on the consistency and clarity of EU demands. Schimmelfennig, Engert, and Knobel (2003) emphasise that ambiguous or inconsistently enforced conditions weaken compliance incentives. Administrative reform – often characterised by complex organisational changes rather than discrete legislative acts – may be particularly sensitive to variations in monitoring intensity and benchmark specificity. Where conditions are less precise or enforcement less systematic, domestic actors retain greater discretion in implementation. Beyond formal conditionality, the EU increasingly employs benchmarking, peer review, and administrative networking to shape domestic practices (Börzel & Schimmelfennig, 2017). These softer instruments may facilitate incremental learning and policy diffusion, especially in areas such as PAR where *acquis* obligations are less detailed. However, their effectiveness depends heavily on domestic receptivity and cannot compensate fully for weak incentive structures. Soft governance may sustain reform momentum where political commitment already exists, but it rarely generates deep transformation in the absence of credible rewards.

Taken together, this literature indicates that EU leverage is neither uniform nor static. It varies across integration modalities – member state, candidate country, and neighbourhood partner – and over time within each modality. Accession negotiations create a high-leverage environment characterised by clear incentives and structured monitoring. Post-accession settings exhibit reduced enforcement capacity and more limited sanctioning tools. Neighbourhood frameworks rely primarily on financial incentives

and political engagement, producing weaker and more variable reform pressures. These differences shape the strategic calculations of domestic actors and influence the depth of administrative change they are willing to undertake.

However, while the literature convincingly demonstrates that leverage matters, it often treats variation across modalities primarily in terms of compliance or policy adoption. Less attention has been paid to how modality-specific leverage structures affect the sustainability of administrative reform. The durability of institutional transformation may depend not only on the presence of conditionality but also on its temporal consistency and on the credibility of long-term EU engagement. In contexts where leverage is strong but temporary, reforms may plateau once incentives weaken. Where leverage is limited from the outset, sustainability may hinge more heavily on domestic political commitment and administrative capacity.

Building on these insights, this book advances the following second expectation guiding the empirical analysis: *Hypothesis 2: The strength of EU leverage across EU integration modalities* (*member state, candidate state, neighbourhood state*) *shapes the depth and sustainability of administrative reform outcomes.*

Legacies and Incentive Structures

While external leverage structures the incentive environment and domestic ownership shapes political commitment, institutional legacies and contemporary political economy dynamics condition how reform stimuli are interpreted, absorbed, and embedded within domestic administrative systems. External pressure for reform does not operate upon institutional tabulae rasae; it encounters historically constituted organisational routines, patronage networks, and incentive structures that shape both the feasibility and the desirability of reform (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Pierson, 2004).

Historical institutionalism provides the conceptual foundation for understanding this conditioning effect. Institutions generate path-dependent trajectories through mechanisms of increasing returns, coordination effects, and adaptive expectations (Pierson, 2004). In administrative systems, such dynamics manifest in recruitment norms, career incentives, reporting hierarchies, and informal practices that stabilise expectations about authority and control. Reform proposals that disrupt these patterns may impose significant redistributional costs on incumbent actors. As Mahoney and

Thelen (2010) argue, institutional change is often incremental and contested, shaped by the distribution of power among actors who benefit from existing arrangements.

In post-communist contexts, legacies of politicisation and hierarchical control continue to influence the incentive structures of both political elites and administrative actors. As indicated in Chapter 2, communist administrative systems were characterised by the fusion of party and state, centralised authority, and informal patronage networks. While formal institutional redesign occurred after 1989, these legacies persisted in varying degrees, shaping patterns of appointment, control over resources, and expectations of bureaucratic loyalty (Grzymała-Busse, 2007; Kitschelt et al., 1999). Crucially, legacies do not merely constrain reform capacity; they alter the cost–benefit calculations of political actors. Where control over administrative appointments constitutes a central mechanism of political survival, reforms that strengthen meritocracy and bureaucratic autonomy may threaten core governing strategies.

Political economy approaches further illuminate how contemporary incentive structures interact with inherited institutional patterns. Hellman's (1998) concept of 'partial reform equilibrium' demonstrates how political and economic elites may strategically support limited reform while resisting deeper institutional transformation that would undermine their access to rents. In administrative domains, this may translate into the adoption of formal civil service legislation accompanied by the preservation of informal channels of appointment and influence. Similarly, Grzymała-Busse (2007) shows how governing parties may selectively institutionalise oversight mechanisms while retaining leverage over resource allocation. These dynamics suggest that reform sustainability depends not only on external incentives but also on the alignment between reform objectives and the political strategies of domestic elites.

Importantly, legacies operate as filters rather than deterministic constraints. They shape how EU demands are perceived and prioritised. In contexts where administrative traditions include elements of professionalisation or prior reform experience, EU-supported initiatives may resonate more readily with domestic norms. Conversely, where politicisation and informal governance practices remain entrenched, external reform templates may be translated into hybrid arrangements that preserve existing power structures. Meyer-Sahling and Yesilkagit (2011) highlight that the durability of civil service reforms varies depending on the institutionalisation of merit-based norms and the insulation of recruitment systems from partisan control. This variation underscores that sustainability requires more than formal

transposition; it demands the internalisation of new incentive structures within administrative organisations.

Legacies also interact with contemporary electoral dynamics. Competitive party systems characterised by high turnover and short time horizons may reinforce incentives for political control over administrative resources (O'Dwyer, 2006). In such settings, even where EU leverage is substantial and political leaders initially endorse reform, the long-term consolidation of administrative autonomy may be vulnerable to shifts in governing coalitions. Conversely, more stable political configurations or reform-oriented coalitions may enable the gradual embedding of professional norms.

From this perspective, institutional legacies and political incentive structures do not merely influence whether reform is adopted; they condition whether it is absorbed and sustained. They determine the depth of organisational change, the resilience of reform against political turnover, and the capacity of administrative systems to maintain professional standards in the absence of intense external monitoring. External leverage may initiate reform trajectories, and domestic ownership may activate them, but legacy-filtered incentive structures shape their consolidation.

The literature therefore suggests that the sustainability of EU-supported PAR depends on the interaction between reform stimuli and the underlying political economy of the state. Where legacies of politicisation and patronage align with contemporary incentives for administrative control, reforms are more likely to remain formal, partial, or reversible. Where institutional arrangements and political incentives are compatible with professionalisation and rule-based governance, reforms are more likely to become embedded in organisational practice.

This reasoning leads to the third analytical expectation guiding the comparative analysis: *Hypothesis 3: Communist legacies and contemporary political incentive structures condition the absorption and sustainability of EU-supported reforms.*

Research Design and Methodology

From Theoretical Expectations to Empirical Strategy

The preceding sections have advanced an integrated explanatory framework for understanding the Europeanisation of post-communist public administrations. Rather than attributing reform outcomes to a single determinant, the analysis has identified three interacting mechanisms: the alignment between EU support and domestic political–administrative commitment; the

structure and credibility of EU leverage across different integration modalities; and the conditioning role of historically embedded and contemporary incentive structures within domestic political economies. Together, these mechanisms illuminate not only how reform is initiated, but why it may fail to consolidate. The task of the empirical chapters is therefore not simply to document reform trajectories, but to examine how these mechanisms operate in practice and how they intersect over time. The analytical challenge lies in moving from theoretical expectation to the empirical assessment of whether variation in reform sustainability corresponds with variation in leverage structures, domestic alignment, and institutional conditioning. The central research question guiding this empirical inquiry invites systematic investigation of the conditions under which EU-supported reforms are absorbed, stabilised, or diluted within domestic administrative systems. Accordingly, the empirical strategy proceeds through a structured comparative analysis of how the Commission's PAR toolkit interacts with domestic political authority, bureaucratic organisation, and incentive structures across three cases and over two decades. By tracing reform sequences longitudinally and comparing institutional outcomes across integration modalities, the study seeks to determine whether the explanatory dimensions identified in the theoretical framework account for observed patterns of sustainability, stagnation, or reversal.

The empirical analysis is built around an analytical structure linking EU intervention to reform sustainability. At its core lies the relationship between European Commission intervention and the trajectory of domestic administrative reform. The study treats the Commission's public administration reform (PAR) toolkit as the principal driver of Europeanisation and, therefore, as the primary independent variable. The PAR toolkit is not conceptualised as a single instrument but as a structured constellation of normative frameworks, financial resources, technical assistance mechanisms, and conditionality arrangements (see Chapters 4 and 5). The dependent variable is the sustainability of administrative reform at the domestic level. Sustainability is defined as the consolidation of institutional arrangements that persist beyond moments of intense external engagement. It refers to the entrenchment of merit-based recruitment and promotion systems, the stability of administrative structures across electoral cycles, the routinisation of procedures consistent with European principles of public administration, and the resistance of reform safeguards to politicised reversal. Sustainability implies institutional embedding: reform becomes part of the ordinary functioning of the administrative system rather than an externally induced episode. This definition is analytically significant

because it distinguishes sustainability from formal compliance. Legislative adoption, the creation of new agencies, or favourable monitoring reports may signal alignment at a given moment. Yet such developments do not necessarily indicate behavioural change or long-term institutional consolidation. Limited success, in this study, therefore encompasses situations in which reform is adopted but not stabilised, implemented during high-leverage phases but diluted thereafter, or redesigned institutionally without altering underlying incentive structures.

Between the independent and dependent variables lie three mediating mechanisms corresponding to the theoretical expectations developed earlier. The first concerns domestic alignment. Reform sustainability depends on the degree to which political leadership and administrative actors converge around reform objectives. Political ownership refers to executive commitment, coalition cohesion, and the willingness to defend reform against short-term partisan incentives. Administrative commitment refers to bureaucratic professionalism, leadership within reform units, and the capacity – or reluctance – of civil servants to internalise new norms. The second mediating mechanism concerns the structure of EU leverage. The credibility, determinacy, and magnitude of conditionality vary across integration modalities. Accession negotiations, post-accession monitoring, and neighbourhood cooperation frameworks create distinct incentive environments. The analysis therefore examines whether reform depth and sustainability correspond to differences in reward credibility, benchmark specificity, and sanctioning capacity across member, candidate, and neighbourhood contexts. The third mechanism concerns institutional conditioning. Legacies of politicisation, patterns of patronage, executive dominance, electoral volatility, and incentive structures for administrative control shape the domestic cost–benefit calculus of reform. These factors do not operate as static historical residues but as evolving political configurations that filter and reinterpret external reform stimuli. The key analytical question is whether these institutional environments facilitate or obstruct the absorption and consolidation of EU-supported reform initiatives.

Importantly, these variables are not treated as fixed attributes. They are examined as dynamic configurations unfolding over time. Reform trajectories are understood as the product of shifting interactions among external incentives, domestic political alignments, and institutional incentive structures. By specifying these relationships explicitly, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts of reform to a mechanism-based explanation of why the Commission's sustained engagement has produced uneven and, in some instances, limited institutional consolidation.

Case Selection and Comparative Logic

The empirical analysis adopts a structured and focused comparative design centred on three cases: Romania, Serbia, and Moldova. The selection is neither illustrative nor convenience-based. It is strategically aligned with the theoretical framework developed in this chapter and is designed to maximise analytical leverage with respect to the three explanatory dimensions: EU leverage, domestic alignment, and institutional conditioning.

The most salient axis of variation concerns integration modality and, by extension, the structure of EU leverage. Romania represents a member state following its accession to the European Union in 2007, thereby allowing assessment of both pre-accession conditionality and post-accession monitoring under diminished EU leverage and enforcement capacity. Serbia occupies the position of a candidate country engaged in accession negotiations during the period under analysis, operating within a framework of structured conditionality and prospective membership. Moldova, by contrast, functioned primarily as a neighbourhood partner between 2000 and 2020, participating in association frameworks and financial cooperation without a credible short-term accession pathway – its formal candidate status only emerging in 2022, beyond the temporal scope of this study. These modal differences generate distinct incentive environments. By comparing reform trajectories across these contexts, the study operationalises variation in EU leverage and evaluates whether the strength and credibility of conditionality correlate with reform depth and sustainability.

At the same time, the cases share a broadly comparable post-communist background. Each emerged from decades of communist rule, confronted the challenges of systemic transformation after 1989, and received sustained financial and technical assistance from the European Commission throughout the 2000–2020 period. This shared historical trajectory provides a controlled regional context within which variation in integration modality and contemporary political economy can be meaningfully examined. By holding constant the broad structural experience of post-communist transition, the analysis avoids conflating modality-driven variation with fundamentally different regime legacies or geopolitical trajectories.

Crucially, none of the selected cases represents a consolidated Weberian administrative model during the period under study. Each has faced persistent challenges in civil service depoliticisation, administrative stability, and institutional consolidation. This common characteristic strengthens the comparative design. Rather than contrasting an unequivocal success case with an unequivocal failure, the study examines variation in reform

sustainability within structurally demanding environments. The objective is not to explain why one country succeeded while another failed absolutely, but to analyse why sustained EU engagement has produced uneven degrees of consolidation across comparable reform terrains. The design therefore combines most-similar background conditions with systematic variation in EU leverage and meaningful variation in domestic political incentive structures. It enables assessment of whether differences in reform sustainability correspond to differences in integration modality, political alignment, and institutional conditioning, while minimising extraneous structural divergence. In doing so, the comparative framework supports mechanism-based inference rather than descriptive juxtaposition.

The empirical analysis focuses on nine structured reform packages – three in each country – implemented between 2000 and 2020. These packages correspond to successive phases of European Commission engagement and provide analytically bounded reform cycles through which the operation of the PAR toolkit can be traced over time. The selection of reform packages follows three criteria. First, each package involves explicit and substantial European Commission support, whether through financial instruments, technical assistance, or structured conditionality frameworks. Second, each targets core executive administrative institutions, including civil service systems, central coordination mechanisms, and administrative capacity-building measures. Third, each unfolds over a sufficient temporal span to allow assessment not merely of adoption but of sustainability – whether reforms persist, stabilise, or regress once initial momentum subsides. In Romania, the analysis follows the trajectory from pre-accession conditionality to post-accession governance through three programme phases: the PHARE (Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies) programme,[2] which operated between 2000 and 2006, under structured enlargement conditionality; the European Social Fund (ESF) cycle for 2007–2013, deployed after accession within the cohesion policy framework; and the subsequent ESF cycle (2014–2020), during which EU leverage operated under markedly different post-membership conditions. This sequencing allows examination of how reform dynamics evolve when the 'membership carrot' is replaced by softer monitoring and funding conditionality. In Serbia, the analysis traces reform across the transition from early post-conflict assistance under the CARDS (Community Assistance for Reconstruction,

2 Between 1998 and 2006, the PHARE programme provided around 30% of the assistance used to build the democratic institutions and public administration necessary to satisfy the Copenhagen criteria for membership (European Parliament, 1998).

Development and Stabilisation)[3] programme (2000–2006) to structured accession preparation under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) I (2007–2013) and IPA II (2014–2020). These phases reflect a progressive institutionalisation of accession conditionality and provide an opportunity to assess whether increasing proximity to membership strengthens reform depth and sustainability, or whether domestic political dynamics dilute leverage effects. In Moldova, the analysis follows EU engagement through TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States)[4] during 2000–2006, the European Neighbourhood Partnership Instrument (ENPI) during 2007–2013, and the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) during 2014–2020, reflecting the evolution of neighbourhood cooperation instruments. Unlike the enlargement context, these frameworks operated without a credible short-term accession pathway during the period under study. This configuration allows assessment of reform dynamics under weaker and more indirect incentive structures. Multi-country or cross-border programmes are excluded from the core analysis in order to preserve causal clarity. The focus remains on country-specific interventions targeting executive administrative systems, thereby strengthening attribution between Commission-supported reform packages and observed domestic institutional outcomes.

By structuring the empirical analysis around successive programme cycles within each integration modality, the study is able to examine reform not as a single intervention but as a cumulative and evolving process. This design allows for longitudinal assessment of whether reform momentum intensifies, stabilises, or dissipates as leverage conditions shift over time. It also enables comparison across cases regarding how different incentive environments shape the depth and sustainability of institutional transformation. The study adopts a qualitative, theory-guided comparative design that combines longitudinal within-case analysis with structured cross-case comparison. The objective is not statistical generalisation but explanatory depth: to assess

3 The CARDS programme was intended to provide assistance to the countries of South-Eastern Europe with a view to their participation in the stabilisation and association processes with the European Union. One of the key fields of action was aimed at enhancing administrative capacity (EU Delegation to Serbia, 2015).

4 The TACIS programme was implemented by the European Commission between 1991 and 2006 and was one of the leading technical assistance programmes deployed by the EU to support the transition process in Moldova. Between 2000 and 2006, TACIS allocated more than €25 million to Moldova to provide institutional, legal, and administrative technical support, to promote private sector development, and to address the social consequences of transition in the country.

whether the mechanisms identified in the theoretical framework account for observed patterns of reform adoption, consolidation, and reversal.

Within each case, the analysis proceeds longitudinally across the period 2000–2020. Rather than treating reform as a single event, the study reconstructs reform trajectories over successive programme cycles. This approach allows examination of how EU-supported interventions unfold over time, how domestic political and administrative actors respond to them, and whether institutional changes persist beyond periods of intense engagement. Particular attention is paid to sequencing – whether reform adoption follows conditionality signals, whether administrative changes are stabilised across electoral cycles, and whether subsequent political developments dilute or reinforce earlier reforms. By analysing reform as an evolving process rather than as a static outcome, the study is able to assess the sustainability – or fragility – of institutional change.

Cross-case comparison complements this longitudinal analysis. The three cases differ systematically in integration modality, domestic political configurations, and incentive structures. The comparative framework therefore evaluates whether variation in EU leverage corresponds to variation in reform depth; whether stronger domestic political–administrative alignment correlates with more stable institutional embedding; and whether legacy-heavy incentive structures are associated with patterns of partial or reversible reform. Rather than juxtaposing descriptive country narratives, the comparison is structured around the explanatory dimensions developed in the theoretical sections of this chapter. This design strengthens internal validity by anchoring empirical interpretation in theoretically specified mechanisms. Observed institutional outcomes are assessed in relation to variation in leverage structures, domestic alignment, and incentive configurations, rather than being attributed to broad contextual factors or post hoc inference. The emphasis remains on causal coherence: whether the interaction between EU intervention and domestic political actors provides a consistent explanation for reform sustainability or partial institutional embedding across the selected cases.

The empirical analysis is organised around an Input–Throughput–Output framework that structures the examination of reform dynamics, enabling systematic differentiation between the design of European Commission intervention, the domestic processing of that intervention, and the institutional consequences that follow. Its purpose is not to impose a mechanistic model of reform but to prevent conflation between reform intention, reform implementation, and reform consolidation. At the level of input, the analysis examines the configuration of the Commission's PAR toolkit as deployed

in each programme cycle. This includes the normative standards promoted through European principles of public administration (OECD-SIGMA, 1999; 2014a; 2014b; 2017) and country-specific recommendations, the volume and structure of financial allocations, the design of technical assistance instruments, the clarity and determinacy of conditionality frameworks, and the consistency of monitoring arrangements. Input analysis therefore captures both the material and normative dimensions of EU engagement, as well as the credibility and specificity of the incentives attached to reform. The level of throughput focuses on how these inputs are processed within domestic political and administrative systems. Here the analysis examines legislative adoption, executive decisions, bureaucratic implementation dynamics, and the interaction between Commission monitoring and domestic political calculation. Particular attention is paid to whether conditionality signals are perceived as credible, whether rewards or sanctions are applied consistently, and how domestic actors – both political and administrative – interpret and respond to reform requirements. Throughput analysis is therefore the stage at which the mediating mechanisms identified in the theoretical framework become visible: domestic alignment, leverage credibility, and incentive filtering. Finally, the level of output assesses observable institutional outcomes. This includes changes in recruitment and promotion systems, the durability of coordination structures, the stability of depoliticisation safeguards, and the persistence of administrative practices across electoral cycles. Crucially, output is evaluated through the lens of sustainability rather than immediate compliance. The question is not whether reforms were adopted at a given moment, but whether they were consolidated, routinised, and protected from subsequent dilution.

By distinguishing analytically between input, throughput, and output, the analytical framework seeks to clarify the locus at which reform may stall, fragment, or regress. It prevents the assumption that well-designed intervention necessarily yields durable outcomes and allows identification of whether limited success stems from weak leverage, fragile domestic alignment, or institutional resistance embedded in incentive structures. The empirical analysis draws on a broad and systematically curated body of primary and secondary material. The documentary corpus includes over 700 official documents spanning European Commission communications, progress and country reports, accession and association documentation, SIGMA assessments, national PAR strategies, legislative texts, programme evaluations, and budgetary allocations covering the period 2000–2020. These materials enable reconstruction of the design, evolution, and monitoring of the Commission's PAR toolkit across the three integration modalities.

To complement documentary analysis and capture dimensions not visible in formal texts, the study incorporates 32 semi-structured elite interviews conducted with European Commission officials, SIGMA experts, national civil servants, ministers and senior advisers responsible for administrative reform, and academic specialists in Europeanisation and public administration. The interviews provide insight into reform negotiations, perceptions of conditionality credibility, bureaucratic resistance, informal practices, and political calculations shaping reform trajectories. All interviews were anonymised in accordance with ethical standards, and their content was triangulated with documentary evidence to mitigate retrospective rationalisation and positional bias.

The analysis does not rely on a single source of authority. Instead, claims regarding reform adoption, implementation, stagnation, or reversal are grounded in convergent evidence drawn from legislative developments, programme documentation, monitoring reports, and interview testimony. The study supplements qualitative evidence with selected indicators from the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) dataset, particularly Government Effectiveness, Regulatory Quality, Rule of Law, and Control of Corruption. In this study, they function not as proof of reform success or failure, but as contextual trend indicators that complement qualitative assessment of institutional change.

The evaluation of reform sustainability proceeds according to clearly defined criteria. Sustainability requires more than legislative adoption or institutional creation at a particular moment in time. It entails the consolidation and routinisation of reform outcomes. Evidence of sustainability includes persistence of merit-based recruitment and promotion rules across electoral cycles; institutional stability in the face of government turnover; absence of systematic legislative dilution of depoliticisation safeguards; routinised administrative procedures rather than ad hoc compliance; and a demonstrable reduction in politicised appointment patterns over time. Conversely, reforms that are enacted during periods of intense EU leverage but subsequently reversed, hollowed out, or informally circumvented are classified as instances of partial institutional embedding.

The objective is not to demonstrate deterministic causality but to assess the consistency between theoretically specified mechanisms and observed reform trajectories. By combining longitudinal documentary analysis, elite interviews, structured comparison across integration modalities, and contextual indicator trends, the study establishes an evidentiary basis for evaluating the European Commission's capacity to induce sustainable administrative transformation in post-communist contexts. The chapters

that follow examine how these dynamics unfold across distinct integration modalities, revealing how the European Commission developed and consolidated its PAR toolkit, laying the groundwork for the empirical analysis of the three case studies: Romania, Serbia, and Moldova.

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PART II

Developing and Institutionalising the Public Administration Reform Toolkit

At the time, anything we could do for them was welcomed. Nobody had a pre-determined agenda. There was a lot of inventing things, not only on our side [*i.e. the Commission*]*, but also on their side* [*i.e. the domestic level*]*. Those countries needed everything: they needed money, advice on how to organise their administrations. A lot of things were invented, ad hoc. Any good idea which came out and which was thought to be worth exploring was welcome. There was a lot of 'adhocary', as we called it. No pre-conceived long-term agenda because things happened so fast. There were new developments every day.*

– Interview 7 (2020)

4. The Genesis and Development of the Public Administration Reform Toolkit

Abstract: This chapter traces the evolution of the European Commission's support for public administration reform (PAR) from the improvised technical assistance of the early 1990s to the structured, conditional, and benchmarked system of the 2020s. It analyses this evolution across three integration modalities – pre-accession, neighbourhood, and post-accession – each operating through different incentive structures and leverage mechanisms. From early programmes to the post-2020 Technical Support Instrument (TSI), successive funding cycles have institutionalised administrative reform as a formal pillar of EU governance. The chapter argues that while the toolkit expanded in scope and sophistication, its transformative capacity varies across integration modalities, diminishing its power as the anchor of accession conditionality gives way to softer instruments of financial incentives, monitoring, and technical support.

Keywords: pre-accession conditionality; SIGMA principles; integration modalities; technical assistance; cohesion policy; EU governance

From Ad Hoc Aid to a Strategic Toolkit

In the turbulent months following 1989, as communism collapsed across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), European officials found themselves improvising support for the fledgling democracies. One former European Union (EU) enlargement adviser recalled that 'anything we could do for them was welcomed.... Those countries needed everything.... A lot of things were invented, ad hoc.... No pre-conceived long-term agenda because things happened so fast' (Interview 7, 2020). This vivid recollection captures the ad hoc spirit of the European Commission's early efforts to

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assist post-communist states. What began as improvised aid soon evolved into a more structured and strategic toolkit for public administration reform (PAR). Over the ensuing decades, the EU – and particularly the European Commission – transformed from a passive bystander into an active driver of administrative transformation in post-communist countries (Grabbe, 2006; Sedelmeier, 2011). This chapter narrates that evolution, tracing how the EU's role in PAR grew from humble beginnings into a comprehensive system of instruments, incentives, and conditions.

The end of communism was a critical juncture for CEE and the Western Balkans, unleashing a transformative wave of political and administrative change. Initially, many assumed these countries would simply reform by 'imitating' Western European institutions (Krastev & Holmes, 2018; 2019a), in a spontaneous process of Europeanisation. Yet scholars like Claus Offe and Pierre Adler argued that genuine democratic and market reforms in such adverse conditions would only be institutionally embedded if 'forced upon a society from the outside and guaranteed by international … supervision for a long period of time' (Offe & Adler, 2004, p. 509). In practice, external support and pressure did prove crucial. The EU stepped into this role of external catalyst – 'providing support from the outside' (Offe & Adler, 2004, p. 509) – by deploying financial aid, technical assistance, and eventually explicit conditions to drive reforms. Over time, the EU's efforts coalesced into what I term the Commission's PAR toolkit: a set of principles, policies, instruments, and benchmarks designed to reform core institutions of governance in partner countries.

Crucially, the EU's engagement varied by each country's relationship to the Union. This chapter structures the analysis around three broad modalities of integration with the EU, each with its own timeline and tools: (a) *Pre-accession modality* – support for candidate and potential candidate countries on the road to EU membership; (b) *Association/neighbourhood modality* – support for neighbouring states seeking closer ties with the EU, without full EU membership prospects; and (c) *Post-accession modality* – support and oversight for EU member states themselves to ensure they meet standards of 'good standing' within the Union. By examining the chronological development of the PAR toolkit in each modality, we can observe how the EU's approach evolved from improvised aid to a codified, conditional, and institutionalised system. We will see how the Commission's toolkit expanded in scope – from focusing narrowly on CEE candidates to encompassing the Western Balkans, then the Eastern Neighbours, and even the Union's own member states – and how its methods shifted from carrot-and-stick conditionality toward more nuanced forms of support. Throughout,

the narrative highlights key phases, policy instruments, and strategic shifts, illustrating the EU's growing influence as well as the challenges and limits of external influence on domestic governance. Post-2020 developments are also discussed to underscore the EU's ongoing adaptations in this domain.

The Pre-accession Modality: Road Map to EU Membership

From 1989 to 1993: Laying the Democratic and Administrative Foundations

The EU's active support for post-communist administrative reform began in tandem with the very first transitions in CEE. In December 1989, only weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the European Economic Community moved to provide urgent assistance to Poland and Hungary – the front runners of democratic transition. The Council adopted Regulation 3906/89 establishing the PHARE (Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies) programme. PHARE became the foundation stone of the Commission's involvement in domestic reforms, initially focused on economic restructuring and institution building in these two countries. By the end of the 1990s, PHARE's scope widened to include Czechoslovakia and soon all CEE countries embarking on political and market reforms. In these early years, the objectives were broad – to support the transition to democracy and a market economy – and the approach was flexible and reactive, as reflected in the 'adhocary' described by practitioners (Interview 7, 2020). Even this early aid laid the foundation for the EU's PAR toolkit by funding training, advising on administrative organisation, and encouraging nascent public institutions essential for democratic governance.

A key milestone in elevating administrative reform on the EU's enlargement agenda came with the 1991 Maastricht Treaty and the deliberations it sparked on future enlargement. In 1991, EU leaders enshrined basic political conditions for membership, such as democratic institutions, respect for human rights, and a European identity, but it soon became clear that effective administration was also essential. The Commission was asked to study the implications of expanding eastwards, and it responded with a 1992 strategic paper, *Europe and the Challenge of Enlargement* (European Commission, 1992a). In this paper, the Commission warned, in what proved to be an apt assessment, that enlargement must not dilute the overall integration of the European Community; candidate countries lacking a 'functioning and competitive market economy' and an 'adequate legal and administrative framework' would struggle to integrate and might even 'harm the Union'

(European Commission, 1992a, p. 10). In other words, without capable public administrations, EU membership could be a liability rather than a benefit for both sides. To prevent this, the Commission argued that applicants needed substantial help to reach 'adequate' levels of administrative and legislative infrastructure necessary for the functioning of the market economy (European Commission, 1992a, p. 19). The administrative capacity of states was thus implicitly recognised as a criterion for accession well before it became formal doctrine. Notably, 1992 also saw the birth of SIGMA (Support for Improvement in Governance and Management), a joint initiative of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Commission, initially funded through the EU's PHARE programme (European Parliament, 1998). SIGMA provided technical expertise and crafted principles of public administration, quickly becoming an instrument through which the Commission could guide and monitor administrative reforms in CEE. Although housed at the OECD, an important aspect to note is that SIGMA is almost entirely funded by the EU, as about 98% of its budget comes from the European Commission (Interview 3, 2019). Commission and SIGMA officials describe SIGMA as effectively 'a tool in the hand of the Commission' despite being formally an OECD entity (Interview 1, 2019; Interview 2, 2019; Interview 3, 2019; Interview 4, 2019; Interview 8, 2020). This institutional setup was chosen originally to give SIGMA more political neutrality, as an OECD initiative rather than an overt EU intervention.

In June 1993, these emerging ideas culminated in the Copenhagen criteria, formally adopted by the European Council. Alongside political and economic conditions, the criteria required that candidate states build the institutional capacity to uphold European norms. While 'good governance' was not explicitly named, stable institutions and the rule of law were emphasised, implying that a professional and effective administration was expected. Indeed, the Copenhagen criteria marked the EU's de facto commitment to promoting good governance in entrants. That same year, the EU invited CEE countries to apply for membership and designated PHARE as the main financial instrument of a comprehensive pre-accession strategy. The Commission and candidate governments signed Interim Agreements to cooperate on administrative improvements. By 1993, the principle was established: preparing for EU membership would necessarily involve reforming public administration, even if the exact standards were still being fleshed out.

From 1994 to 1998: Building the Framework for Accession

With more CEE countries lining up for membership, the mid-1990s saw the EU systematically link administrative reform to the accession process.

At the 1994 Essen Summit, EU leaders launched a pre-accession strategy aimed at ensuring that associated countries put in place the legislation and administrative structures needed for EU membership. The message was clear: it was not enough to adopt EU laws on paper; countries needed the bureaucratic machinery to implement and enforce those laws. The Commission reinforced this point in its influential 1995 white paper on integrating CEE countries into the internal market. As the paper bluntly stated, 'The main challenge … lies not in the approximation of legal texts, but in adapting their administrative machinery and their societies to make the legislation work' (European Commission, 1995a, p. 23). In short, adopting EU rules required overhauling institutions, retraining officials, and creating new regulatory bodies – a complex process of administrative transformation. The white paper urged each country to establish training facilities for civil servants and judges, and it pledged that the EU would help transfer its administrative know-how. Although the white paper had no legal force, it proved highly influential: at the December 1995 meeting of the European Council in Madrid, the EU's political leaders echoed its themes, stressing the reinforcement of administrative structures in candidates as a precondition for accession (European Commission, 2019b). The Commission's technocratic insights had thus permeated the political agenda.

During this period, the Commission also started to expand and refine its toolkit of assistance. By 1996, PHARE's geographic reach had expanded to 13 partner countries, encompassing the Central and Eastern European states, the Baltic states (beneficiaries since 1991, following their independence from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics [USSR]), and, more recently, Western Balkan states such as the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Meanwhile, the Commission established new instruments dedicated to institutional capacity building. A notable innovation was the Technical Assistance and Information Exchange (TAIEX) instrument in 1996 – a rapid deployment tool sending experts from EU member states to advise their counterparts in candidate countries. TAIEX was conceived as a short-term 'know-how shuttle', complementing larger projects by quickly familiarising candidate administrations with EU rules and best practices. The multiplication of such instruments signalled a shift: the EU's support was becoming more structured and targeted, moving beyond general economic aid toward specific interventions to retool public administrations.

In 1997, the Commission explicitly reframed its approach to PHARE and related assistance from being demand-driven (i.e. responding to recipient requests) to accession-driven (i.e. focused on EU requirements) (European Commission, 1997). In a March 1997 note, the Commission identified the

'institutional and administrative capacity of the candidate countries' as a key problem for enlargement, declaring it one of PHARE's top priorities (OECD-SIGMA, 1998, p. 124). In practical terms, this meant PHARE funding would be guided by the European Commission's Opinions (Avis) on each application for membership – essentially conditioning aid on the gaps identified in meeting accession criteria. Rather than waiting for countries to ask for help, the Commission would prioritise projects that addressed weaknesses highlighted in the EU's own assessments – effectively transitioning EU assistance from a reactive resource into a proactive tool for compliance.

This more assertive stance was embodied in the Commission's landmark Agenda 2000, unveiled in July 1997. Agenda 2000 not only recommended enlarging the Union and outlined reforms to EU policies, it also bolstered the pre-accession instruments (European Commission, 1997). The Commission proposed a significant reinforcement of PHARE for 1998–1999 and the creation of new funds after 2000 to support the impending eastern enlargement. Agenda 2000 delivered a frank assessment that the candidates were 'not yet prepared' for membership and urged intensified reforms to build administrative capacity (European Commission, 1997). Based on the Commission's detailed Opinions on each candidate (released as part of Agenda 2000), it was clear that administrative shortcomings – from weak civil services to inadequate regulatory agencies – were widespread. The Commission thus made strengthening administrative and institutional capacity a top priority, explicitly linking it to the ability to assume the obligations of membership. From this point forward, any country hoping to join the EU had to demonstrate not just the willingness to adopt European rules, but also the capacity to implement and enforce them.

A flurry of concrete measures followed. The Accession Partnerships, detailing EU road maps tailored to each candidate country, embedded public administration reform as a binding requirement, translating normative expectations into operational conditionality. The Commission also launched the Twinning programme in 1998, pairing administrative institutions in candidate states with counterparts in member states to provide structured, practitioner-led guidance throughout the reform process. Rather than simply prescribing standards from Brussels, Twinning sought to transfer institutional knowledge and working practices through sustained peer-to-peer engagement. By the end of the 1990s, the Commission's PAR toolkit under the pre-accession modality had matured into an integrated architecture: financial instruments anchored by PHARE, technical assistance delivered through TAIEX and Twinning, and policy frameworks provided by white papers and Accession Partnerships, all bound together

by an increasingly robust conditionality logic. The groundwork had thus been laid for what would crystallise into an informal administrative *acquis*: the shared understanding that a professional, merit-based, and politically neutral civil service was a baseline expectation for any future member state, and a particularly pressing imperative for the post-communist candidates whose inherited administrative structures diverged most sharply from European standards.

From 1999 to 2013: Administrative Reform as Informal Precondition for EU Membership

Around the turn of the millennium, the EU's insistence on administrative reform as part of enlargement became even more concrete. In 1999, at the Commission's request, SIGMA published the first edition of the *European Principles for Public Administration*. This document codified the core requirements for a 'well-functioning' public administration that candidate countries were expected to meet. These included reliability and predictability (referring to the guarantee of the democratic rule of law through legal certainty of administrative actions and decisions); openness and transparency (aimed at securing rigorous scrutiny of administrative actions and their outcomes, in line with pre-established rules); accountability (aimed at ensuring the compliance of politicians and civil servants with the rule of law); efficiency (in the use of public resources); and effectiveness (in terms of enforcing legislation and in accomplishing the policy goals established in legislation) (OECD-SIGMA, 1999). Although not an official part of the EU *acquis*, these principles gained an almost canonical status in guiding accession preparations (Interview 1, 2019; Interview 8, 2020). Indeed, as of 1999 SIGMA also began conducting annual assessments of each candidate country's progress in administrative reform, feeding their findings directly into the European Commission's yearly progress reports. In effect, the Commission now had a monitoring mechanism to judge candidates' bureaucracies against European best practices, creating an informal conditionality: fall short on administrative principles, and your EU bid would suffer. This was a remarkable development – a domain traditionally guarded as a 'core state power' was now subject to external scrutiny. While the EU lacked any formal legal competence to dictate how a country organised its administration, the political conditionality of enlargement enabled the Commission to influence this sensitive area.

The years 2000–2004 were the final ramp-up to the EU's 'big bang' enlargement. The imminence of membership for many CEE countries lent urgency to consolidating reforms. The European Council meetings and Commission

strategy papers of this period consistently hammered home the message that candidates must shore up administrative capacity to effectively apply the *acquis communautaire*. The 2000 Nice European Council reaffirmed that criteria must be met in full; by 2002–2003, as accession treaties were being signed, the Commission was spotlighting lingering weaknesses in judicial and administrative systems, in some cases setting 'benchmarks' to be fulfilled even after accession (notably via transitional measures or post-accession monitoring for Romania and Bulgaria). In short, administrative reform became an informal gatekeeper for entry into the Union – no country could join without at least a blueprint for a professional public administration.

Parallel to these developments, the EU adjusted its assistance instruments for the final pre-accession stretch. In 2000, recognising the different needs of the Western Balkans (most of which were not as advanced in the accession process), the EU established the CARDS (Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation) programme. CARDS replaced PHARE in the Western Balkan region for 2000–2006, reflecting the shift from post-war reconstruction to institution building under the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP). Importantly, the CARDS regulation explicitly listed 'institutional and administrative reform' as a top priority and introduced multi-annual planning frameworks for aid (Council Regulation No. 2666/2000). This was a step up from the early 1990s PHARE, which had little upfront conditionality or long-term programming. In essence, the EU was learning from a decade of enlargement experience: assistance needed to be tied to strategies and conditions to be effective. For the Balkans, this meant no blank checks – aid would follow a country strategic paper, multi-year indicative programmes, and annual action plans, all aligned with reform objectives. This more disciplined approach mirrored what had been evolving for the CEE candidates and foreshadowed the structured instruments of the next decade.

The enlargement of 2004 (with eight post-communist countries from CEE, plus Cyprus and Malta) and 2007 (Romania and Bulgaria) tested the results of this pre-accession modality. By and large, the EU's heavy investment in administrative reform paid off in formal compliance: all new members had created modern civil service laws, reorganised ministries and agencies, and built regulatory institutions required to implement EU law. The Commission's PAR toolkit was instrumental in these achievements. Administrative reform had become one of the fundamental pillars upon which the enlargement rested. The credibility of the promise of membership propelled candidates to undertake arduous reforms that might otherwise have stalled. However, the EU also learned that willingness and capacity to reform can diverge.

While the lure of membership ensured willingness, their capacity to absorb reforms varied, and some changes were superficial. After accession, the limitations of this approach became apparent: in several new member states, administrative reforms stagnated or were partially reversed once the disciplining pressure of pre-accession conditionality had been removed. Persistent corruption within public administration further underscored the gap between formal compliance achieved prior to membership and substantive institutional consolidation (Dimitrova, 2010). These outcomes tempered the triumphal narrative and taught the EU a crucial lesson: how reforms are adopted domestically – the depth of local ownership and the strength of institutions – determines their sustainability. This insight would later inform the EU's post-accession and neighbourhood strategies, where the emphasis on monitoring and enforcement grew stronger.

Before turning to those phases, it is worth noting the institutionalisation of the pre-accession toolkit by the mid-2000s. In 2006, the EU rolled all its pre-accession instruments, including PHARE and CARDS, into a single framework: the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA). IPA I (2007–2013) and later IPA II (2014–2020) continued to provide extensive funding for candidate and potential candidate countries, with one of their key priorities explicitly being PAR. Under IPA, assistance was conditioned on the existence of national PAR strategies – by 2007, a candidate country had to adopt a clear strategy for PAR, in line with EU requirements, to unlock IPA funds. This effectively mandated that aspirants have a reform road map, completing the shift from the ad hoc aid of 1990 to a fully strategy-driven, conditional aid system.

From 2014 Onward: Administrative Reform as a Formal Pillar of EU Enlargement

The landscape shifted significantly in 2014 with the launch of the 'Fundamentals First' approach, which elevated PAR alongside rule of law and economic governance as one of the three core pillars of the EU's enlargement strategy (European Commission, 2014a). From this point on, administrative reform was no longer a loose precondition but became a formal benchmark for EU accession progress. This shift was institutionalised through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) II Regulation 231/2014, which identified four strategic objectives for EU support: political reforms, socio-economic development, preparation for membership, and regional cooperation. Political reform priorities included strengthening public administration and good governance. A notable innovation introduced by IPA II was the use of country-specific and multi-country Indicative Strategy Papers, jointly

drafted by the Commission and national authorities. These documents explicitly defined reform priorities and set measurable indicators for tracking progress, thereby increasing the transparency and accountability of EU assistance (European Commission, 2014c).

In parallel, the Commission began requesting annual SIGMA assessments of each candidate's progress against a new set of *The Principles of Public Administration*, published in 2014 and updated in 2016 for ENP countries. These assessments included both baseline measurement reports and monitoring reports, which fed directly into the Commission's annual Enlargement progress reports. This formalised the EU's ability to systematically evaluate each country's reform trajectory and tailor its technical and financial support accordingly. A further milestone came with the 2018 Enlargement Communication, *A Credible Enlargement Perspective for an Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans*, which embedded PAR in the revised cluster-based methodology for negotiations (European Commission, 2018d). The new framework stipulates that the Fundamentals cluster – of which public administration and the rule of law are key pillars – is to be opened first and closed last, reinforcing the centrality of state capacity and governance to the EU accession process. Notably, the Communication underscored that administrative reform was not just a technical exercise but a political necessity, calling on governments to mobilise domestic support and make full use of available EU reform assistance instruments (European Commission, 2018d, p. 6).

Together, these changes marked a paradigmatic shift in the EU's approach: from encouraging administrative reform as part of the general accession process to requiring it as a formal, monitored, and benchmarked pillar of integration. In this context, the EU's influence became more structured, measurable, and conditional. The pre-accession modality thus institutionalised administrative reform through a combination of credible membership incentives, benchmarked conditionality, and structured technical assistance. Its effectiveness rested not only on financial magnitude, but also on the credibility of accession and the sequencing of compliance incentives.

The Association/Neighbourhood Modality: Road Map to Closer Partnership

From 1991 to 1999: Post-Soviet Technical Assistance

Even as the EU was deeply engaged in preparing CEE countries for membership in the 1990s, it faced a different challenge to the east: the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. For these countries – including

Ukraine, Moldova, the Caucasus republics, and Central Asia – EU membership was not on offer (apart from the Baltic states, who pursued accession). Nevertheless, the EU had an interest in promoting stability and reform in its wider neighbourhood. In 1991, the European Community launched the TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States[1]) programme to aid the ex-Soviet republics – except for the Baltics, which were covered by PHARE. In TACIS's initial design, economic reform and recovery were the prime focus; the 1991 regulation notably omitted explicit references to democracy or good governance. Some support was provided for 'public sector management training', but political-institutional reform was not front and centre (Regulation, 1991). This reflected the cautious optimism of the early 1990s, when the EU's strategy was more about emergency assistance and fostering market economies, assuming political institutions would gradually follow. Administrative reform was a secondary concern, tackled indirectly through training and advice.

By the end of the decade, however, the EU recognised that merely offering technical aid without governance conditionality had limitations. Many post-Soviet states were drifting toward weak governance or semi-authoritarianism, and the lack of administrative capacity was hindering economic transition. In 1999, the EU overhauled TACIS for the 2000–2006 period (Regulation 99/2000) to explicitly include promoting democracy, rule of law, and PAR as objectives. Administrative reform was elevated as a top priority in the new TACIS framework. Just as in CEE, the EU's approach in the neighbourhood shifted from a demand-driven, partner-led logic to a more assertive stance linking assistance to specific reforms. The revised TACIS regulation sought a constructive dialogue rather than a response to demands, and aimed to fund fewer but larger projects for bigger impact (European Commission, 2002d). We see here the seeds of conditionality and strategic focus being planted in the neighbourhood context: the EU signalled it would invest where there was commitment to reforms promoting democratic governance.

From 2000 to 2010: The European Neighbourhood Policy and 'More-for-More'

The early 2000s brought a turning point in the EU's relations with its neighbours, driven in large part by the forthcoming enlargement. Anticipating that the 2004 eastward expansion would put the EU in

1 The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries are: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan.

direct contact with countries like Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova as new immediate neighbours, the Commission advanced the idea of a 'Wider Europe' framework. In March 2003, it published *Wider Europe – Neighbourhood*, a strategy paper outlining a new approach to the eastern and southern neighbours after enlargement (European Commission, 2003b). Central to this approach was a grand offer: if neighbouring countries demonstrated concrete progress in political, economic, and institutional reforms (including approximating EU laws), they would be given, in return, a stake in the EU's internal market and greater access to EU assistance (European Commission, 2003b, p. 10). This effectively extended a conditional incentive system to non-members: while full membership was not promised, significant integration and aid were on the table in return for governance reforms. The *Wider Europe* paper explicitly linked institutional and administrative reform to the benefits neighbours could reap. It pledged close partnership and capacity-building help for those willing to align with EU norms.

To operationalise this vision, the EU and partner countries developed Association Agendas and action plans by 2004–2005, which set out reform agendas with short- and medium-term priorities, often spanning areas such as public administration, rule of law, and economic policy. These plans became the reference for both sides: they guided EU assistance programming and served as benchmarks to assess progress in each country. The Commission made clear that new benefits, such as increased aid, trade privileges, and easier mobility, would be conditioned on meeting reform targets agreed in the action plans. This policy came to be known as the 'more-for-more' principle: the more a country reforms, the more the EU will offer in support and integration. In practice, this introduced an element of competition and incentive in the Neighbourhood Policy.

One concrete outgrowth was the extension of institution-building tools to neighbours. In 2003, the successful Twinning instrument (used in candidate states) was opened to countries that had signed Association or Partnership agreements with the EU. This allowed, for example, ministry officials in Georgia or Ukraine to receive on-the-ground mentoring from their EU member state counterparts, much as Polish or Latvian officials had during pre-accession. Such transfers of expertise were critical for reforming administrative structures to align with European requirements and standards. In 2004, the Commission formally launched the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) with a Strategy Paper (European Commission, 2004), emphasising mutual commitment to common values like rule of law, good governance, and respect for human rights as the foundation of

'privileged relationships' (European Commission, 2003b). It stated plainly that the ambition of each partnership would reflect the extent to which these values are shared. The Strategy Paper highlighted improving the functioning of public institutions and administrative efficiency as a shared interest of the EU and its partners. Thus, from the start, the ENP treated PAR as a precondition for deepening ties. Good governance was not just an altruistic goal but seen as essential for neighbours to fully benefit from EU initiatives.

In financial terms, the EU streamlined its support by creating the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) in 2006 (for the 2007–2013 budget period). The ENPI regulation explicitly made supporting institutional and administrative capacity for good governance and rule of law a priority, listing it alongside other objectives, such as economic development and fighting corruption. To further incentivise progress, in late 2006 the Commission introduced a dedicated Governance Facility – essentially bonus funds under ENPI – for countries that showed strong commitment and performance on reform priorities in their action plans, including PAR. This allowed the Commission to annually monitor reforms and reward top performers, adding a strong performance-based angle to aid allocation.

By the end of the 2000s, the EU afforded a stronger focus to its relations with post-communist countries from Eastern Europe, with the launch of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009, targeting Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The EaP set ambitious long-term goals, and notably, among its '20 Deliverables for 2020' was a specific one on PAR (Deliverable #11) to 'support the implementation of public administration reform' in partner countries. This made PAR one of the key priorities under the EaP's 'stronger governance' pillar. In parallel, the Union continued to update its principles: in 2016, SIGMA issued a tailored set of the *Principles of Public Administration* for ENP countries, recognising that not all partners aspire to EU membership and that guidance must be adapted. These principles were a condensed version of those for candidates – less prescriptive but still providing a road map for sound administration.

Post-2010 Developments

The ENP was revised in 2011 and 2015 to become more flexible and responsive, with the funding instrument being renamed as the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) for the programming period 2014–2020. Under the ENI, the EU doubled down on the incentive-based model: assistance was explicitly tied to progress on democracy and governance reforms,

with the 'more-for-more' principle guiding allocations. This meant partner governments had to not only commit on paper but show genuine progress to unlock full funding. In practice, countries like Tunisia (in the Southern Neighbourhood) benefited from increased aid as they advanced reforms after 2011, whereas others saw funds reallocated when reforms stalled. The EU also increased support for civil society and local governance, recognising that top-down reform needs bottom-up demand to sustain it. By 2020, the Neighbourhood Policy had come to embody a comprehensive, if challenging, approach: political dialogue, targeted financial aid, technical Twinning, policy benchmarks, and conditional rewards all intertwined to promote better governance next door to the EU.

The association/neighbourhood modality thus institutionalised PAR under structurally weaker incentive conditions than enlargement. Although financial assistance expanded and administrative standards were increasingly codified through Association Agreements, action plans, and SIGMA assessments, the absence of a credible and time-bound membership perspective fundamentally altered the leverage structure. Conditionality operated through differentiation and 'more-for-more' logic, yet rewards were neither existential nor irreversible. Administrative reform benchmarks could guide reform agendas, but their enforcement relied on persuasion, financial conditionality, and reputational incentives rather than accession-linked gatekeeping. In this configuration, the European Commission's PAR toolkit functioned less as a transformative accession instrument and more as a capacity-building and coordination framework, whose effectiveness depended heavily on domestic political commitment and institutional receptivity. The neighbourhood experience therefore illustrates how similar reform instruments operate differently when detached from the hard anchor of enlargement conditionality.

Looking at recent shifts, the EU's willingness to adapt is evident. The geopolitical earthquake of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine prompted the EU to take an unprecedented step: in June 2022, Ukraine and Moldova were granted EU candidate status, signalling the Union's intention to reach deep into the former Soviet Union with its transformative agenda. This historic move essentially extends enlargement-style conditionality instruments into a geopolitically volatile context. The coming years will test the EU's toolkit under extreme conditions, as Ukraine, Moldova, and other hopefuls work to meet onerous requirements in exchange for the ultimate reward of membership. These developments reaffirm that, even with its limitations, the EU's support for administrative reform remains a central pillar of its strategy to stabilise and integrate its neighbourhood.

The Post-Accession Modality: Supporting EU Member States' Governance

From 2004 to 2009: Cohesion and Convergence through Capacity Building

When the EU nearly doubled in size in 2004, an interesting paradox arose: the Commission, which had vigorously monitored candidates' reforms, suddenly lost its formal leverage once those countries became member states. Yet the need to ensure effective public administration did not vanish on accession day – in fact, it became even more crucial for the Union's functioning. How could the EU encourage continuous administrative improvement within its sovereign member states, where direct conditionality was no longer applicable? The answer emerged through the EU's Cohesion Policy and budgetary instruments. Starting with the 2007–2013 financial period, the EU embedded PAR goals into its structural funds framework, thereby incentivising member states to pursue reforms in exchange for development funding.

A pivotal step was Regulation 1083/2006, which set out provisions for the European Social Fund (ESF) and other cohesion funds for 2007–2013. For regions lagging in development – with Gross Domestic Product (GDP) below 75% of EU average – the ESF introduced a new Convergence Objective that explicitly included strengthening institutional capacity and administrative efficiency as funding priorities. In practice, this meant that less-developed member states (including many of the new CEE members, as well as southern periphery states) could use EU funds to modernise their public administrations – for example, reorganising ministries, training civil servants, and improving the delivery of public services. The Community Strategic Guidelines on Cohesion (adopted by the Council in 2006) reinforced this, calling on convergence regions to 'build up public administrations and public services at national, regional and local level' (Council of the European Union, 2006). Even the EU's Lisbon Treaty (ratified in 2007, in force since 2009) underscored administrative capacity: Article 197 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU recognised that effective implementation of Union law by member states is essential for the Union and that the EU may support national efforts to improve administrative capacity, while stopping short of any harmonisation of laws. In other words, there was now a treaty-sanctioned rationale for the EU to assist member states in this field – albeit only voluntarily and without infringing sovereignty.

To operationalise these goals, each eligible member state negotiated a National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF) with the Commission

for 2007–2013. The NSRF outlined how EU structural funds would be used nationally and often included strategies for administrative reform. The Commission thus gained a subtle but significant tool: through the NSRF and related Operational Programmes, it could influence domestic reform priorities by attaching funding to them. Essentially, money became the carrot to induce reforms that the EU could not mandate by law. The Commission, guarding the EU's financial interests, also had an implicit stick: if a member state's administration was too weak to properly manage EU funds, the Commission could suspend payments or require corrective measures. Thus, the post-accession period saw the Commission begin to interfere with core state powers for the sake of the general interest of the EU – not by legal diktat, but via financial conditionality and partnership agreements.

From 2010 to 2020: Crisis, Conditionality, and the Rise of Reform Support

The global financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent Eurozone crisis had profound effects on the EU's approach to governance in member states. As economic turmoil exposed governance failures – such as in the case of the Greek debt crisis, which partly stemmed from administrative weaknesses in tax collection and public finance management – the EU was compelled to take a more intrusive role in coordinating and supporting structural reforms in its member states. In 2010, the EU launched the Europe 2020 Strategy aimed at smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth. Under Europe 2020, the Commission explicitly tied progress on various reforms – including public administration improvements – to the delivery of EU funding and to new monitoring mechanisms. For instance, the allocation of some structural funds was made contingent on alignment with Europe 2020 targets, incentivising countries to pursue reform agendas consistent with EU recommendations.

A major innovation was the creation of the European Semester in 2010, a yearly cycle of economic and budgetary policy coordination for all member states. As part of the Semester, the Commission and Council issue country-specific recommendations (CSRs) each year, advising (and to some extent pressuring) national governments to implement certain reforms. Initially focused on fiscal and macroeconomic issues, by 2012–2013 the CSRs began addressing the quality of public administration, recognising that effective governance is integral to economic stability. These recommendations might urge, for example, the depoliticisation of civil service, reduction of red tape, or improvement of judicial efficiency. While the CSRs are not legally binding, they carry political weight and are backed by the threat of sanctions under macroeconomic imbalance or budget rules, if ignored. This marked a new

compliance-oriented approach within the EU: in candidate and neighbourhood countries the Commission had conditionality tied to accession or aid, and now in member states it wielded surveillance and financial oversight tools to similar effect. The logic was converging – whether to join the EU or to benefit fully as a member, you had to adhere to certain standards of good governance, with the EU providing guidance and consequences.

Further cementing this, the regulations for the 2014–2020 European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIFs) introduced a series of ex-ante conditionalities. One crucial ex-ante conditionality (Thematic Objective 11 – TO11) required that member states have 'a strategic policy framework for reinforcing member states' administrative efficiency, including public administration reform' in place to receive funding for institutional capacity projects (Regulation [EU] No 1303/2013, p. 134). In practice, before a country could use EU funds for administrative modernisation, it needed to adopt a comprehensive PAR strategy with clear priorities, timelines, and monitoring arrangements. This was a way to force countries to plan reforms more seriously – effectively making an EU payment contingent on reform commitment upfront. Additionally, a Performance Framework was established: countries had to meet certain targets (output and result indicators) by mid-term to unlock reserve funding. If they fell short, the Commission could reallocate funds or impose corrections to avoid 'wasteful or inefficient' use of the EU budget (Regulation [EU] No 1303/2013, p. 4). These mechanisms gave the Commission sharper teeth – carrots and sticks – even when dealing with sovereign member administrations. It was a delicate dance: the EU could not directly tell a member state how to reform its civil service – that remains a core state power that is nationally guarded – but by attaching strings to funding, it strongly steered national choices. The Commission had effectively become an actor in domestic PAR across the Union, leveraging its role as guardian of EU finances and coordinator of economic policy to advance a governance agenda.

In parallel to using sticks, the EU also developed new support instruments to offer direct help. The crises revealed that some member states lacked not just the will, but also the technical capacity to design and implement complex reforms. To address this, the Commission launched the Structural Reform Support Programme (SRSP) in 2017. The SRSP, run by the newly created Structural Reform Support Service (SRSS), allowed any member state to request technical assistance for carrying out growth-enhancing administrative and structural reforms. With a relatively modest budget but high expertise, it funded expert missions, diagnostic studies, and hands-on help for reforms, ranging from improving tax administration to overhauling

healthcare systems. The idea was to foster reforms even in politically sensitive areas by providing neutral, outside expertise and by sharing best practices drawn from around Europe. Alongside this, the Commission bolstered its Better Regulation agenda – issuing a comprehensive *Better Regulation Toolbox* (2015, updated 2017) to guide policymakers on evidence-based law-making and effective implementation. It also published *Quality of Public Administration: A toolbox for Practitioners* in 2015 (revised 2017), an extensive compendium of best practices and guidance for modernising administrations, compiled by an internal Commission interservice group. Such knowledge tools are meant to disseminate lessons learned and to encourage a culture of continuous improvement in administrations across the EU. They positioned the Commission not just as a disciplinarian, but as a partner and coach in pursuit of better governance.

Post-2020 Developments: Resilience, Recovery, and Security

In the wake of 2020, the European Commission significantly ramped up its support for PARs within EU member states. To spearhead these efforts, in January 2020 the Commission created a new Directorate-General, the Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM, reorganised into the Commission's Secretariat-General in February 2025), elevating the former Structural Reform Support Service (SRSS) into a permanent structure. DG REFORM's mandate was to help EU countries build more effective institutions, stronger governance frameworks, and efficient public administrations, thereby reinforcing their capacity to design and implement growth-enhancing policies. This institutional move marked a further step in European integration – the Union further entering the realm of national administration, an area once thought too sovereign to touch, under the justification of common interest in effective governance. Thus, in 2021, a dedicated Technical Support Instrument (TSI) was launched as the successor to the SRSP (2017–2020), providing tailor-made technical expertise to design and implement reforms. With a €864 million budget for 2021–2027, the TSI covers a wide range of policy areas – from climate and health to digital transition and public administration – but it certainly has PAR as a clear priority: by 2025 the Commission reports supporting over 1,800 reform projects in all 27 member states, including efforts to improve the capacity and efficiency of public administrations and to modernise service delivery (European Commission, 2025c).

The COVID-19 crisis itself underscored the urgency of administrative reforms, particularly through the creation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) under NextGenerationEU. Launched in 2021, the RRF made

up to €723.8 billion available to member states for investments and reforms to emerge stronger from the pandemic. Crucially, each national recovery plan had to address country-specific reform recommendations and dedicate at least 37% of its funding to climate measures and at least 20% to digital measures (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2021). This requirement put a spotlight on the digitalisation of public services and government processes, which the RRF explicitly supports as part of strengthening societal resilience. The RRF's performance-based payouts (funds are disbursed only when agreed reform milestones are met) further incentivised governments to implement long-pending administrative reforms.

Resilience and security have also become central to administrative reform in the post-2020 era. Geopolitical tensions and hybrid warfare threats, including cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns, mean that public authorities must be more robust than ever. The EU has responded by tightening security requirements and offering support to protect critical public infrastructure and data. For example, the new NIS2 Directive (adopted in 2022) expanded the scope of cybersecurity obligations to include public administration as an essential sector (Directive [EU] 2022/2555). This change was driven by stark evidence that government bodies have become prime targets of cyberattacks, with public administration being one of the most targeted sectors in Europe (EIPA, 2025). Under NIS2, national and local authorities are now required to implement comprehensive cybersecurity measures, and the Commission – along with the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) and other bodies – is guiding and monitoring compliance. Through the TSI, the Commission has funded projects to improve cyber-resilience in government, as the TSI explicitly prioritises digital and governance reforms. The overarching goal is to ensure that state authorities remain capable and trustworthy guardians of citizen safety and data in the digital age, from defending against hacking and data breaches to maintaining continuity of public services during crises. The Commission's post-2020 efforts thus reflect a renewed commitment to the idea that EU membership entails not only rights and funds, but also a shared responsibility to uphold administrative excellence – a prerequisite for the Union's functionality and success in the digital era.

The institutional consolidation of the PAR toolkit across enlargement, neighbourhood, and post-accession settings therefore calls for a closer examination of how its normative standards, instruments, and incentives operate in practice. The following chapter takes up this task by operationalising the toolkit through an Input–Throughput–Output analytical framework, disaggregating its constituent elements, including discursive and strategic instruments, financial programmes, and technical assistance

mechanisms, and lays the foundation for examining how these are translated into domestic institutional action and, ultimately, into reform outputs across the three integration settings examined in this study.

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5. The EU's Public Administration Reform Toolkit Through an Input–Throughput–Output Lens

Abstract: This chapter operationalises the European Commission's public administration reform (PAR) toolkit through an Input–Throughput–Output analytical framework. It identifies three categories of inputs – discursive and strategic instruments, financial programmes, and technical assistance mechanisms – and examines how these are translated into domestic action through EU institutional coordination, engagement with national authorities, and monitoring practices. The chapter then disaggregates reform outputs into three analytically distinct domains: formal structures and processes, human resources and professionalisation, and administrative systems and tools. By distinguishing between initial institutional redesign and the sustainable embedding of new practices, the chapter establishes the analytical template applied to Romania, Serbia, and Moldova in the empirical chapters that follow.

Keywords: Twinning; TAIEX; reform sustainability; professionalisation; administrative capacity; institutional redesign

Introduction

The European Commission's structured bundle of normative standards, financial instruments, and technical assistance mechanisms designed to promote administrative capacity building and modernisation across different integration frameworks is collectively referred to throughout this book as the public administration reform (PAR) toolkit. While its origins lie in the post-communist transition and the articulation of European principles of public

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administration through the SIGMA (Support for Improvement in Governance and Management) programme, the toolkit today operates as an integrated intervention architecture. It combines soft-law guidance and benchmarking with financial conditionality and capacity-building, and instruments such as Twinning and TAIEX (Technical Assistance and Information Exchange). By linking normative expectations to material incentives and monitoring frameworks, the Commission seeks to translate administrative standards into institutional change. The analytical task of this chapter is not to retrace the toolkit's historical evolution (outlined in Chapter 4), but to examine the PAR toolkit through an Input–Throughput–Output framework. Input refers to the normative standards, financial instruments, and technical assistance mechanisms deployed by the Commission to promote administrative reform. Throughput captures the institutional and political processes through which these instruments are translated into domestic action, including internal European Union (EU) coordination, engagement with national authorities, and monitoring practices. Output concerns the institutional and organisational changes that result from these interventions, and the extent to which they consolidate over time.

The analysis proceeds by examining how these three dimensions interact. First, it identifies the core components of the toolkit and their strategic deployment. Second, it assesses the institutional pathways through which EU intervention is processed. Third, it evaluates the observable administrative effects and their limitations. This structure allows for a systematic assessment of not only what the Commission does, but how its interventions travel through domestic systems and under what conditions they translate into sustainable reform outcomes.

Input

In the context of EU-supported administrative reform, 'input' encompasses the policy instruments, financial resources, and expertise that the European Commission – often in partnership with other institutions – deploys to initiate or encourage changes in domestic governance. These inputs can be broadly categorised into: (a) discursive and strategic inputs – the ideas, norms, and plans that shape reform agendas; (b) financial instruments – funding programmes and conditional aid that resource reforms; and (c) technical assistance and peer exchange tools – mechanisms that deliver expertise and build capacity on the ground. Together, the inputs form the toolkit's arsenal that the Commission uses

to influence national public administrations despite having no direct regulatory power over them.

Discursive and Strategic Inputs

A foundational input in the EU's PAR toolkit is the set of normative guidelines and strategies that define what 'good governance' means in the European context. Chief among these are common European principles for public administration developed by the SIGMA programme. At the Commission's request (Interview 1, 2019; Interview 8, 2020; OECD-SIGMA, 1999), SIGMA distilled the principles (reliability and predictability, openness and transparency, accountability, effectiveness, and efficiency) into a comprehensive framework (first released as *European Principles for Public Administration* in 1999 and updated in 2014, 2016, 2017, and 2023). These principles serve as an ideational input: they articulate a vision of modern public administration that candidate and partner countries are expected to strive for. In 2023, SIGMA issued a revised edition of the principles to incorporate the latest best practices and lessons from recent crises. Notably, the 2023 revision merged what had been separate frameworks for enlargement and neighbourhood countries into a single set of standards and extended their relevance to regional and local levels of government. The principles thus provide a discursive blueprint for reform – a yardstick against which countries' administrative performance can be evaluated and a guide for designing reform strategies.

Alongside such normative frameworks, the Commission uses strategy papers and action plans as inputs to steer reforms. For example, during the enlargement process, the European Commission annually issues enlargement strategy documents and country progress reports that outline priority reform areas (including public administration) for each candidate. Similarly, country-specific strategy papers, partnership agendas, or action plans set out targets for improvements in governance. Many beneficiary countries, often with technical assistance from the EU, also develop their own PAR strategies – medium-term plans aligning national goals with European principles. The existence of a national PAR strategy, with clear objectives, timelines, and assigned leadership, is itself a key SIGMA principle of good administration. The EU encourages and sometimes financially supports the drafting of such strategies, considering them an important policy instrument to ensure local ownership of the reform agenda.

The EU also relies on evaluative documents as inputs that create reform pressure through assessment and comparison. In the pre-accession and neighbourhood context, SIGMA's baseline measurement reports and subsequent

monitoring reports are crucial. These annual assessments measure each country's alignment with the *Principles of Public Administration* using quantitative indicators and qualitative analysis. The reports score performance in areas such as civil service professionalism, policy development capacity, service delivery, and public financial management, providing a baseline and tracking progress over time. By making these findings public, the Commission creates soft pressure on governments to improve scores and address identified weaknesses. There is a clear analogy to the Commission's European Semester process for EU member states, where since 2011 country-specific recommendations (CSRs) have included advice on improving administrative efficiency. SIGMA's monitoring reports for candidate states and neighbourhood states as well as the CSRs for member states are evaluative inputs meant to spur reform by benchmarking performance and recommending actions. Another example of an evaluative input is the European Commission's Rule of Law Reports (for member states) and similar scorecards, which, while broader, often touch upon administrative capacity. Thus, the Commission's 'soft governance' tools – principles, strategies, and evaluations – form a discursive toolkit that defines reform content and keeps it on the agenda. These inputs often precede or accompany financial aid, creating the narrative and rationale for why certain administrative reforms are needed.

Financial Instruments

Financial resources are a second critical category of inputs in the EU's PAR toolkit. The European Commission has progressively developed funding programmes and financial instruments that provide the monetary support and incentives for countries to undertake governance reforms. Administrative transformation entails organisational restructuring, training, information systems development, and regulatory redesign – all of which generate fiscal and coordination costs. EU funding instruments therefore operate not only as technical support, but also as incentive structures that reduce the domestic political cost of reform while linking financial access to compliance with European administrative standards. Two broad categories can be distinguished: multiannual programmatic funding and performance-based financial instruments.

Programmatic Funds

Since the 1990s, the EU has earmarked significant programmatic funding for administrative reform, particularly in enlargement and neighbourhood

contexts. In Central and Eastern Europe, the PHARE (Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies) programme played a central role in institutional capacity building during the 1990s and early 2000s, including the reform of civil service systems and regulatory frameworks. This was followed by the creation of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) in 2007, which consolidated previous funding schemes under one umbrella. IPA Phase I (2007–2013), IPA II (2014–2020), and the ongoing IPA III (2021–2027) have consistently designated PAR as a priority area, with a strong emphasis on professionalisation, meritocracy, and e-government. In the EU's eastern and southern neighbourhoods, the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) and later the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) allocated funds for institutional development, often in tandem with Twinning and TAIEX projects. Since 2021, the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI-GE) has absorbed these instruments, continuing support for PAR and extending the use of Twinning/TAIEX tools beyond traditional borders. Inside the EU, the European Social Fund (ESF) has supported institutional development, especially in newer or less-developed member states. Under Thematic Objective 11 (TO11, ESF 2014–2020) and the current European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) for the programming period 2021–2027, ESF funds have contributed to digitalisation, human resource management (HRM), and administrative efficiency. These resources complement the Commission's broader policy coordination mechanisms, such as the European Semester, by providing tangible support for the implementation of governance recommendations. By earmarking and mainstreaming funding for administrative reform, the EU made PAR not only a strategic priority but a financed one – ensuring that reform objectives were underpinned by practical resources.

Performance-Based Instruments

Alongside multi-annual programmatic funds, the European Commission has progressively developed performance-based instruments to reinforce administrative reform incentives – especially in enlargement, neighbourhood, and, more recently, member state contexts. These instruments link financial disbursements to measurable progress on agreed reform benchmarks, thereby enhancing domestic ownership and political accountability. A key modality in this category is budget support operations. Unlike traditional project funding, budget support involves direct financial transfers to a partner country's treasury, released in tranches conditional

upon the fulfilment of policy commitments and pre-defined results. In the area of PAR, such benchmarks typically include the adoption of civil service laws, improvements in merit-based recruitment, or digital transformation of services. Although long used in development contexts, budget support entered the enlargement domain only with the introduction of IPA II in 2014. This marked a strategic shift: from financing externally driven projects to enabling domestically led reforms. This reinforced the EU's shift from 'doing reforms for' countries to 'supporting reforms by' countries, while retaining leverage through conditionality. Failure to meet agreed milestones can lead to delayed or suspended payments, underscoring the performance-linked nature of this instrument. Within the EU, while not termed 'budget support', similar conditionality mechanisms exist. For example, structural funds have long been subject to macroeconomic criteria, and ex-ante conditionalities under cohesion policy function similarly, tying access to funding with reform commitments. This approach gained further traction through the introduction of innovative post-2020 instruments. By tying unprecedented levels of funding to governance outcomes, the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and the Technical Support Instrument (TSI) represent a turning point in how the EU supports reforms at home. It reinforces the idea that resilient public administration is central to Europe's future competitiveness and crisis response capacity.

Technical Assistance and Peer Exchange Tools

Financial resources and reform plans set the stage, but expertise and hands-on assistance are often required to translate goals into reality. Thus, a third pillar of the EU's PAR inputs consists of technical assistance and peer-to-peer cooperation instruments. These are the practical tools that provide recipient administrations with access to the know-how, training, and advisory services needed to implement complex reforms.

Launched in 1998 amid the Eastern enlargement, Twinning is a long-term institutional cooperation tool that pairs an administration in a beneficiary country with a counterpart in an EU member state (European Commission, 2007d). Under a Twinning project, a civil servant expert from an EU member state is sent as a Resident Twinning Advisor (RTA) to work on-site in the beneficiary administration for typically one to three years. Along with the RTA, short-term experts from various member states' administrations conduct missions, workshops, and training to help achieve the project's mandatory results. Each Twinning project is framed by a Twinning contract with specific reform objectives and is co-managed by a Project Leader in the EU member state and a counterpart in the beneficiary. Twinning's origin lay

in preparing candidates for EU membership – essentially transferring the *acquis communautaire* and administrative practices through peer mentoring. Over time it became a hallmark of EU assistance in the Neighbourhood as well.

Twinning can be seen as an input that blends financial support with in-kind expertise: the Commission finances the secondment and activities (via a grant to the member state institution), while member states contribute expertise and often some co-financing. By design, Twinning fosters a sense of partnership and European solidarity – it is cooperation between public administrations as equals. This often builds trust and networks that outlast the project. However, Twinning is also complex and relatively rigid. Setting up a Twinning project involves a detailed Twinning fiche (terms of reference) and a call for proposals to member states, which can take many months. In fact, the selection and contracting process for a Twinning partner has been known to cause start-up delays of up to two years (Interview 3, 2019; Interview 27, 2020). Because they are essentially public–public partnerships bound by formal contracts, they lack flexibility once launched, and so adapting a Twinning project to new political circumstances is difficult. Additionally, Twinning is resource-intensive – both the EU and the beneficiary must invest administrative effort, and costs can be higher than short-term consultancies due to the long deployment of experts. The Commission has continually refined the Twinning instrument – issuing updated Twinning manuals, with major updates in 2017 and 2020 – to streamline procedures and incorporate lessons learned. Notably, Twinning was traditionally limited to non-EU countries, but since 2020 it has been opened up globally. This expansion reflects Twinning's perceived success as a capacity-building tool – it is now considered part of the EU's global cooperation toolbox, supporting the Sustainable Development Goals through governance projects.

Where Twinning is long-term and comprehensive, TAIEX (Technical Assistance and Information Exchange) provides short-term, ad hoc expertise. Established in 1996, TAIEX was initially a mechanism to help candidates from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) understand and transpose EU legislation. It operates by mobilising experts from member states' administrations (or sometimes EU institutions) to deliver quick, demand-driven assistance to a beneficiary country. This can take the form of workshops, expert missions, or study visits, usually lasting only a few days. TAIEX is highly flexible: a government that needs advice on, say, drafting a freedom of information law or setting up an e-procurement system can request a TAIEX workshop, and the Commission will arrange for qualified member state practitioners to travel and share their knowledge, often within weeks.

TAIEX events often gather officials from several countries, facilitating the regional exchange of best practices.

Institutionally, TAIEX is centrally managed by the European Commission, with its administrative oversight evolving alongside the Union's shifting geographic priorities. While originally the remit of the Directorate-General for Enlargement – later known as the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), and, as of February 2025, the Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood (DG ENEST) – its management has expanded to include the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) for global development cooperation and the Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM, reorganised into the Commission's Secretariat-General in February 2025) within EU member states. Thus, one key feature is that TAIEX now serves both EU and non-EU countries. The Commission extended TAIEX to member states in certain contexts, for instance, to support peer-to-peer learning under the Structural Reform Support Programme (SRSP) or to facilitate exchange on the implementation of EU law even after accession. TAIEX represents the rapid response arm of the PAR toolkit, as it can quickly fill knowledge gaps or provide technical training without the need for a long project. However, because of its brevity, TAIEX works best in conjunction with longer projects or as a precursor to them.

In addition to Twinning and TAIEX, which rely on member state experts, the EU frequently funds technical assistance (TA) projects implemented by contracted consultants, typically through public procurement. These are projects where a consulting company (or consortium) is hired via a service contract to advise a ministry or implement a capacity-building project. Many EU-funded PAR initiatives – such as drafting civil service legislation, introducing a human resource management information system (HRMIS), or reengineering administrative processes – have been carried out by expert teams from the private sector or international organisations under Commission contracts. For example, a technical assistance project might place a team of legal and IT experts in a ministry for one year to develop an e-government service portal. The Commission uses the tendering mechanism for such services when it needs specific technical expertise not available through Twinning or when it wants to engage long-term experts outside the Twinning format.

Alongside these instruments, the Commission also relies on SIGMA's support. Apart from its normative role, SIGMA itself functions as a technical assistance instrument. Housed in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Paris, SIGMA has a standing

team of experts (around 20 in recent years) covering areas of civil service and administrative law, policymaking, and public financial management. SIGMA experts can be mobilised to provide direct advice to countries – for instance, helping a government draft a new administrative procedure law or improve its public procurement oversight. SIGMA often conducts peer reviews or assessments for governments, and its reports come with recommendations that feed into EU programming, as mentioned in Chapter 4. Over time, SIGMA's technical inputs – whether model Civil Service Laws, training events for top civil servants, or advisory missions – have been an integral part of how the EU supports PAR, especially in Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries. However, SIGMA's mandate does not extend to EU member states – it only focuses on accession and neighbourhood regions. Within the EU, similar functions are gradually being built up by the Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM)'s Competence Centre and networks like the European Public Administration Network (EUPAN).

It is also worth noting other inputs, such as peer networks or schools funded or supported by the EU. For example, the Regional School of Public Administration (ReSPA) in the Western Balkans, officially launched as an international organisation in September 2010, is funded by the European Commission to act as a training hub and network for Balkan administrations (European Commission, 2021a). It provides workshops and comparative research, and it shares EU best practices in PAR. ReSPA's work complements bilateral instruments by fostering regional cooperation and knowledge exchange. Similarly, networks such as EUPAN (for member states' top officials) and the Eastern Partnership Panel on Governance create platforms for dialogue and diffusion of administrative know-how. While these are broader than technical assistance projects, they function as discursive-technical inputs, creating communities of practice that can sustain reform momentum.

Throughput: Implementation and Coordination

Having outlined the main inputs of the PAR toolkit, we now proceed to examine the throughput, i.e. the processes and mechanisms through which the European Commission and its partners implement these inputs. Throughput involves the governance of the reform process itself: how different EU bodies coordinate, how they engage with domestic institutions, and how they manage, monitor, and adjust reform support to ensure coherence and effectiveness. In simpler terms, throughput is about the 'how' – how inputs

are delivered and translated into action. Key aspects include: institutional coordination within the EU, interaction with beneficiary country actors, project management and administrative procedures, and monitoring and feedback mechanisms that track progress.

A defining characteristic of the EU's approach to PAR is its multifaceted nature, which intersects with enlargement strategy, international development assistance, economic policy coordination, and intra-Union institutional cooperation. This cross-cutting mandate necessitates robust inter-service coordination across the EU's organisational architecture. While the European Commission remains the primary strategic actor, administrative reform support is distributed among several internal departments. Historically, the Directorate-General for Enlargement (later DG NEAR) held the mandate for candidate and neighbourhood countries, overseeing key instruments such as the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI-GE), and the Twinning and TAIEX mechanisms. Within this structure, the Centre of Thematic Expertise on Public Administration Reform (CoTE PAR), originally founded in 2015, continues to serve as a pivotal hub for technical guidance and the strategic harmonisation of PAR initiatives across enlargement countries. CoTE PAR, though a small team, acts as a knowledge hub, ensuring that the projects and funding in different countries align with the common principles and benchmarks. It also manages the contract with SIGMA on behalf of the Commission (Interview 8, 2020; Interview 10, 2020). On the other hand, the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL) has had responsibility for public administration aspects inside the EU via the ESF funding and, since 2013, for coordinating a horizontal view on the quality of public administration. Recognising the need for an internal counterpart to CoTE PAR, the Commission created the Competence Centre on Public Administration and Governance in 2017 within its Secretariat-General. This unit gathered expertise on member states' public administrations and helped coordinate across DGs on issues affecting national administrations. In 2020, the Competence Centre was moved under the newly formed DG REFORM.

DG REFORM epitomises the Commission's shift toward more integrated internal coordination, a hallmark of the first Von der Leyen mandate (2019–2024). Established in January 2020, DG REFORM took over from the Structural Reform Support Service (SRSS) and was given the mandate to assist any EU member state in the design and implementation of institutional reforms, upon request (DG REFORM was itself reorganised into the Commission's Secretariat-General in February 2025). It coordinated the Technical

Support Instrument and also played a key role in the implementation of the RRF, in collaboration with the Secretariat-General's Recovery and Resilience Task Force (RECOVER). Importantly, DG REFORM had been designated as the central coordinator for public administration policy in the EU, while DG NEAR focused on neighbourhood countries. The Commission uses Inter-Service Groups (ISG) to coordinate internally; one such group – the Inter-Service Group on Public Administration and Governance (IGPA) – was set up in 2013 to bring together all relevant DGs to ensure policy coherence on public administration issues (Interview 11, 2020).

In practice, operational coordination occurs primarily through the EU Delegations, which serve as the frontline for implementing assistance. Although these Delegations are formally part of the European External Action Service (EEAS), they host dedicated operational sections staffed by the European Commission to manage project cycles and technical dialogues with host governments. These field officers rely on strategic guidance and technical benchmarks from headquarters to ensure that new support programmes remain consistent with the Union's latest governance standards. Parallel to these technical activities, the EEAS provides the necessary diplomatic framework for reform. The Head of Delegation, acting in an ambassadorial capacity, leads the high-level policy dialogue with the host government. This political engagement is informed by the Commission's technical assessments, including annual country reports and SIGMA/OECD evaluations, thereby ensuring that the EU's diplomatic pressure is directly aligned with specific administrative reform objectives. In sensitive areas of PAR (like anti-corruption or judicial reform), the political weight of the EEAS can complement the technical voice of the Commission. Moreover, since Delegations unify the EU's external representation, they convene member states' embassies to coordinate on key messages – a process known as EU donor coordination. This helps avoid mixed signals, for example, by ensuring that member states' bilateral aid aligns with the EU's overall reform strategy for that country. While the EEAS does not directly fund PAR projects, its role in diplomatic throughput – keeping reform commitments on bilateral agendas and leveraging EU foreign policy for governance goals – is significant.

Another crucial component of throughput is how the EU's efforts interact with the domestic actors in the beneficiary country – the governments and institutions that are the targets of reform. The implementation of EU assistance hinges on local ownership, capacity, and political will. Throughput thus involves strategies to engage and coordinate with these domestic stakeholders effectively, as well as to navigate the political economy of reform.

In candidate and neighbourhood countries, the EU typically insists that governments designate a clear institutional counterpart for PAR initiatives. One of the SIGMA principles actually states that there should be 'one leading institution with responsibility and capacity to manage the reform process, with involved institutions having clear accountability' (OECD-SIGMA, 2014a, p. 9). In practice, many countries establish a PAR coordination unit or ministry. The EU works closely with these coordinating bodies, as they help formulate the national PAR strategy, monitor implementation, and liaise with donors. Engagement with domestic actors in EU member states has its own dynamic. Here, the Commission often works with a designated coordination unit and line ministries. The political context is different since these are sovereign member states, so the Commission's role is more that of a facilitator than a strict conditionality enforcer. Throughput in these cases relies on the member state's willingness to utilise technical support. Some countries enthusiastically take up technical assistance projects, others less so.

The throughput of the PAR toolkit also involves the operational management of myriad projects and programmes, the ensuring of coherence among them, and robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to guide and correct the course of reform efforts. These more technocratic elements are essential to translate inputs into effective outputs. Continuous monitoring is central to the throughput dimension, providing the primary mechanism through which the Commission tracks implementation progress and identifies systemic obstacles at an early stage. EU monitoring operates across several complementary layers. At the project level, individual initiatives, such as Twinning projects, are subject to regular reporting cycles and oversight through dedicated steering committees. At the country level, EU Delegations maintain sustained on-the-ground presence, conducting ministerial visits, observing capacity-building activities, and engaging directly with key reform stakeholders to assess whether stated commitments are translating into administrative practice. Some large programmes hire independent monitors or Results-Oriented Monitoring (ROM) missions to provide an external view. For budget support, specific indicators are tracked, such as the number of senior civil service positions filled by competitive process, or user satisfaction survey results. SIGMA provides annual monitoring of the overall PAR progress in candidate and neighbourhood states. These reports are very detailed and highlight not just outputs but how well reforms are working in practice. The Commission incorporates SIGMA's findings into its official country progress reports or assessment communications, thus tying the technical assessment to political evaluation (for enlargement countries,

progress in PAR can influence the pace of accession negotiations). These evaluations provide valuable feedback for adjusting how tools are used. Another external monitor is the European Court of Auditors (ECA). The ECA has done audits on EU PAR support, such as a 2016 special report on EU assistance for strengthening the public administration in Moldova and other audits touching on capacity building in enlargement. Though ECA reports come after the fact, they influence the PAR toolkit by prompting improvements in design, coordination, and oversight.

Output: From Institutional Design to Reform Sustainability

The ultimate test of the PAR toolkit lies not in its design or implementation processes, but in the output it generates at the domestic level. Output refers to observable institutional changes resulting from EU-supported interventions. It represents the formal and organisational transformations that can be identified in administrative systems following EU engagement. However, outputs must be analytically distinguished from outcomes and from sustainability. The adoption of new laws, the creation of agencies, or the installation of digital systems does not in itself demonstrate institutional consolidation. Outputs capture change; sustainability captures endurance. To clarify what types of change EU interventions seek to induce, outputs can be grouped into three broad and analytically coherent categories, which structure the empirical chapters that follow.

Structures and Processes

A primary category of outputs concerns the formal architecture of executive administration and the procedural rules through which authority is exercised. EU-supported reform interventions are meant to reshape institutional design by aligning domestic administrative structures with European principles of legality, predictability, accountability, and coordination. In practice, this typically involves the adoption or revision of civil service legislation, administrative procedure codes, and public management statutes; the creation or restructuring of central coordination bodies; and the formalisation of inter-ministerial policy planning mechanisms. Such reforms are meant to clarify lines of authority, codify merit-based standards, standardise procedural safeguards, and reduce discretionary decision-making.

From a governance perspective, these structural outputs aim to transform administrations from politically subordinated bureaucracies into

rule-bound executive systems characterised by legal-rational authority in the Weberian sense. They are designed to institutionalise neutrality in recruitment, stabilise tenure protections, embed horizontal accountability mechanisms, and enhance policy coherence at the centre of government. In enlargement and neighbourhood contexts alike, these measures reflect convergence toward what SIGMA has conceptualised as the core elements of a European administrative space. Yet structural redesign is inherently vulnerable to reinterpretation. Laws can be amended, coordination bodies can be politically sidelined, and procedural safeguards can be diluted through secondary legislation or informal practice. For this reason, the adoption of new institutional frameworks constitutes only an initial layer of reform. Whether structural outputs become durable constraints on political discretion depends on their insulation from partisan interference and their consistent enforcement across electoral cycles.

Human Resources and Professionalisation

A second, and arguably more consequential, category of outputs concerns the regulation and management of human resources within the civil service. If structures define the formal architecture of administration, personnel systems determine how that architecture functions in practice. EU-supported reform interventions in this area are meant to professionalise recruitment, promotion, training, and evaluation procedures in line with meritocratic and depoliticised standards. Typical reform components include the introduction of open competitive recruitment procedures, competency-based examinations, standardised promotion criteria, performance appraisal systems, training curricula aligned with administrative competencies, and safeguards against arbitrary dismissal. These measures are meant to reduce patronage, stabilise career trajectories, and foster a professional ethos anchored in neutrality and technical competence rather than partisan loyalty.

From an institutional perspective, civil service professionalisation represents a shift in incentive structures. Where appointments are insulated from political turnover and advancement is linked to performance criteria, the expected returns to partisan capture diminish. Conversely, where executive actors retain discretionary control over hiring and dismissal, formal merit provisions may coexist with informal politicisation. For this reason, human resource reform occupies a pivotal position in the Europeanisation of public administration: it targets the behavioural foundations of governance rather than merely its formal design. Professionalisation is also a central focus of EU-supported administrative reforms, as this affects reform absorption capacity and institutional memory. Stable career civil servants are more

likely to internalise procedural norms, accumulate expertise, and sustain reform initiatives beyond the lifespan of individual political mandates. Conversely, high turnover and politicised appointments undermine continuity and weaken institutional learning. In this sense, human resource reform is not only a question of fairness or compliance with European standards; it is directly linked to the durability of institutional transformation. Yet the formal adoption of merit frameworks does not in itself displace entrenched patronage practices, which tend to persist through informal channels even where formal rules change. Hybrid systems frequently emerge in which merit-based recruitment operates alongside informal political influence, particularly in senior appointments. Sustainability therefore requires more than the adoption of civil service laws: it depends on the routinised application of recruitment rules, the insulation of disciplinary procedures from executive discretion, and the gradual internalisation of professional norms within administrative cultures.

Systems and Tools

A third category of outputs concerns the development of administrative systems and managerial tools designed to modernise the operational capacity of the state. These include digital platforms (e-government services, e-procurement systems, interoperable registries), human resource management information systems (HRMISs), budgetary and financial management tools, policy coordination software, and data collection infrastructures. EU-supported reform in this area is meant to enhance efficiency, transparency, traceability, and strategic planning capacity within executive administrations. Unlike legislative reforms – which alter formal rules – new systems and tools reshape the daily functioning of administration. Digitalisation initiatives are meant to reduce discretionary gatekeeping, standardise procedures, shorten processing times, and create audit trails that enhance accountability. Procurement platforms, for example, are meant to limit informal contracting practices by increasing transparency and competition. Systems for managing human resources are meant to centralise personnel data, facilitate merit-based oversight, and reduce manipulation of recruitment processes. Policy coordination tools are meant to strengthen coherence across ministries and enable evidence-based decision-making.

From a governance perspective, these systems alter informational asymmetries and reduce transaction costs. They can constrain informal practices by embedding procedural safeguards within technical infrastructure. However, their transformative potential depends on usage, maintenance,

and institutional integration. A digital procurement platform that can be bypassed, or a HRMIS that is not systematically updated, remains a formal output without behavioural impact. Sustainability in this domain therefore requires more than technological installation. It requires budgetary commitment, staff training, interoperability across agencies, and political acceptance of the transparency effects that digital systems often produce. Where executive actors perceive such tools as limiting discretion or exposing patronage networks, resistance may take the form of underfunding, delayed implementation, or selective application. Moreover, systems and tools often depend on broader administrative capacity. Introducing performance management software presupposes reliable data collection and analytic skills. Implementing digital services presupposes cybersecurity frameworks and IT expertise. Without these complementary capacities, technical outputs risk becoming symbolic artefacts rather than embedded practices. In analytical terms, systems and tools occupy an intermediate position between structures and human resources. They are neither purely legal nor purely behavioural; rather, they operationalise governance principles through administrative infrastructure. Their sustainability thus hinges on both political support (Hypothesis 1) and the extent to which legacy-heavy incentive structures (Hypothesis 3) tolerate increased transparency and procedural constraint.

Together, these output domains – structures and processes, human resources and professionalisation, and systems and tools – provide a consistent template for evaluating what EU-supported reform is meant to change, and for distinguishing short-term institutional redesign from sustainable administrative embedding. The next chapters apply this Input–Throughput–Output lens to Romania, Serbia, and Moldova, tracing how the Commission's PAR toolkit was operationalised across different integration modalities and how domestic political alignment and legacy-heavy incentive structures shaped the reform initiatives and their sustainability.

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PART III

Empirical Analysis of the Public Administration Reform Toolkit

In Romania, but also generally in the region, such as in Moldova or in the Western Balkans, people see politics as a source of personal benefits, and this is done through the administration, so the temptation to politicise the administration is extremely high.

– Interview 14 (2021)

6. Romania: From Post-Communism to EU Integration

Abstract: This chapter examines the European Commission's efforts to Europeanise Romania's historically centralised and politicised state apparatus across two decades of sustained external engagement. Applying the Input–Throughput–Output framework, it traces how EU-funded programmes deployed substantial financial, normative, and technical resources to induce administrative change. The analysis shows that accession conditionality enabled significant formal alignment, producing new civil service frameworks, anti-corruption institutions, and administrative systems, yet failed to displace the legacy-heavy incentive structures sustaining politicisation and fragmented reform implementation. Post-accession, the shift from membership leverage to financial and monitoring-based instruments altered the reform calculus and exposed persistent vulnerabilities. The chapter concludes that external incentives can produce institutional redesign, but reform durability depends on domestic ownership that conditionality alone cannot generate.

Keywords: conditionality; civil service professionalisation; politicisation; Operational Programme; reform durability

Brief Contextual Introduction: Historical Legacies and Reform Constraints

Romania represents a paradigmatic case of administrative transformation shaped by powerful historical legacies. The governance challenges confronting the country after the fall of communism in 1989 did not arise in a vacuum; they were the cumulative product of centuries of centralised authority, clientelist rule, and politicised administration (Banu & Țăranu,

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2016; Nunberg, 1999; Tismăneanu et al., 2006). These legacies extend beyond formal institutional design. They encompass inherited political practices, administrative norms, informal networks of authority, and patterns of state–society relations that were reproduced under communism and persisted into the post-1989 period. As such, they influence how European norms and incentives are interpreted, shape how reform initiatives are processed within domestic institutions, and affect whether institutional change becomes embedded or remains fragile. Romania's reform trajectory therefore reflects not simply policy adjustment under external pressure, but a deeper interaction between Europeanisation dynamics and historically sedimented political and administrative cultures.

Long before the communist period, Romanian governance structures were marked by administrative arbitrariness and personalised authority. Centuries of Ottoman suzerainty over Wallachia and Moldavia, combined with Austro-Hungarian influence in Transylvania, entrenched practices of patronage, tribute extraction, and discretionary rule. As Banu and Țăranu (2016, p. 451) observe, Romanians were 'subjected to arbitrariness for many centuries, unprotected by a well-articulated judicial system, subjected to the laws of whim'. Even early-20th-century centralisation efforts following state unification did not consolidate deeply institutionalised rule-of-law traditions. Political instability in the interwar period further weakened institutional autonomy and democratic accountability.

While elements of administrative centralism predated 1947, the communist regime qualitatively transformed the Romanian state by fusing party and administration into a single hierarchical command structure, thereby institutionalising political control as the organising principle of governance. Following the proclamation of the socialist Romanian People's Republic in 1947, the 1948 Constitution formally designated the government as the 'supreme executive and administrative organ' (Official Gazette, 1948, in Dincă, 2012). In practice, however, state institutions became instruments of Communist Party rule. Under the rule of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and, more dramatically, Nicolae Ceaușescu, the distinction between political authority and administrative function effectively disappeared. As Pasti (1995, p. 332) notes, the regime produced 'total control of politics, via the administration, over citizens'. The bureaucracy was not conceived as a neutral Weberian apparatus but as a mechanism of ideological enforcement, resource allocation, and social control.

Over four decades, the Romanian administrative apparatus was thus moulded into a tightly centralised and politically subordinated structure in which loyalty outweighed competence and obedience carried greater

rewards than expertise. Bureaucratic careers were embedded in party hierarchies; advancement depended less on professional merit than on demonstrated conformity to political authority. Decision-making became concentrated and discretionary, insulated from public scrutiny and detached from societal accountability. The Securitate's extensive surveillance system reinforced this configuration, cultivating fear, conformity, and interpersonal distrust rather than transparency or institutional responsibility. Administrative bodies were not designed to mediate between state and citizen, but to implement directives flowing downward from the party leadership. In practice, the distinction between governance and political control collapsed: public administration functioned as an operational arm of political monopoly rather than as an autonomous executor of law.

The Romanian revolution of 1989 removed Ceaușescu but did not dismantle the administrative culture he presided over. The early post-communist transition was marked by continuity as much as rupture. No comprehensive lustration policies – i.e. policies meant to purge the public sector of former communist staff – took place in the early post-1989 period. As Tismăneanu (2006, p. 54) memorably observed, 'old faces [were wearing] new masks'. The administrative apparatus remained politicised, centralised, and weakly accountable. A 2014 governmental assessment acknowledged this legacy in stark terms:

> Public administration was primarily an instrument of control, and therefore ordinary citizens were isolated from the administration.... The mandate of the public administration was entirely subject to political monopoly, so it was accountable only to political leaders. There was no possibility of negotiation between the state and an almost non-existent civil society. This has led to a lack of public trust in state institutions ... while the public system has never developed the concept of accountability to citizens. (Government of Romania, 2014, p. 1)

By the late 1990s, Romania lagged significantly behind other Central and Eastern European (CEE) states in administrative reform. Nunberg (1999, p. 23) concluded that Romania had made 'far less significant' progress than Poland or Hungary. Politicisation remained entrenched; policy coordination was fragmented; and strategic planning was episodic rather than institutionalised (Dincă, 2012; European Commission, 1999b; Tismăneanu et al., 2006). These weaknesses were not merely technical deficits. They reflected a state apparatus still organised around hierarchical command and blurred boundaries between political office and administrative function.

When the European Commission assessed Romania's readiness for membership in the early 2000s, administrative capacity emerged as a decisive concern. The country was deemed insufficiently prepared to implement and enforce the *acquis* effectively (European Commission, 2001e, p. 8; 2002). The postponement of accession until 2007 signalled not simply procedural delay, but recognition that formal institutional alignment had yet to translate into reliable administrative capacity. Romania therefore enters the empirical analysis as a legacy-heavy, highly politicised, and weakly institutionalised case. This configuration is analytically consequential. European principles of meritocracy, transparency, and accountability encounter an administrative order historically structured around discretion, political loyalty, and centralised control. Public administration reform, in this case, does not merely refine existing practices; it seeks to displace deeply sedimented incentive structures. In such an environment, external inputs are filtered through entrenched patronage networks; throughput is shaped by executive volatility and fragmented ownership; and outputs risk remaining formal rather than self-sustaining.

Romania thus constitutes a demanding test for the European Union (EU)'s administrative conditionality. It permits examination of reform sustainability after accession (Hypothesis 2), of absorption capacity under conditions of politicised bureaucracy (Hypothesis 3), and of the interaction between external incentives and domestic ownership (Hypothesis 1). The sections that follow examine whether and how EU intervention succeeded in embedding durable administrative change, or whether reform remained contingent upon the very external incentives designed to transcend it.

Inputs: Financial, Discursive, and Policy Tools

Following 2000, the European Commission launched a comprehensive support framework to help Romania build an administration aligned with European principles of public administration. This support combined substantial financial assistance with discursive and policy instruments aimed at steering Romania's administrative transformation. The European Commission provided Romania with unprecedented financial aid for administrative reform across three major programming periods: pre-accession (2000–2006) – PHARE (Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies) programme; post-accession (2007–2013) – Operational Programme Administrative Capacity Development (OP DAC); and post-accession (2014–2020) – Operational Programme Administrative Capacity

(OP AC). Under the EU's PHARE programme (active in Romania between 1992 and 2006), the Commission allocated approximately €143 million, specifically during the 2000–2006 period, to support Romania's administrative reforms, alongside rule-of-law and judiciary reforms. Following Romania's official designation as an EU candidate at the 1999 Helsinki Summit, PHARE assistance was oriented to help the Romanian administration prepare to implement the *acquis communautaire*. A wide array of projects delivered technical assistance, training, and equipment to upgrade central and local administrative structures. By 2001, Romania had adopted a national public administration reform (PAR) strategy, and PHARE programming from 2001 to 2006 was aligned to support its implementation (Business and Strategies Europe, 2015).

Following its accession to the EU in 2007, Romania became eligible to benefit from the European Social Fund (ESF) to sustain its administrative reform efforts. The dedicated Operational Programme Administrative Capacity Development (OP DAC) was established for the 2007–2013 period, allocating approximately €208 million in EU funding and around €250 million in total when including national co-financing. OP DAC was structured around three priority axes: (1) improving public policy formulation and strategic planning; (2) enhancing the quality, efficiency, and decentralisation of public services; and (3) providing technical assistance to ensure effective programme implementation. Hundreds of projects were funded under OP DAC, supporting ministries, local governments, and public agencies to improve regulatory frameworks, simplify administrative procedures, train civil servants, and introduce performance management systems. Significantly, in the absence of a comprehensive national PAR strategy at the time, OP DAC functioned de facto as a PAR strategy in itself. As one interviewee observed, 'OP DAC operated like a reform strategy' by prioritising and financing key administrative modernisation actions (Interview 18, 2021).

In the 2014–2020 programming period, the European Commission significantly scaled up its support to Romania's administrative reform efforts through the new Operational Programme Administrative Capacity (OP AC). With a total allocation of approximately €563 million, OP AC represented a major increase compared to the previous period, underscoring the Commission's recognition that Romania's administrative system required more intensive and strategic support. The programme was structured around two main priority axes – improving the performance and transparency of public administration and the judiciary, and enhancing the quality and accessibility of public services – in addition to a technical assistance axis. Unlike OP DAC, OP AC was closely linked to Romania's Strategy for Strengthening Public

Administration, 2014–2020, a national framework developed with EU input to address 'the structural causes underlying the poor capacity of public administration in Romania' (Government of Romania, 2014). The strategy served as a guiding document for investments under OP AC and aimed to foster systemic reforms in human resource management (HRM), transparency, accountability, and service delivery. In this regard, an interviewee considered that 'during 2014–2020 the planning and implementation of the Commission's assistance … was clearly guided by the SIGMA principles' (Interview 17, 2021). Thus, EU conditionality became smarter and more targeted, addressing previous gaps.

Moreover, funding was tied to ex-ante conditionalities introduced in the 2014–2020 EU budget cycle, requiring Romania to demonstrate strategic planning and readiness before accessing funds. The programme's objectives were also aligned with the European Commission's 2014 country-specific recommendation (CSR) to Romania, which urged the government to 'strengthen public administration, in particular by improving efficiency, human resource management, decision-making, and transparency, integrity and accountability … and tackle persisting shortcomings in public procurement' (European Commission, 2014d). In this sense, OP AC provided the financial backbone for advancing reforms in civil service professionalisation, policy coordination, e-government, and anti-corruption throughout the 2014–2020 period.

The scale-up of funding across these periods – from millions of euros to over half a billion under OP AC – underpinned Romania's reform attempts. EU money financed new IT systems, training for tens of thousands of civil servants, salary increases for qualified staff, and the creation of new structures to manage reforms. This external investment was crucial because Romania's domestic resources were limited, especially after the 2009–2010 financial crisis when austerity hit public administration budgets (European Commission, 2015d; Matei & Matei, 2012). In essence, EU funds became the lifeblood of Romania's administrative modernisation projects.

Yet concerns about the progress, depth, and sustainability of reforms did not disappear at the moment of accession. Precisely because administrative and judicial weaknesses were seen as only partially addressed, the European Commission introduced an unprecedented post-accession safeguard mechanism: the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM). From 2007 onwards, Romania (alongside Bulgaria) was subject to regular monitoring of judicial reform and anti-corruption efforts, with periodic Commission reports assessing progress in areas such as judicial independence, integrity, and high-level corruption. The CVM thus extended conditionality beyond

membership, signalling that formal accession did not mark the end of EU scrutiny over governance reform. While the CVM focused mainly on courts and corruption rather than administrative efficiency per se, it had indirect effects on public administration: it pressured Romania to establish and empower the National Integrity Agency (ANI) to monitor officials' assets and conflicts of interest. The CVM reports, which could influence decisions like Romania's entry into the Schengen Area, kept reform momentum alive in the sensitive early post-accession years. Indeed, some EU member states cited continued judicial dysfunction and institutional weaknesses as reasons to block Romania's Schengen accession for over a decade. The leverage of potential sanctions – such as withholding EU funds or political embarrassments – incentivised Romanian governments to avoid blatant backsliding.

Beyond the CVM, Romania's integration into the EU's broader governance architecture introduced new forms of policy coordination and soft conditionality. One of the most prominent mechanisms was the European Semester, through which the European Commission exercises discursive and normative influence over member states' reform agendas. Starting in 2010, Romania became subject to annual country reports and country-specific recommendations (CSRs) that assessed its economic and institutional performance. These instruments repeatedly flagged shortcomings in public administration and governance. For instance, between 2011 and 2016, the CSRs consistently urged Romania to build up effective regulatory control and enforcement capacity, fight corruption, promote the rule of law, and substantially reduce administrative red tape. These recommendations were intended to align national reform efforts with broader EU2020 strategy priorities.

Initially, some notable governance issues were omitted from the CSRs – such as e-government and public procurement weaknesses – despite their prominence in both national reform debates and EU monitoring exercises. However, by the mid-2010s, the Commission's messages became more targeted and strategic. In 2014, Romania received a CSR explicitly urging improvements in administrative efficiency, transparency, human resource management, and decision-making coordination, marking a shift toward a more direct governance agenda. This evolving discourse served not only as a benchmark for reform but also as a blueprint that domestic strategies – notably the 2014–2020 Strategy for Strengthening Public Administration (SCAP) – closely mirrored.

Building on this, the Commission introduced a new instrument of leverage: ex-ante conditionalities (later called 'enabling conditions') for the

disbursement of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIFs) in the 2014–2020 programming period. For Thematic Objective 11 (TO11), which focused on improving institutional and administrative capacity, Romania was required to adopt a national PAR strategy and demonstrate alignment with criteria in areas such as strategic planning, civil service reform, and transparency. As one Romanian official explained:

> The Commission came and imposed ex-ante conditions [for 2014–2020], including the existence of a strategy with clear criteria for reform. Imposing this condition, we became determined to generate a strategy … [which] pointed out the biggest problems of the administration. (Interview 18, 2021)

Thus, the EU's conditionality compelled Romanian authorities to confront and diagnose systemic weaknesses and to commit formally to addressing them. This strategic framework helped ensure that financial support was not simply reactive but tied to measurable reform goals. For instance, the adoption and gradual strengthening of a Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) framework became part of broader efforts to improve regulatory quality and evidence-based policymaking in line with European standards (Berceanu, 2019). In the 2010s, Commission reports and country evaluations increasingly linked the disbursement of certain EU funds to progress on administrative milestones, such as improving RIA practices and simplifying bureaucratic procedures, reflecting the growing emphasis on conditionality tied to performance rather than expenditure alone. This approach foreshadowed the even more ambitious performance-based conditionalities later introduced under the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), which tie access to significant funding to progress on agreed reform targets rather than project implementation alone.

Alongside financial support and conditionality, the European Commission deployed a wide range of capacity-building instruments to facilitate knowledge transfer and strengthen Romania's administrative capabilities. Prominent among these were Twinning projects, which – during the pre-accession period – paired Romanian ministries and agencies with peer institutions from EU member states to carry out concrete reform initiatives. During the 2000s, dozens of Twinning projects helped Romanian authorities draft administrative codes, establish e-governance systems, and train civil servants in key policy areas, drawing on expertise from countries such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. These long-term cooperation mechanisms were complemented by TAIEX (Technical Assistance and Information Exchange) missions, which deployed EU experts for short-term

assignments – such as workshops or advisory sessions – to address specific reform issues. The Commission also provided technical support through the SIGMA (Support for Improvement in Governance and Management) programme, which played a key advisory role in helping Romania align its administrative structures with the *Principles of Public Administration*. Through its assessments and hands-on guidance, SIGMA helped introduce normative benchmarks around merit-based recruitment, transparency, policy coordination, and service delivery – all of which became integral to Romania's reform strategies (Interview 15, 2021). Taken together, these tools formed the 'action frame' of the Commission's administrative reform agenda – ensuring that financial and policy inputs were matched with technical expertise and normative guidance. Their purpose was not only to produce legislative or procedural change on paper, but to support substantive transformation within Romania's public sector institutions. As one interviewee from the National Agency of Civil Servants (ANFP) noted, the SIGMA *Principles of Public Administration* 'are and remain the basis [for reforms]; they are already included in legislation and strategic documents' (Interview 17, 2021). While such principles were not always cited explicitly in early programming documents, by the 2014–2020 period the alignment with European governance values had become more systematic and deliberate.

The Commission's monitoring reports also shaped the public narrative. Regular EU progress reports (pre-2007) and later CVM reports and semester reports often publicly pointed out Romania's governance problems – from inefficient bureaucracy to corruption – keeping these issues in the spotlight. In 2017, a Commission-sponsored report bluntly stated that 'Romania performs worst of all member states on the World Bank [governance] index' and listed chronic weaknesses such as 'poor strategic planning, weak management and control systems, [and] a poorly functioning public procurement system' (European Commission, 2017f). Similarly, the Commission's 2018 assessment noted Romania was the only EU country scoring below the world average on Government Effectiveness (European Commission, 2018i). Such frank appraisals, coming from an authoritative external body, validated domestic reformers' calls for change while pressuring recalcitrant authorities. They also set performance frames against which progress (or lack thereof) would be measured.

Throughput: Implementation Processes of EU-Supported Reforms

Transforming Romania's public administration proved to be a complex process, influenced by both the way the European Commission designed

and implemented its support, and by domestic political and institutional dynamics. This section examines how these factors – external and internal – affected the implementation of reform programmes between 2000 and 2020.

Commission-Dependent Factors

The European Commission learned by trial and error in implementing its reform toolkit to Romania. One critique of early EU support was that its objectives were often overly ambitious in scope and time frame, not fully grounded in Romania's administrative reality (European Commission, 2007b). Early PHARE projects attempted wide-ranging reforms – for instance, restructuring entire ministries or overhauling civil service pay scales – on very short schedules. A 2007 evaluation noted this was 'disconnected from reality … [and] overstretching the already limited human capacities' in Romania's administration (European Commission, 2007b, p. 14). Similarly, the first post-accession programme, OP DAC (2007–2013), was designed with broad but rather ill-defined targets. It included objectives that were difficult to quantify or had no clear performance indicators (European Commission, 2013b). A Commission-backed evaluation later admitted that 'the lack of depth of analysis underpinning [OP DAC] was the weakest point in [its] intervention logic', leading to unrealistic targets not tailored to actual country needs (European Commission, 2013b, p. 30). In hindsight, the Commission could have imposed stronger up-front requirements – such as demanding a detailed national PAR strategy with prioritised, sequenced reforms – before disbursing funds. The absence of such a guiding framework in the pre-2007 period meant PHARE projects were somewhat ad hoc (European Commission, 2007b, p. 16).

In the early stages of the PHARE programme, technical assistance was largely demand-driven: Romanian ministries requested support in their respective domains, and projects were crafted ministry by ministry. While this ensured Romanian buy-in for each project, ministries seldom coordinated reforms across government. A review observed that this sectoral approach led to 'a partial remnant of a "silo-oriented" mentality … [with] each ministry securing its "fair share" … with a reluctant approach to inter-ministerial cooperation' (Business and Strategies Europe, 2015, p. 90). This resulted in isolated one-off improvements rather than systemic change. Recognising this, the Commission shifted to a more programmatic, 'accession-driven' approach. PHARE funding after 2002 was programmed on a multi-annual basis aligned with overarching accession priorities, not just individual ministry requests (Business and Strategies Europe, 2015). Projects were monitored against quantitative indicators and assessed for relevance to

the EU *acquis* and Romania's modernisation plans (Business and Strategies Europe, 2015). This switch improved coherence: by 2005–2006, PHARE interventions were deemed largely relevant and helped key horizontal institutions – 'key bodies for administrative improvement' – to begin finding their footing (MWH Consortium, 2006, p. 15).

A pivotal moment in implementation came in 2007 when Romania joined the EU. Pre-accession conditionality – the implicit threat of 'no reform, no entry' – disappeared, and with it the Commission lost an important share of its leverage to compel the government to maintain commitment for reform. In the immediate post-accession years, the Commission's attention turned heavily toward fighting corruption and safeguarding judicial independence, primarily via the CVM (Interview 4, 2021). Administrative reform, lacking a dedicated enforcement tool, slipped down the priority list. The OP DAC programme continued to fund projects, but without the EU's carrot-and-stick approach to accession, Romanian political ownership weakened (as discussed in the next section). The Commission had to find new ways to incentivise reform – which it eventually did by making greater use of fund conditionalities and linking with broader EU economic governance frameworks. But the 2007–2012 period has been one of post-accession 'reform fatigue', where many initiatives stalled once EU pressure eased. This underscores that the timing of EU inputs relative to political will was crucial: some reforms that raced ahead to meet the 2007 deadline were not deeply institutionalised and later suffered setbacks when oversight relaxed.

The Twinning projects funded by the EU yielded mixed results. On the one hand, the projects offered Romanian institutions hands-on experience with EU administrative models. On the other hand, some Twinning projects revealed a 'copy and paste' problem: foreign experts would import their home country's institutional model, which sometimes proved ill-suited to the Romanian context (Interview 20, 2021). A former state adviser coordinating PAR between 2015 and 2017 explained that each Twinning partner 'came with their own model – Italian, French, German … – models not necessarily compatible [with the Romanian context]. In the absence of a vision,… things started to skate' (Interview 14, 2021). For example, the French administrative model, with its strong prefect system and *grandes écoles*–trained elite, did not transplant easily to Romania's more politicised civil service, and the lack of continuity meant lessons from one project were not always integrated broadly. The Commission recognised this issue and, to mitigate it, created the Managing Authority (MA) in Bucharest for the ESF administrative programmes (OP DAC/OP AC). This dedicated unit, essentially a specialised department in the Romanian government, was mandated to provide strategic

direction for reform and manage implementation of EU-funded reforms at the local level, and also to report regularly on progress. By doing so, the Commission externalised the management of assistance to a degree – placing day-to-day oversight in local hands – but also ensured centralised feedback and consistency. The MA could coordinate among different Twinning projects, encourage common standards, and push back if a proposed solution was too foreign or impractical. This innovation improved implementation by bridging EU and domestic efforts, though – as we will see – even the MA faced its own capacity challenges.

Thus, the Commission's role in implementation was marked by persistent commitment but also practical limitations. Over the two decades, the Commission tightened its conditionality 'screws', provided more strategic guidance, and remained an enduring and relentless source of support for those Romanian civil servants and decision-makers committed to reform. The presence of Commission representatives in monitoring committees, asking pointed questions about the 'added value beyond quantitative indicators' (Interview 17, 2021), became an important accountability mechanism. Yet, the success of EU assistance also hinges on domestic factors: how Romania's political leaders and bureaucratic structures responded to the call for change.

Domestic Political and Institutional Factors

Domestic politics in Romania often proved to be the weak link between EU-driven plans and their execution. While Romanian governments committed, on paper, to EU-backed reforms, in practice many saw these reforms as external impositions rather than intrinsic national priorities. During the pre-accession phase, reforms were undertaken largely to tick the boxes for EU membership – once that goal was achieved, enthusiasm waned. An ex-post evaluation of PHARE found that the 'underlying [problem]' was 'a lack of sufficient political will from successive governments to push through reform' (MWH Consortium, 2006, p. 1). In other words, deep reforms, such as relinquishing political control over civil service appointments, threatened the interests of ruling parties, and without the immediate reward of EU accession, politicians had little incentive to carry them out. The notion of political ownership was weak: rather than championing administrative modernisation as beneficial for Romania's citizens, many leaders treated it as a burdensome EU conditionality. This led to half-hearted implementation and at times open resistance or reversal when EU pressure abated.

Perhaps the most disruptive factor was Romania's chronic governmental instability. Between 2000 and 2021, Romania had 21 different government make-ups (cabinets or significant reshuffles) – an extraordinary turnover

that constantly reset reform efforts. One senior civil servant described how 'excessive political changes' meant 'three ministers a year in the same ministry, or three secretaries of state [agency heads] in an institution', making it 'very difficult to manage ambitious projects,... especially at the national level' (Interview 15, 2021). Moreover, new governments frequently reorganised ministries – changing their structures, merging or splitting agencies – which led to chaos and loss of institutional memory. An official from the Secretariat-General of the government recounted that 'very often, too often, ministries are reorganised ... [and] with each [new] minister ... [comes] new directions, services are made and others closed.... [N]o one focuses on continuity of reforms' (Interview 16, 2021). The Secretariat-General itself saw five different Secretaries-General in five years, when that role should ensure administrative continuity regardless of politics. Such instability not only delayed projects (as new appointees took time to get up to speed or changed priorities) but also demotivated civil servants. Officials became reluctant to invest in long-term reforms that might be cancelled and instead focused on surviving the next upheaval.

A core issue, predating and outlasting accession, was the blurred line between politics and administration. Romanian governments were often unwilling to cede control over the civil service, despite EU norms favouring an independent bureaucracy. The PHARE evaluation pointed to the 'inability or unwillingness to separate political and administrative functions' as a drag on all reforms (MWH Consortium, 2006, p. 1). A case in point is the role of prefects (county governors). In 2004, under EU influence, Romania depoliticised the prefects, converting them into senior civil servants to ensure neutral oversight of local administration. This was hailed as progress. However, by 2019–2020, the ruling parties sought to reverse this, arguing for political appointment of prefects. As one interviewee lamented in 2021:

> [A]n effort – including European money – from 2004 until today is wasted because ... the prefect will become political again. It is a regression, and it shows that when you are not monitored and corrected, you tend to resume the old ways. (Interview 15, 2021)

Indeed, within weeks of that statement, in January 2021, the government issued an emergency ordinance allowing prefects and their deputies to be political appointees. A Romanian expert dryly noted: 'Political appointment is a setback. As a civil servant you have evaluations; political appointees do not' (Interview 17, 2021). This episode demonstrates the persistent pull of patronage: control over appointments is a resource that successive governments

were reluctant to give up, EU advice notwithstanding. Politicisation also trickled down through constant staff turnover after elections. It became common practice for a change in government to be accompanied by a clean-out of ministerial cabinets and even middle management, replacing professionals with politically affiliated personnel.

In some instances, Romanian leaders actively undermined reforms under the guise of other urgencies. During the 2009–2010 financial crisis, for example, the government centralised decision-making and bypassed standard procedures in what was presented as necessary emergency response. A former state adviser noted that through the crisis,

> the government reintroduced on an even larger scale an ad hoc and discretionary manner of decision-making,… accentuating politicisation. Exceptional appointments and temporary, ad hoc political appointments increased a lot after the crisis. The tools created during the crisis were continued even after, regardless of who was in government. (Interview 14, 2021)

The EU publicly criticised this trend: the European Commission's 2022 report noted that in Romania 'decision-making has often been based on government emergency ordinances' and frequent management dismissals, which 'hinder continuity in reform implementation' (European Commission, 2022b, p. 44).

In addition to political issues, Romania's administrative institutions themselves often struggled to absorb and implement reforms. Ironically, the very weakness that EU programmes aimed to fix – lack of administrative capacity – also hindered those programmes' execution. During the pre-accession years, Romania's bureaucracy had too few skilled personnel to manage the influx of EU funds and projects. As an evaluation noted, the human resources necessary to effectively implement PHARE programmes were lacking, and the state administration did not have the capacity to absorb the increased levels of support that PHARE entailed (Ecotec, 2006). This led to bottlenecks in project management, with some PHARE projects experiencing long delays or only partial completion. For example, complex procurement rules (required by EU financial regulations) overwhelmed many ministries, leading to repeated tender cancellations and restarts. Complicated contracting procedures often delayed the implementation of PHARE-funded projects (Business and Strategies Europe, 2015; MWH Consortium, 2006). Thus, paradoxically, the lower capacity a country has, the harder it is for it to use capacity-building aid, and EU funds writ large.

Even by 2007, when OP DAC began, administrative capacity remained feeble in some critical units. The MA for OP DAC was a newly established institution that lacked prior experience in overseeing administrative reform programmes, and it had limited national authority to pursue and steer reforms at the ministerial and inter-institutional levels (Interview 15, 2021). In essence, a small team in the MA had to coordinate projects across a vast government apparatus, which was a tall order. Furthermore, the 2008–2009 financial crisis forced austerity measures: public sector wages were cut and a hiring freeze was imposed. Many experienced civil servants left for the private sector or went abroad. State resources – both money and staff – were trimmed, which negatively affected the achievement of some of OP DAC's objectives (European Commission, 2016b). Reduced co-financing meant some planned projects had to be scaled back or cancelled. So just as EU funds increased, Romania's ability to co-finance and staff projects diminished.

Institutional continuity was weak, not just at the political level but also within the civil service. Frequent reorganisations and staff turnover meant that even technical units lost expertise. Even the MA for EU funds saw extraordinary staff turbulence due to political reshufflings. There were new project officers due to 'reorganisations, [which occurred] sometimes twice a year, and [so] we no longer knew who the project officer was' (Interview 15, 2021). This instability prevented the MA team from fully maturing and delayed communication with beneficiaries. The government's own 2021 self-evaluation admitted that constant staff changes increased workloads on remaining staff and, ultimately, undermined the administrative capacities necessary to meet the targets of OP AC (Government of Romania, 2021). A related issue was the draining away of talent: EU integration ironically made it easier for skilled Romanian civil servants to take EU jobs in Brussels or join international companies, leading to a 'brain drain' from the national administration. As one government report noted:

> [P]re-accession brought an influx of young professionals.... [O]nce Romania joined the EU in 2007,... a process of de-professionalisation began to emerge, exacerbated by [the fact that] professional civil servants ... left to work for EU institutions or in the private sector. (Government of Romania, 2014, p. 4)

This quote encapsulates a painful dynamic: the very people trained with EU support to drive reform ended up leaving the underpaid, politically fraught domestic institutions for greener pastures, thereby weakening the capacity for implementing further reform.

Romania's public administration has historically been burdened by complex procedures and overlapping regulations, which slowed the execution of reform. Public procurement is a prime example – EU projects had to follow strict procurement rules, but Romania's procurement system was itself undergoing reform and was notorious for bureaucratic red tape. New procurement laws or guidelines introduced to fight corruption sometimes unintentionally made processes even slower. Evaluations of OP AC found the increased complexity of procurement procedures led to significant project delays and required substantial resources being invested in bureaucratic activities (Archidata Srl et al., 2020). In some cases, tenders for consulting services had to be relaunched multiple times due to legal challenges or a lack of qualified bidders, pushing timelines far beyond the original plans (Interview 2, 2019). Additionally, the legal framework for administration was a moving target. In 2018, Romania's parliament passed a new Administrative Code meant to codify civil service and institutional rules – a potentially positive step. However, the Constitutional Court struck it down that same year on procedural grounds. The failure of the Administrative Code to enter into force perpetuated uncertainty about roles and procedures, maintaining deficiencies in predictability, stability, and efficiency (Government of Romania, 2020). Thus, reforms like clarifying the responsibilities of central vs local authorities were left in limbo, complicating how EU-funded projects could be implemented. Every time a law was changed or annulled, agencies had to recalibrate. The instability of the institutional framework led to knock-on effects: postponements in launching projects (waiting for clarity on who does what), delays in getting institutional agreements (as agencies debated responsibilities), and even having to redesign project scopes. In short, a constantly shifting administrative landscape made consistent implementation very challenging. Nonetheless, as many interviewees and observers agree, without the EU's involvement, even the modest progress achieved would not have been possible. The next section will assess the concrete outcomes of two decades of reform efforts, looking at what changed in Romania's public administration and how those changes measure up against both EU expectations and broader indicators of good governance.

Outputs: Assessing the Impact of EU-Supported Reforms

After two decades of sustained external support and intermittent domestic efforts, how much has Romania's public administration improved? This section evaluates the outcomes of reforms in three key areas – administrative

structures and processes, human resources, and systems and tools – and then examines overall governance indicators to gauge Romania's progress relative to EU standards. Finally, it integrates recent (post-2020) developments, including the end of special EU monitoring, to provide an up-to-date picture of Romania's administrative convergence with European principles of public administration.

Structures and Processes

One tangible impact of EU intervention has been the creation and strengthening of institutions that underpin a modern public administration. In the early 2000s, under pre-accession pressure, Romania introduced institutional mechanisms intended to strengthen central policy coordination and link legislative initiatives to budgetary planning. The Central Unit for Public Administration Reform (UCRAP) was set up in 2002 within the Ministry of Administration to coordinate reform initiatives across government. Similarly, the Public Policy Unit was established within the General Secretariat of the Government, gradually formalised through Government Decisions in 2004–2005, with the aim of improving inter-ministerial coordination and requiring ministries to justify draft legislation with fiscal and strategic impact assessments (European Commission, 2005). PHARE aid also facilitated the establishment of the National Agency of Civil Servants (ANFP) in 1999, tasked with regulating civil service employment and ensuring merit-based recruitment. This agency became a pillar for professionalising the bureaucracy, though its effectiveness fluctuated with political changes. These institutions, described by a Commission-sponsored report as 'key bodies for administrative improvement [that] are beginning to find their feet, with PHARE support' (MWH Consortium, 2006, p. 15), helped keep reform on the agenda within the government machinery. ANFP, for example, oversaw the implementation of a unitary pay scale and job descriptions for civil servants, while UCRAP prepared comprehensive reform strategies.

A major structural change in the 2000s, driven largely by EU pressure, was the build-up of Romania's anti-corruption infrastructure which, while focused on the justice sector, also impacted public administration ethics. The National Anti-Corruption Directorate (DNA) was established in 2002 and, with continued EU monitoring and support, grew into a potent force prosecuting corrupt officials. Over the 2010s, DNA investigations led to numerous convictions of high-ranking politicians and civil servants, signalling a break from past impunity. Additionally, the National Integrity Agency (ANI) was created in 2007 to oversee asset declarations and conflicts of interest of officials, fulfilling a CVM benchmark. These institutions

benefitted from EU funding and technical assistance, as well as from legal changes mandated by EU recommendations. The result by 2020 was a public administration more constrained by anti-corruption oversight than ever before. While corruption certainly did not vanish, the risks for corrupt officials increased, altering the calculus for many public servants.

EU programmes also pushed forward the framework for decentralisation. Romania in the 2000s began transferring certain competences, such as schools, healthcare, and local development, to local authorities and created eight regional development agencies corresponding to EU development regions. The Commission funded training and systems to support this, aiming for more responsive local administration. By the mid-2010s, the Romanian administration started assessing citizens' needs or satisfaction with public services, in a quest to improve quality, adopting Western European models of citizen-centric service (Government of Romania, 2015b).

Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) requirements were further consolidated through Government Decision 1361/2006. These reforms reflected EU and SIGMA recommendations to enhance coherence, reduce ad hoc decision-making, and align policy formulation with medium-term planning. However, while the procedural architecture for coordinated policymaking was formally in place by the time of accession, its effective operation remained dependent on political commitment and administrative capacity. A 2015 government report noted EU-funded projects helped shift some institutional approaches from ad hoc decisions to evidence-based planning (Government of Romania, 2015b). However, in practice, the adoption of better regulation practices, including RIAs, strategic planning, and meaningful stakeholder consultations, was rather flawed. According to the European Commission's 2020 country report, 'ex-ante regulatory impact assessments are lacking, with no legal institutional framework' to ensure systematic use of RIAs in policymaking, and formal consultation requirements were often under-enforced (European Commission, 2020b, p. 18). Independent reviews also highlight that incentives for line ministries to conduct impact assessments remain weak, and oversight functions are fragmented, meaning that RIA practice is inconsistently applied and often reduced to a box-ticking exercise rather than substantive analysis (World Bank, 2019).

By 2020, Romania's administrative architecture contained significantly more of the formal institutional features associated with a modern European state than it had in 2000, including dedicated agencies for civil service management and integrity oversight, strategic planning units, and e-government bodies. Yet institutional proliferation did not translate consistently into institutional effectiveness. Reform strategies frequently remained at the

level of formal documentation, with limited implementation capacity or political follow-through (European Commission, 2020b). Decentralisation advanced unevenly: local governments acquired new responsibilities without commensurate resource transfers, while the central government periodically reasserted control in ways that undermined sub-national autonomy (European Commission, 2020b). In the domain of transparency and integrity, Romania adopted foundational legislation in the early 2000s, including the Freedom of Information Act and the Law on Transparency in Decision-Making, yet enforcement remained inconsistent and dependent on political will rather than institutional routine. The Commission's own assessments tracked this gap with consistency: as late as 2020, it observed that 'the quality of public consultations is deteriorating' (European Commission, 2020b, p. 18). Romania's trajectory thus illustrates a pattern recurring across post-communist reform contexts: new institutions were established within the formal architecture of the state, while inherited administrative cultures and informal practices persisted within them, limiting the depth of institutional transformation.

Human Resources

Improving the human capital of the Romanian public administration was a central goal of EU-funded reforms. There have been notable advances in training and professional development, though retaining talent and depoliticising appointments remain challenging.

EU assistance enabled an unprecedented scale of training for Romanian civil servants. Through PHARE and, later, ESF projects, thousands of officials underwent courses in areas such as information and communications technology (ICT), public procurement, strategic management, EU law, foreign languages, and anti-corruption practices. The establishment of the National Institute of Administration (INA) in 2001, supported by a Twinning arrangement with France's *École Nationale d'Administration* (ENA), provided a permanent institutional structure for civil service training, initially coordinated through eight regional centres. However, INA was dissolved in 2009 by the government as part of broader austerity-driven restructuring measures, with its functions and assets transferred to the National Agency of Civil Servants (ANFP). Following a seven-year hiatus, INA was re-established in 2016 under Government Ordinance 23/2016, on the grounds that the fragmentation of professional training provision after 2009 had measurably weakened the quality of public administration. By 2020, the reconstituted INA had resumed its role as the principal provider of civil service training, contributing to a gradual strengthening of the

professional skills base within the Romanian bureaucracy. One tangible outcome was that ministries developed cadres of EU law specialists and project managers who could handle EU-funded projects – a capacity that was near zero in 2000. Moreover, training introduced new management practices, such as performance management, monitoring and evaluation techniques, and policy analysis. According to the European Commission's evaluation in 2016, these capacity-building efforts were among the most important contributions of EU support (European Commission, 2016b). When successful, EU-funded projects for administrative capacity building have helped civil servants to undertake evidence-based public policy planning not previously widely practiced in Romania (Government of Romania, 2015b). The use of key performance indicators (KPIs) in administration, encouraged by EU guidance, started to be institutionally embedded – one interviewee from ANFP noted that thanks to Commission support and monitoring, there is now 'wider use of performance indicators in the administration' and somewhat stricter observance of procedures (Interview 15, 2021).

EU accession negotiations pushed Romania to adopt laws ensuring meritocracy in civil service hiring. A civil service statute (Law 188/1999, updated 2003) created a competitive exam system for entry and established the concept of a politically neutral senior civil service (Government of Romania, 1999). While the implementation has wavered, there is now at least a formalised recruitment process for civil servants overseen by ANFP. Between 2000 and 2020, hundreds of open competitions for civil service positions were held, replacing the old system of direct appointments. In theory, promotions were also to be based on performance and exams. This is a significant change from the early 1990s when jobs were often simply given to party loyalists or purchased outright. However, the impact on actual personnel quality is mixed. The Commission's assistance contributed to a gradual generational renewal of the administration. Yet, practices of politicisation persisted through temporary appointments or politicised agency leadership, diluting the effect of formal meritocratic rules. By the late 2010s, frustration grew that public authorities found ways to circumvent merit principles. The re-politicisation of prefects in 2021 is one glaring example (Interview 15, 2021). Another example is the use of fixed-term contractors in ministries – often outside the civil service law – to bring in political cronies, a loophole exploited frequently. Therefore, while EU-driven legal frameworks for human resource management are in place, yielding a corps of capable civil servants, the top echelon of the bureaucracy often remained politically influenced, limiting its overall professionalism. As one interviewee succinctly put it, Romania's bureaucracy by 2020 was 'not

sufficiently prepared [at accession] and after 20 years, the reform is not at the desired level' (Interview 21, 2021).

Systems and Tools

Another dimension of administrative performance is the systems and tools that government uses to formulate and implement policies. The EU has tried to equip Romania with modern governance tools, such as e-government platforms, budgeting and planning systems, RIA frameworks. The outcomes here have been mixed. Despite technical assistance, by 2020 Romania still struggled with basic policy management tools. The Commission noted that 'the development of an effective framework for strategic and budgetary planning has stalled' (European Commission, 2020b, p. 60). Recurrent government turnover and shifting political priorities meant that medium-term strategies were frequently revised or abandoned. As a result, policy–budget alignment remained fragile, and public decision-making often reflected short-term political calculations rather than stable strategic frameworks. The European Semester repeatedly identified weaknesses in policy coordination and medium-term fiscal planning in its country reports (European Commission, 2015–2020). Although additional EU support continued to provide technical assistance, the consolidation of a durable, government-wide culture of strategic planning progressed gradually and unevenly.

Romania was also late in digitalising its administration. Throughout the 2000–2020 period, various EU-funded projects tried to jump-start e-government – creating electronic portals for permits, developing electronic procurement systems, and digitising registries. A bright spot was the Electronic Public Procurement System (SEAP), which was launched in mid-2000s with PHARE support. Upgraded continuously, it brought more transparency to public tenders and was praised by the Commission as a step toward the reduction of corruption. With EU support, Romania also established the Authority for the Digitalisation of Romania (ADR) in 2020 to drive e-government initiatives.[1] ADR quickly launched several national online platforms, such as Ghiseul.ro for online fee payments and e-licitatie.ro for publishing public procurement notices. These tools, introduced decades after they became standard in many EU countries, have started to improve

1 The ADR benefitted from over €2.5 million from the Commission to improve online interactions between citizens and the public administration under the project Support for the Identification, Management and Implementation of the Ministry of Communications and Information Society funded under Axis 2 of the 2014–2020 Operational Programme (see Fonduri-UE.ro, n.d.).

citizens' access to services. Yet, Romania remains an EU laggard in digital public services – an e-government benchmark report in 2022 ranked Romania last in the EU on digitalisation level (European Commission, 2022a). While broadband infrastructure is good, the level of digital skills and the quality and accessibility of e-governance services are significantly lower in Romania than the European average (European Commission, 2022a). In short, the systems and tools for digital government are starting to be in place, but the usage and maturity of these services trail behind. This pattern is reflective of many structural reforms: the EU helped build the 'scaffolding' of institutions and laws akin to other EU members, but the functionality inside that scaffolding relies on the long-term investment and commitment of domestic agents.

Overall Governance Outcomes and Indicators

When evaluating Romania's administrative reform in aggregate, the picture that emerges is one of incremental gains but no transformative leap. Various governance indicators illustrate this point (see Figure 1). For example, across the six Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) – Voice and Accountability, Political Stability, Government Effectiveness, Regulatory Quality, Rule of Law, and Control of Corruption – Romania showed a mild upward trend from 2000 to 2021 but persistently lagged behind the EU average[2] on all counts. In Government Effectiveness, Romania improved from around -0.25 (percentile ~50th) in 2000 to +0.23 in 2014, but then slipped back to -0.26 by 2020 – roughly the same as two decades earlier. This indicates that initial gains post-EU accession were not sustained. By contrast, the average of older EU member states is far higher (around +1.5), and even the cohort of countries that joined in 2004 score well above Romania. Tellingly, Romania also often scores below Bulgaria, its fellow 2007 entrant, on governance measures, and below Croatia (which joined in 2013). This suggests that Romania has been a tail-end performer in the EU in terms of governance quality, despite its heavy EU assistance. The figures below, compiled from WGI data, show Romania's rule-of-law score improved but remained well under the EU average, and its control of corruption, while better than a decade ago, was still comparatively low. In fact, by 2021 Romania was scoring lower on these than some EU states that are themselves considered problematic on corruption, highlighting how far Romania still has to go.

2 The EU average scores were calculated by considering the scores of EU member states, taking account of the 2004, 2007, and 2013 enlargements rounds.

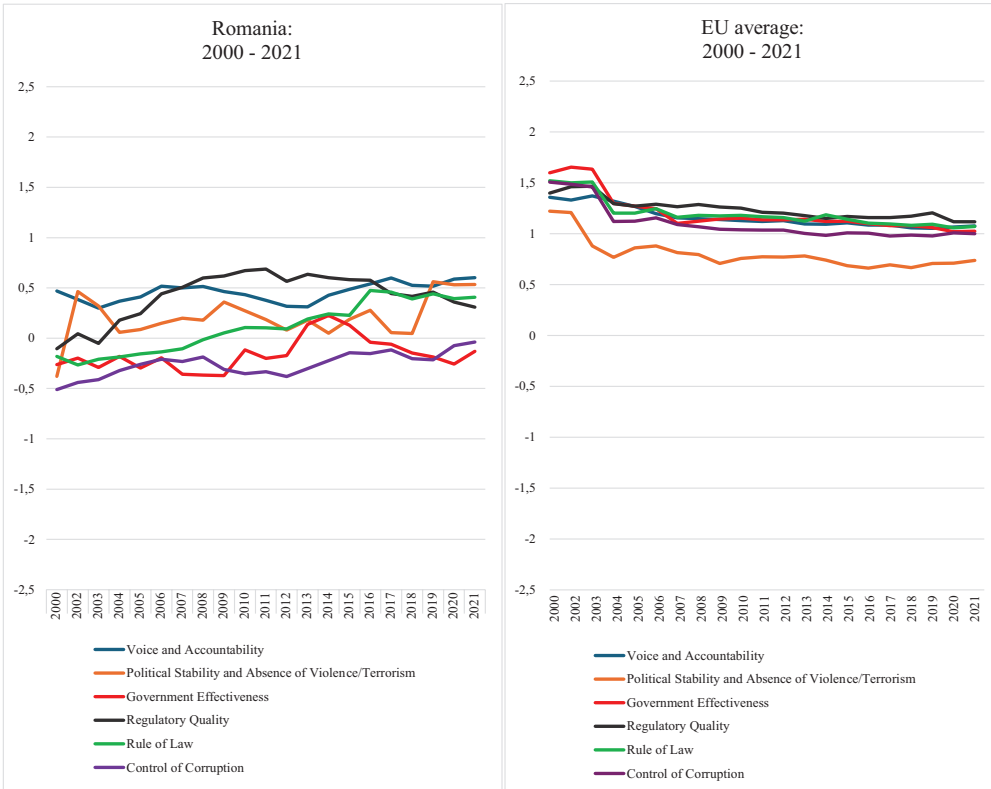

Figure 1. Government Performance in Romania vs EU Average, 2000–2021. Source: Author's compilation based on the WGI dataset (World Bank, 2022).

Another useful indicator is Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). This well-known index underscores slow improvement. In 2000, Romania's CPI score was around 30/100 (very corrupt by EU standards). By 2020, it had risen to 44/100, and in 2023 stood at 46/100, which is an improvement but still the third worst in the EU (only Hungary and Bulgaria score lower). In 2023, Romania scored 46/100 on the CPI, compared to an EU average of 64/100 – a gap of 18 points that underscores its continued divergence from the EU norm. Globally, Romania ranked 65th, placing it in the lower half of EU member states (Transparency International, 2024). The stagnation around the mid-40s score reflects that while high-profile corruption is prosecuted more now, petty corruption and clientelism in administration remain issues. Moreover, the public perceives continued corruption in public services – something that reforms have not fully rooted out. The EU's insistence on anti-corruption measures (e.g. asset disclosure, conflict of interest rules, transparent procurement) certainly prevented

worse outcomes, but corruption is still a systemic challenge affecting administrative performance and trust.

Democracy indicators, such as those provided by Freedom House, are on the same page. Freedom House's *Nations in Transit* reports categorise Romania as a 'semi-consolidated democracy' – a classification it has held for several years, with particular weaknesses in governance and judicial independence (Bădulescu, 2024b). This aligns with the qualitative findings of this study: pluralism is in place, and EU norms are formally adopted, but the implementation and consolidation of good governance is incomplete. Many of the chronic ailments identified in 2000 remain visible in 2020. The difference after two decades, however, is that Romania now has better tools and more resources, and it is more closely intertwined with EU systems, which together act as a check against severe deterioration and as an engine for gradual improvement.

Notably, most observers and interviewees concur that without the EU's support, Romania's administration would be in a far worse state. One former official asserted: 'The results would never have been obtained without EU support.... Without the Commission's assistance, it would have been impossible to foster the professional development of civil servants in Romania and to encourage digitalisation' (Interview 15, 2021). This sentiment was echoed by multiple interviewees, emphasising that the EU provided the vision, resources, and pressure to drive changes that otherwise might not have happened. EU funding enabled Romania to try reforms it could not afford on its own; EU benchmarks forced governments to address issues they might have preferred to ignore. In essence, the EU acted as a constant prod and guide – a role that is perhaps underappreciated when looking only at the middling indicators.

At the same time, the limits of external influence are evident. The EU could encourage and assist, but it could not single-handedly 'Europeanise' Romania's administrative culture. After millions of euros and numerous strategic recommendations, transformative change remained elusive. Instead, progress came in small steps, often two steps forward, one step back, in line with domestic political ebbs and flows. By 2020, Romania had reached a plateau where the basic administrative framework is compatible with EU norms, yet the effectiveness and integrity of governance still trails the EU average by a substantial margin.

Post-2020 Developments and Outlook

Looking beyond 2020, Romania's public administration faces new opportunities and challenges in its reform journey, this time without the crutch of

special EU conditionality but within the broader context of EU membership. In November 2022, when the European Commission declared that Romania had sufficiently met the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) benchmarks on judiciary and corruption, it decided to close the CVM. This was a significant milestone, indicating that, at least on paper, Romania had put in place the necessary frameworks for an independent judiciary and integrity systems. The end of the CVM in 2023 was also seen as clearing a political obstacle for Romania's further integration – notably, entry into the Schengen Area. Indeed, after years of being blocked, often ostensibly because of rule-of-law concerns, in December 2024 the EU Council decided to fully admit Romania into Schengen as of 1 January 2025. This decision, made possible by a shift in previously opposing member states' positions, has been hailed in Romania as the end of its second-class status in the EU. It also implicitly recognises the progress Romania has made in upgrading its border management and reducing corruption at the frontiers – another administrative aspect that EU assistance helped improve over the years. These post-2020 developments signal that Romania, by meeting EU benchmarks, has achieved a minimum threshold of acceptable performance in certain areas of governance. The lifting of the CVM, in particular, is a vote of confidence in the sustainability of judicial and anti-corruption reforms.

Romania continued to be monitored by the European Commission under the regular Rule of Law Report mechanism, just like any other member state. EU funding in the 2021–2027 period is now tied to a new set of 'enabling conditions', including sound governance and the EU's general Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation (2021), which means that serious rule-of-law issues can trigger suspension of EU funds for any member. Romania will be keen to avoid such scenarios, especially as it relies on EU funds for development.

The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), launched in 2021 to support EU economies in recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, has introduced a new conditionality-based driver of administrative reform. Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), with a total allocation of €28.5 billion, includes dedicated components to modernise public administration, strengthen anti-corruption frameworks, and enhance audit institutions. Key milestones in the public administration component include the implementation of a comprehensive e-governance toolbox and interoperability system – centred on integrated digital services for citizens and businesses, and a reform of public sector human resource management through merit- and competency-based frameworks applicable to central administration (Milestone 418). As of late 2025, Romania had absorbed approximately €10.7 billion (37.6%) of its total allocation, below the EU

average, with all milestones required to be completed by August 2026. Romania's NRRP experience thus illustrates both the renewed leverage that performance-based EU funding can exercise over domestic reform processes and the persistent implementation challenges that have characterised EU-supported administrative modernisation in Romania throughout the period under review in this book.

A further structural challenge is that the target Romania is trying to reach is not static. The European governance standards against which member states are assessed have continued to evolve, and the EU of the 2020s places considerably greater emphasis on digital governance, sustainable development, and institutional resilience than the accession benchmarks Romania had to meet in 2007. All member states are now expected to adapt to demands that did not feature prominently in earlier reform agendas, among them cybersecurity in government, agile policymaking in support of the green transition, and robust mechanisms to counter disinformation and external interference in public administration. Romania's administration will need to keep pace with these shifting expectations rather than treat earlier compliance as a point of arrival. For Romania, this means that meeting the benchmarks of one reform cycle does not conclude the reform process; it repositions the country at the starting point of the next. The EU's administrative expectations are cumulative and self-renewing, and Romania faces the additional challenge of accelerating reforms simply to converge with a mainstream that is itself moving forward.

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7. Serbia: From the Yugoslav Breakup to EU Aspirations

Abstract: This chapter examines the European Commission's efforts to Europeanise Serbia's post-conflict, post-authoritarian state apparatus shaped by communist legacies, Milošević-era state capture, wartime institutional distortions, and unresolved questions of sovereignty and statehood. Applying the Input–Throughput–Output framework, it traces how EU efforts to promote administrative reform were deployed across two decades of protracted accession. The analysis shows that candidate status generated significant formal alignment, yet a persistent pattern of legislativism prevailed, in which laws were adopted without transforming administrative behaviour. Executive consolidation and patronage-based incentive structures constrained depoliticisation, while a credibility gap in the membership prospect diluted reform momentum. The chapter concludes that an extended but uncertain EU accession perspective sustains institutional redesign while falling short of deep and sustainable administrative transformation.

Keywords: post-conflict governance; public administration reform; depoliticisation; patronage networks; prolonged accession; Western Balkans

Brief Contextual Introduction: Historical Legacies and Reform Constraints

Serbia enters the empirical analysis as a post-conflict, prolonged-accession case shaped by a distinct constellation of federal legacies, nationalist mobilisation, state fragmentation, and hybrid institutional reconstruction. Unlike Romania's hyper-centralised bureaucratic-authoritarian inheritance, Serbia's administrative trajectory reflects the disintegration of a multinational

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federation, the instrumentalisation of institutions during the Yugoslav Wars, and a protracted struggle to redefine state authority after regime change. These legacies are not merely historical background; they condition the reception of European Union (EU) inputs, structure the throughput of reform processes, and shape the durability of institutional outputs.

Under socialist Yugoslavia, Serbia operated within a federal system that combined communist one-party rule with significant decentralisation. The 1974 Yugoslav Constitution granted substantial autonomy to republics and provinces, including Kosovo and Vojvodina, producing a fragmented governance architecture in which formal decentralisation coexisted with party control (Ramet, 2006). While this system differed from Romania's hyper-centralisation, it did not generate a Weberian administrative ethos. Rather, party–state fusion structured recruitment and advancement, and administrative neutrality was subordinated to political loyalty. The League of Communists penetrated state institutions deeply, embedding clientelist networks within both republican and federal bureaucracies.

The dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s transformed this legacy into a far more destabilising inheritance. Under Slobodan Milošević, Serbia experienced a decade of war, international isolation, economic collapse, and intensified executive domination. State institutions were repurposed to sustain nationalist mobilisation and regime survival. Public administration became an instrument of political control and patronage distribution within an increasingly authoritarian system (Bieber, 2003; Goati, 2001). The wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and later Kosovo not only devastated the economy but also hollowed out administrative capacity. International sanctions and hyperinflation eroded professional norms and incentivised survival strategies rooted in informal networks and political loyalty. During this period, the distinction between public office and partisan authority blurred further, consolidating patterns of politicisation and executive concentration.

The democratic overthrow of Milošević in October 2000 did not immediately translate into administrative reconstruction. Although the new leadership declared European integration a strategic priority, state institutions were fragile, fragmented, and burdened by the legacies of conflict and international isolation. Serbia also confronted unresolved questions of statehood: Montenegro's independence referendum in 2006 dissolved the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, and Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 further destabilised the territorial and constitutional framework. Administrative reform thus unfolded simultaneously with state redefinition, placing additional strain on institutional consolidation.

These structural conditions have had direct implications for the country's Europeanisation. First, EU inputs entered a governance environment marked not only by politicisation but by post-conflict institutional fragility. Administrative reform overlapped with reconstruction, decentralisation debates, and constitutional uncertainty. Unlike Romania, where EU conditionality confronted entrenched bureaucratic centralism, in Serbia it interacted with fragmented authority structures and unresolved sovereignty disputes. EU norms of coordination, meritocracy, and accountability therefore encountered a state apparatus in flux, where institutional stability itself was contested.

Second, throughput dynamics in Serbia have been shaped by fluctuating political commitment and evolving party systems. The early 2000s were characterised by reformist but internally divided coalitions, limiting sustained ownership of administrative reform. From 2012 onward, under the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), political authority became more centralised, and while formal commitment to EU accession continued, observers have documented increasing executive dominance and concerns about democratic backsliding (Bieber, 2018). Administrative reforms have thus unfolded in an environment where European integration remains rhetorically central but competes with domestic incentives for political consolidation. This duality affects how EU assistance is processed: reform strategies may be adopted, yet implementation can be selectively prioritised or politically instrumentalised.

Third, sustainability of outputs in Serbia is closely tied to the credibility of accession prospects. As a candidate country since 2012, Serbia remains subject to accession conditionality, yet the prolonged and uncertain nature of enlargement has diluted the immediacy of membership incentives. Conditional leverage remains formally strong, but its temporal horizon has lengthened. Where accession momentum slows, the political costs of maintaining depoliticised administrative systems may outweigh perceived – yet distant – benefits.

Serbia thus constitutes a distinct analytical configuration: a post-conflict, highly politicised, and moderately fragmented case undergoing long-term accession. Its communist and wartime legacies do not merely create technical capacity deficits; they embed incentive structures in which public office remains politically valuable and executive control over appointments retains strategic importance. EU principles of administrative neutrality and rule-bounded governance challenge not only inherited bureaucratic practices but also contemporary political strategies. The case therefore enables systematic evaluation of three interrelated dynamics: whether sustained alignment

between domestic reform commitment and Commission support enhances consolidation (Hypothesis 1); whether prolonged accession conditionality retains transformative leverage (Hypothesis 2); and whether communist and conflict-era institutional incentives filter and constrain the absorption of EU-supported reforms (Hypothesis 3).

The sections that follow examine whether and how EU intervention succeeded in embedding durable administrative change in Serbia, or whether reform remained contingent upon accession incentives and vulnerable to domestic political recalibration.

Inputs: Financial, Discursive, and Policy Tools

Following the democratic breakthrough of 2000, Serbia began receiving extensive support from the EU to reform and modernise its public administration. The European Commission played a pivotal role during 2000–2020 by providing a combination of financial aid, strategic guidance, and normative frameworks to facilitate Serbia's transition from its complex post-Yugoslav legacy to a modern, European-style administrative state. This section outlines the main forms of EU support – the financial instruments, the discursive frameworks (ideas, principles, and conditions promoted by the EU), and the policy tools or programmes of technical assistance – that constituted the Commission's toolkit for administrative reform in Serbia.

EU financial aid for Serbia's public administration reform (PAR) substantially evolved over the 2000–2020 period, following the broader shifts in the EU's external assistance programmes. In the immediate post-Milošević years, Serbia was included in the EU's regional CARDS (Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation) programme. During the 2000–2006 programming period, Serbia received approximately €116 million through CARDS dedicated to governance and institutional rebuilding. These funds were critical in jump-starting Serbia's institutional recovery after the 1990s devastation, supporting efforts such as urgent public service restructuring, rebuilding administrative capacity, and drafting new governance legislation. In 2007, as Serbia moved closer to candidate status, the EU rolled out the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), which replaced CARDS and other earlier instruments for candidate and potential candidate countries. Under IPA Phase I (2007–2013), Serbia was allocated an estimated €165 million specifically for PAR and related capacity building (European Commission, 2011b). This increase reflected the EU's growing commitment

to Serbia's European path, providing resources for more ambitious reforms in areas like civil service professionalisation, e-government, and regulatory simplification. The trend continued with IPA Phase II (2014–2020), during which roughly €210 million was earmarked to Serbia's PAR and governance improvements. By this time Serbia was a formal candidate country (since 2012) and had begun accession negotiations, so the funding aimed to address more complex reforms linked to EU membership requirements.

It is notable that Serbia's early funding levels, especially under CARDS, were modest compared to those of some Central-East European countries (like Romania or Bulgaria) that were full candidates in the early 2000s. However, Serbia's allocations steadily increased as its EU integration process deepened. From 2000 to 2020, Serbia received hundreds of millions of euros in EU assistance for governance reforms – a significant investment, though still lower in absolute terms than what some earlier accession countries obtained. The financial inputs were not simply handouts; they were carefully conditioned and targeted. Each phase of funding came with strategic priorities jointly agreed by the Commission and the Serbian authorities in a bid to ensure that money was directed at identified weaknesses in the administrative system.

A major strategic shift occurred in the 2014–2020 period with how financial assistance was delivered. The European Commission's new enlargement strategy (European Commission, 2014e) put PAR at the forefront of the accession agenda, alongside the rule of law and economic governance. In line with this, the Commission increasingly moved from funding many small projects to a sector budget support approach. In Serbia, this took shape, for example, as a sector reform contract for PAR – an €80 million programme, out of which €70 million was provided as direct budget support to the Serbian government (disbursed in tranches upon meeting reform targets) and €10 million via complementary technical assistance projects (GOPA, 2019b). This approach effectively meant the Commission was now directly injecting funds into Serbia's state budget to support PAR, in exchange for Serbian authorities undertaking large-scale reforms and meeting specific performance indicators. The shift to budget support was intended to increase local ownership and high-level commitment. As one senior Serbian official explained, 'when you have direct budgetary support, then the actual reform depends on real political support across the whole government' (Interview 24, 2020). In other words, by tying disbursements to reform results, the Commission sought to create stronger incentives for Serbian political leaders to truly buy into the reform process, rather than treating EU projects as externally driven initiatives. As a Serbian ministry official noted, this

financial modality of providing '€80 million only for PAR' also signalled 'how important this is for the Commission' (Interview 30, 2020).

Alongside funding, the EU provided discursive and strategic inputs – in the form of frameworks, principles, conditions, and regular assessments – that guided Serbia's reforms. Since Serbia did not have strong reform strategies in the early 2000s, the European Commission helped supply a strategic vision through key documents and policy dialogues. For example, under CARDS the Commission drafted a Country Strategy Paper for the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia for 2002–2006, annual National Indicative Programmes, and Stabilisation and Association reports that laid out broad priorities and benchmarks (EPRD, 2013; European Commission, 2001c). These documents emphasised rebuilding core institutions, promoting good governance, and preparing for obligations under the future Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA). Initially, the objectives were relatively general – focusing on institution building, PAR, and the rule of law – which gave flexibility to address emergent needs in a post-conflict environment (European Commission, 2006c). This vagueness presented trade-offs: while it allowed adaptable use of funds, it also meant expectations were not tightly defined.

On the domestic front, Serbian authorities articulated their own reform vision by adopting a PAR strategy (2004–2008) in November 2004. This was a milestone. It was Serbia's first comprehensive PAR strategy, rooted in the European principles of public administration developed by the SIGMA (Support for Improvement in Governance and Management) programme: depoliticisation, professionalisation, decentralisation, and transparency (European Commission, 2012b). The strategy and its action plan outlined reforms in civil service legislation, administrative procedures, institutional restructuring, and decentralisation, aligning with concepts of 'good governance' and 'open government'. This meant that even at the strategy level, Serbia was consciously trying to internalise European norms of how a public administration should function. Although the 2004 strategy lacked time-bound targets and clear indicators – many goals were defined in terms of passing new laws rather than measuring implementation (GOPA, 2019a) – the existence of this strategy gave the European Commission a reference framework to support. Indeed, IPA assistance in the late 2000s was largely programmed to back the priorities of the 2004 PAR strategy and subsequent action plans.

The European Commission used conditionality and policy dialogue to steer Serbia's reforms, especially as more funds were at stake under IPA. In practice, this meant the Commission tied funding approvals and

progress in accession talks to specific reform benchmarks. For instance, the Commission often required that certain prerequisites (like relevant legislation, administrative structures, or co-financing commitments) be in place before releasing project funds (ECA, 2016b). The annual progress reports issued by the Commission became an important discursive tool: these yearly reports assessed Serbia's advancements – or lack thereof – in governance areas, including public administration, and their findings fed back into programming decisions and political conditionality. Over time, the language of the Commission's assessments grew more exacting. By the mid-2010s, the Commission explicitly anchored its recommendations in the SIGMA principles of public administration. After SIGMA published a comprehensive baseline assessment of Serbia in 2015, evaluating Serbia against 48 principles across six areas of public administration, the European Commission started using those findings to shape its assistance and conditions. According to a senior Serbian civil servant, from 2015 onward the SIGMA principles became the de facto road map: 'They are very useful. We take it almost … not as a Bible, but if you're doing PAR that's obligatory.… No financial aid is paid without harmonising with those standards or seeing progress with those standards' (Interview 30, 2020). In essence, every new PAR strategy or action plan had to demonstrate alignment with SIGMA principles after 2014.

Another key element of the EU's input was the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) itself and its related bodies. The SAA (signed in 2008, in force from 2013) not only liberalised trade and aimed to foster cooperation, but also created a joint institutional framework where EU and Serbian officials met regularly. PAR featured in these dialogues, keeping it on the political agenda. Additionally, in 2008–2009 Serbia adopted a comprehensive National Programme for Integration (NPI) with the EU (Government of Serbia, 2009), mapping out how national legislation would be aligned with the EU *acquis*. This programme was updated annually and served as another planning tool that dovetailed with PAR efforts (European Commission, 2012b). It helped Serbian institutions prioritise legal and administrative changes needed for eventual accession, often highlighting capacity gaps that EU aid could then target.

By the latter half of the 2010s, the Commission's support came with an expectation of more strategic planning and coordination on Serbia's side. The Commission, together with SIGMA experts, supported Serbia in formulating a new PAR strategy for 2014–2020 (adopted in early 2014) to refresh the reform agenda. However, because SIGMA's updated principles were published only in late 2014, Serbia supplemented the strategy with two iterative action

plans (2015–2017 and 2018–2020) that were 'much more aligned with the SIGMA principles' (Interview 27, 2020). This highlights how the EU – through SIGMA – directly assisted in drafting Serbia's reform plans, ensuring they met European best practices. This intensive involvement exemplifies the EU's 'ideational' or discursive influence: Serbian officials increasingly spoke the language of European public administration standards and measured their own work by those yardsticks.

In addition to funding and frameworks, the European Commission deployed a suite of technical cooperation instruments to transfer knowledge and build capacity in Serbia's administration. Chief among these were Twinning, TAIEX (Technical Assistance and Information Exchange), and classic technical assistance (TA) projects, as well as the SIGMA programme itself. Serbia benefited from dozens of Twinning projects across various fields – from modernising tax administration to strengthening public procurement systems. These projects were meant to import best practices by having European practitioners work hand in hand with Serbian officials on new laws, organisational structures, and procedures. However, not all Twinning experiences were positive: some interviewees noted that Twinning sometimes led to imposing a specific member state's model without sufficient adaptation to the local context. In Serbia's case, a few Twinning partnerships struggled because the chosen member state's administrative system was too different from Serbia's needs, leading to attempts to 'copy-paste experiences from one member state to another' that were not entirely suitable (Interview 23, 2020). This sometimes resulted in low ownership or understanding on the Serbian side.

Serbia also made extensive use of TAIEX for seminars and trainings, which helped familiarise Serbian civil servants with EU directives, standards, and the functioning of European institutions. They also served to keep reform discussions active at the working level, complementing the longer-term projects. Dozens of study visits for Serbian officials to EU countries were organised as well, broadening exposure to European administrative practices.

Direct technical support was also provided through SIGMA, alongside its assessments and principles discussed earlier as a normative framework. SIGMA experts worked in Serbia to advise on drafting the civil service law, establishing the new professional training structures, and designing monitoring and evaluation systems for PAR. Uniquely, SIGMA's involvement lent Serbia peer advice from experienced European administrations (often former high-ranking officials or specialists from other countries) and helped connect Serbia to regional best practices. For instance, SIGMA's comprehensive

monitoring reports in 2017 and 2021 offered detailed evaluations of Serbian administration and recommendations, effectively functioning as both a diagnostic tool and a guide for subsequent EU assistance (OECD-SIGMA, 2017b; 2021a). Through these tools, the 'action frame' of EU support was operationalised: it was not just money and plans, but also people on the ground working to change administrative practices in Serbia.

Throughput: Implementation Processes of EU-Supported Reforms

Having outlined the EU's toolkit for supporting Serbia's administrative reform, we now turn to the implementation of these reforms – the 'throughput' processes that connect inputs to outcomes. This involves examining the factors that shaped how effectively (or not) the EU's support was translated into on-the-ground changes in Serbia's public administration. There were influences stemming from the Commission's own approach as well as critical domestic factors in Serbia.

To structure this analysis, we first explore the Commission-dependent factors: how the European Commission designed and managed assistance, including aspects pertaining to the use of conditionality, programming flexibility, coordination, and expertise issues, and how these factors affected implementation. We then delve into the domestic political and institutional factors within Serbia that either facilitated or impeded reform uptake – including the level of political will, the stability of leadership, and the administrative capacity of Serbian institutions. By considering both external and internal dynamics, we can understand why certain reforms succeeded, why others stalled, and how the overall PAR process unfolded between 2000 and 2020.

Commission-Dependent Factors

In theory, the EU's financial aid and technical support came with strings attached – clear conditionality to ensure reforms were carried out. In practice, the strictness and clarity of these conditions varied over time. During the early CARDS years, the Commission's approach to programming aid in Serbia was quite top-down. Needs assessments and project designs were often done by the Commission with limited systematic input from Serbian beneficiaries (EPRD, 2013). This expedited getting projects off the ground in the uncertain post-2000 environment, but it also meant limited local

ownership: Serbian ministries sometimes saw EU projects as externally imposed, with objectives that were 'over-ambitious or disconnected from the reality on the ground' (Deloitte Consulting, 2008). A Commission evaluation in 2007 admitted that many CARDS projects for institution building in Serbia had unrealistic goals and time frames, given beneficiaries' limited absorption capacity, which 'created more than once a problematic situation' (European Commission, 2007c). In short, in the rush to deploy aid after 2000, the Commission did not always calibrate the project scope to Serbia's actual administrative readiness.

One aspect where the Commission could have been tougher early on was ex-ante conditionality – requiring Serbia to meet certain prerequisites before receiving aid. For example, ensuring that a clear lead agency or strategy was in place for each reform area might have improved focus. A review of IPA assistance found that 'the Commission could have imposed stronger conditionality' by demanding that Serbia adopt key laws or set up coordination bodies before starting some projects (Ecorys, 2013). After 2010, the Commission began tightening its conditionality. This was partly in response to lessons learned and partly due to changes in the enlargement environment. The leverage of accession was formally greater once Serbia became a candidate in 2012: reforms were now not just about using aid effectively, but also about opening and closing negotiation chapters. The Commission increasingly linked PAR progress to Chapter 23 and 24 requirements (judiciary and fundamental rights; justice and home affairs) and later to the newly introduced 'Fundamentals First' approach of the revised EU enlargement methodology. By the mid-2010s, the Commission was leveraging the SIGMA principles as quasi-conditions: for instance, before disbursing funds under the PAR sector reform contract, Serbia had to show it had adopted an updated PAR action plan aligned with SIGMA recommendations, and demonstrate progress on specific indicators (GOPA, 2019b). There was also an important condition introduced around 2016–2017: the Commission insisted that Serbia treat PAR and public financial management (PFM) as interconnected issues. In practical terms, this meant Serbia had to merge its PAR and PFM strategies or at least closely coordinate them to continue receiving budget support. A Serbian official recalled that

> the Commission said that if you want to see the money – €80 million for Serbia's PAR – you need to merge PAR and PFM.... They are pushing for it, probably to respond to some challenges the Commission had with states inside the EU. (Interview 30, 2020)

This conditionality reflected an EU lesson that budgeting and administrative efficiency go hand in hand; ministries had to work together and break the silos that hinder reforms.

The Commission's management of aid projects also significantly affected implementation. Evaluations noted that the Commission underused the inception phase of projects – a period at a project's start meant to fine-tune objectives – to recalibrate unrealistic or outdated goals (Particip GmbH, 2009). The result was frequent time extensions and budget add-ons to allow projects to eventually deliver results, as initial timelines proved too optimistic, especially amid Serbia's political volatility (Particip GmbH, 2009). Furthermore, for much of the 2007–2013 period, the management of IPA in Serbia was centralised in the EU Delegation in Belgrade, which was responsible for programming, contracting, monitoring, and evaluation. This put heavy workloads on Delegation staff (task managers), who had to juggle designing new projects while overseeing ongoing ones. Resource constraints at the Delegation sometimes led to less thorough project preparation or monitoring than ideal, illustrating that the EU's capacity on the ground can be a limiting factor.

Another design issue was insufficient tailoring to local capacity. The Commission did not always conduct formal capacity assessments of Serbian institutions before assigning them complex projects (Ecorys, 2013). This lack of realism meant some IPA projects tried to do too much, too quickly, leading to implementation delays or partial completion. The European Court of Auditors also criticised the Commission for, in some cases, inadequately defining project objectives and not incorporating lessons from past projects (ECA, 2014). In response, the Commission did begin to streamline projects in the late IPA I period – focusing on fewer, larger interventions with more strategic impact (like the PAR sector budget support and a complementary technical assistance project to support the reform of policy planning). The sector approach in IPA II, using budget support, was itself a way to improve flexibility: rather than micromanage many individual projects, the Commission set broad targets and let the Serbian government figure out how to meet them, with monitoring and policy dialogue guiding the way.

One downside of the Commission's large budget support contract, however, was a risk of reduced transparency. With money going directly into Serbia's state coffers, the onus was on Serbian institutions to report progress. Civil society observers and even some officials complained that the PAR sector reform contract lacked transparency – its implementation was 'extremely opaque … despite announcements that it was going to be a "transparency instrument" with civil society organisations involved in

monitoring', in reality no public reports or data on targets achieved were made available (Interview 23, 2020). There is evidence that the Commission, under geopolitical pressure, prioritised disbursing funds over strict compliance in this period. A former Commission official admitted that 'we [the Commission] may have disbursed [funds] without [the government] always fully … [delivering the expected results]. There was pressure to disburse' (Interview 10, 2020). Essentially, the Commission faced a dilemma: on the one hand, wanting to enforce conditions rigorously, and, on the other hand, worrying that withholding funds (or being seen as too harsh) could push Serbia away at a time when Russian and Chinese influence in the region was rising. Indeed, Serbia by the late 2010s had multiple external partners – Russia and China offered loans and projects without governance strings attached – and the EU feared losing leverage. As one Serbian adviser described it,

> the Commission wants to remain an important actor in the region, as we are no longer in a context where Serbia has only one perspective [the EU]. Serbia won't turn its back on other 'friends' like Russia, China, or Turkey. (Interview 22, 2020)

This context sometimes led the Commission to soften the enforcement of conditionality on PAR, in order not to alienate Serbian leaders. The trade-off was that some reform targets were marked as achieved when in fact reforms had only partially materialised – a point we will see reflected in output assessments.

The success of EU-funded reforms often came down to whether the right expertise was deployed and whether the Serbian side was fully engaged. In the early years, quality control of technical assistance was a problem. A 2009 evaluation noted the 'dubious quality of TA' in some CARDS projects – for instance, foreign experts who lacked local knowledge or the appropriate skill set (Particip GmbH, 2009, p. 3). Some projects had to replace international experts mid-course, which, while eventually improving outputs, caused significant delays (Ecorys, 2013). Additionally, there was sometimes a disconnect between what EU experts delivered and what Serbian institutions could absorb or were ready to use. One interviewee recalled that in the early 2000s,

> there were so many good souls that wanted to help and so many ideas, but the Serbian administration could not understand what they wanted because they had separate views. For example, French support was

> based on a centralised state model, for a decentralised state [like Serbia]. (Interview 27, 2020)

This highlights how well-meaning advice could miss the mark. Twinning projects, in particular, were cited as occasionally inflexible or mismatched, with member state experts sometimes attempting to transplant their home systems without sufficient adaptation (Interview 23, 2020).

Monitoring and follow-up by the Commission also had room for improvement. Under CARDS, the Commission used a results-oriented monitoring (ROM) system involving external monitors who would evaluate projects and report mainly to the Commission. However, these ROM reports were not routinely shared or discussed with Serbian beneficiaries, meaning local officials often did not receive feedback or have a chance to course-correct during implementation (Deloitte Consulting, 2008; Interview 22, 2020). This lack of inclusive monitoring limited learning and reduced Serbian stakeholders' sense of accountability for results. By the IPA era, monitoring became somewhat more joint through sector working groups and IPA monitoring committees involving the Serbian authorities, but even then, the focus was often on activities and spending, rather than outcomes and impact. In 2018, the Commission explicitly recommended Serbia to strengthen its own monitoring and evaluation capacity to track reform results, not just activities (European Commission, 2018b). This indicates the EU recognised a gap in how progress was being measured and reported. Without solid monitoring data or transparency, it was difficult for both the EU and Serbian public to know which reforms were genuinely working.

Finally, the consistency of messaging from the EU side also affected reform implementation. Some interviewees pointed out a disconnect between the technical level and the political level in EU–Serbia relations. EU technical reports and local EU Delegation officials would often plainly criticise shortcomings – for instance, noting 'hideous politicisation' in the civil service or lack of political will – but at high-level meetings, top EU representatives sometimes struck a more positive tone, commending Serbian leaders for progress (Interview 23, 2020). This inconsistency could dilute accountability. As one former adviser in Serbia observed,

> If the leadership in Serbia gets constantly praised by top-level EU representatives, but then technical reports and civil society point out lack of will and breaches of legislation,… you lose the idea of who is responsible for the lack of progress. The effectiveness and credibility of the EU's support is then lost. (Interview 23, 2020)

In essence, the EU at times sent mixed signals – publicly congratulating reforms in general terms (perhaps for diplomatic reasons or to keep Serbia motivated), while internally knowing that deeper problems persisted. This may have reduced pressure on Serbian politicians to follow through on difficult changes, as they could highlight the EU's positive statements as endorsement.

Moreover, as enlargement fatigue set in and the timeline for Serbia's accession slipped further into the future, the Commission's leverage diminished. By the late 2010s, many in Serbia perceived – rightly or wrongly – that the EU was not prepared to admit new members anytime soon. This perception was reinforced when the Commission introduced a new clustering of chapters and more stringent benchmarks in 2020, which some Serbian officials saw as moving the goalposts (Interview 24, 2020). One interviewee remarked that the Commission is fully capable of forcing candidates to speed up reforms 'when they choose to be.... Currently they are not choosing to be [so assertive] in the area of administrative reform, because nobody thinks any enlargement will happen anytime soon' (Interview 24, 2020). In other words, with accession far off, the urgency faded on both sides.

The Commission, balancing competing priorities such as internal institutional crises, the 2015 migratory influx, and the subsequent COVID-19 pandemic, arguably de-prioritised rigorous oversight of Serbia's administrative reforms in favour of high-level political objectives, most notably the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue (Interview 26, 2021). Extensive scholarly evidence characterises this period as the rise of a 'stabilitocracy' in the Western Balkans, where the EU prioritised regional stability over substantive democratic and governance standards (Bieber, 2020; Kmezić, 2018). Consequently, by 2020, while the Commission remained a primary agenda setter, its influence over Serbia's domestic institutional depth was increasingly attenuated by a geopolitical preference for stability over transformation.

Domestic Political and Institutional Factors

The foremost domestic factor in Serbia's PAR journey has been the degree of political will and commitment to reform. In the early 2000s, Serbia's political scene was unstable and often divided on the reform agenda. The first post-Milošević years saw a coalition of democratic parties push initial reforms (adopting the 2001 Reform Agenda to reorganise government and simplify administration, for example). Yet, this momentum was not consistent. Between 2000 and 2012, Serbia had numerous elections and government changes that disrupted reform continuity. Particularly during the 2007–2012 period, government turnover was frequent (there were elections in 2007

and in 2008 and an early one in 2012) and coalition governments often had divergent priorities. Every reshuffle or election led to administrative reorganisation – ministries merged or split, officials were replaced – causing delays or abandonment of ongoing reform efforts (Ecorys, 2013). After the 2012 elections, Serbia's high-level PAR Council (meant to steer and coordinate reforms) became inactive for over a year, leaving reforms without political guidance (OECD-SIGMA, 2013). Without a clear champion (such as a dedicated Minister for Administrative Reform or strong prime ministerial backing), various ministries and agencies involved in PAR lacked direction and fell back into the old routine, rather than pursuing new initiatives introduced by EU-funded projects (Ecorys, 2013).

Furthermore, vested interests in the political–administrative elite often resisted the deeper changes required for depoliticising and professionalising the civil service. Many political leaders and party patrons had a stake in maintaining control over public sector jobs and contracts – the 'spoils' that come with power. As a 2013 Commission report diplomatically put it, 'recruitment, particularly for managerial positions, is an issue of serious concern, as a substantial proportion has been conducted through non-transparent procedures' (European Commission, 2013c, p. 8). In plain terms, politicians were continuing to place allies in key positions regardless of merit rules. This indicates low genuine commitment to the spirit of PAR: laws might be passed under EU pressure, but implementation could be deliberately superficial. One Serbian reformer observed that

> no matter how much money the Commission offers, it will never be enough to make an unwilling government tie its own hands in terms of transparency, depoliticisation and issues like that. On the other hand, where there is political will, [EU support] is perfectly sufficient to properly support reforms. (Interview 23, 2020)

This statement encapsulates the reality that EU aid is a facilitating factor, not a determining one – ultimately the domestic leadership's willingness to restrain its traditional patronage powers is decisive.

Serbia's experience after 2012 is illustrative. Aleksandar Vučić's government initially declared PAR a priority and indeed took some visible steps that 'looked good in the eyes of the EU' (Interview 29, 2021), such as downsizing the administration and enacting action plans. However, insiders note that within the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), not everyone supported weakening political control over the bureaucracy. Reforms that threatened to diminish the party's influence in agencies or local governments could

be quietly sabotaged. According to one account, reform proponents in government often lacked backing from the ruling SNS:

> Political support was and is the party in power; it is obtained informally, and the direction [for action] is gained informally. I didn't have the political party behind me as a Deputy PM, if they [the members of the ruling party] were feeling that the actual political centre of power was not going to approve that [i.e. reform initiatives]. (Interview 29, 2021)

The implicit warning was that pushing too hard on certain reforms could result in dismissal – the 'termination of a mandate at the stroke of a pen' (Interview 29, 2021) – a credible threat in Serbia's political culture. Such dynamics meant that reformist voices were often isolated, and initiatives that went beyond the superficial could be neutered after the EU advisers left the room.

One cannot ignore the effect of broader political priorities overshadowing PAR. The EU and Serbia's government had to juggle multiple high-stakes issues – the economy, relations with Kosovo, and (since 2015) the migrant crisis, among others – and in this hierarchy of political attention, PAR, which is technical and yields no immediate political capital, consistently fell to the bottom. Several interviewees lamented that the EU–Serbia dialogue has been 'excessively focused on the Belgrade–Pristina negotiations, taking precedence over talks about progress on administrative reform' (Interview 24, 2020). A form of tactical prioritisation emerged: as long as Belgrade demonstrated cooperation on the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue or regional security matters, the Union exercised a degree of regulatory forbearance regarding internal governance. This dynamic intersected with the absence of a credible accession timeline. A senior official described the resulting 'vicious cycle': the perceived distance of the membership goal directly diminishes political enthusiasm, noting that 'if suddenly there was a much more convincing accession prospect, it would create the political will [for hard reforms]' (Interview 29, 2021). Without that prospect, the immediate political costs of compliance – particularly reforms that risked destabilising established patronage networks – outweighed the distant, uncertain rewards of membership. The preservation of the status quo thus became the rational strategic choice for domestic elites. Only a fundamental recalibration of this incentive structure, whether through a credible merit-based acceleration of the accession path or the application of more stringent negative conditionality, is likely to alter this domestic cost–benefit calculus.

Another central domestic obstacle, touched on above, is the persistent politicisation of public administration in Serbia. Despite new civil service laws and formal merit-based procedures introduced (with EU help) since 2004, political interference in hiring, promotions, and day-to-day management has continued. As early as 2012, the European Commission observed that 'appointments in public administration remain vulnerable to politicisation' (European Commission, 2012b, p. 2). By 2020, the problem had not abated; in fact, the Commission's Serbia report that year warned of an 'increasingly serious concern' regarding lack of transparent, merit-based senior recruitment (European Commission, 2020k, p. 5). The patronage system, where ruling parties distribute public jobs to loyalists, has survived every change of government. This has several adverse effects on the implementation of reforms. When governments or ministers change, there is a sweep of personnel changes, even at middle-management and expert levels. Often, competent civil servants are sidelined or pushed out to make room for politically connected replacements. One interviewee noted the difficulty of removing incompetent staff who were embedded through political means and, conversely, the difficulty for truly professional civil servants to retain positions of influence (Interview 27, 2020). This not only erodes institutional memory but also means that people trained under EU projects may not stay long enough to apply what they learned. Politicisation demoralises career civil servants. If promotions depend on loyalty rather than performance, civil servants have little incentive to innovate or take initiative on reforms. A skilled bureaucrat might find it more rewarding to seek jobs elsewhere (private sector or abroad) than to stay in a politicised office. As one frustrated civil servant put it, 'We end up having people in the administration who are not experienced, who do not take responsibility – the hierarchy is very strict, and on top of that those who are good leave' (Interview 22, 2020). High performers exiting the administration was a common theme, which undermined the long-term effectiveness of EU capacity-building efforts. Politicisation also means that even when new systems are put in place (say, an IT system for tracking policy decisions or a new HR performance-evaluation procedure), they may be circumvented or ignored in practice if they constrain political agendas. For example, Serbia introduced formal exams and selection commissions for civil service hiring (with EU assistance), but it became common that many senior posts were simply left as 'acting' (temporary status) and continuously filled by party appointees, bypassing open competition. Indeed, by 2023 more than half of senior management positions in the Serbian civil service were occupied in an acting capacity – a fact explicitly noted by the European Commission

(European Commission, 2023e). This allowed political control to persist under the radar of formal procedures.

The EU and SIGMA's push for depoliticisation made limited headway against these entrenched practices. While Serbia did amend the Civil Service Law in 2018 to tighten merit provisions and while it created a centralised human resource management service (HRMS) to oversee recruitment, the implementation lagged. SIGMA's 2021 monitoring report diplomatically stated that 'the effectiveness of recruitment procedures … remains sub-optimal' and urged strict implementation of the merit-based rules or else a revision of the system (OECD-SIGMA, 2021a, p. 6). Local experts were even more blunt: a recent study concluded that '[p]oliticisation of the senior civil service in Serbia is a deeply rooted problem. After years of raising red flags, the question is not how to eliminate it but whether there is any way to allay it' (Đinđić & Lazarević, 2023, p. 4). This indicates that despite continuous pressure from the EU, the political capture of administrative appointments has remained essentially intact since the start of the transition.

Beyond high-level political dynamics, the bureaucratic capacity of Serbia's civil service, encompassing the professional skills, organisational structures, and administrative culture of its personnel, constituted an independent constraint on reform implementation. In 2000, Serbia's public administration emerged from a decade of international isolation, economic sanctions, and institutional neglect. Agencies were chronically under-resourced, staffing profiles were skewed toward personnel with outdated competencies, and basic administrative infrastructure had deteriorated significantly. The simultaneous pursuit of multiple transformative agendas in the years that followed, including privatisation, fiscal decentralisation, and the progressive alignment of legislation and practice with EU requirements, placed severe and compounding demands on an already weakened administrative system. As EU funds flowed in, a paradox arose: often 'there were more funds available than administrative capacity to manage those funds', leading to under-utilisation or delays (IBF International Consulting, 2015). Managing EU projects requires specific capabilities – fluent English, familiarity with EU procurement rules, project management know-how – which were initially scarce. The Serbian European Integration Office and a few line ministries built up expertise over time, but absorbing aid effectively was a challenge, especially in smaller institutions.

A 2007 Serbian government report candidly stated the administration had an 'insufficient number of experts capable to envisage, formulate and implement an EU-funded project' (Government of Serbia, 2007, p. 52). This

shortfall meant that the same small pool of qualified people were tasked with multiple reforms and donor projects, leading to overwork and burnout. Compounding this, public sector salaries were (and remain) relatively low, making it hard to attract or retain talented professionals. It was not uncommon that a civil servant trained by an EU project would soon jump to a higher-paying job in an international organisation or leave for the private sector, draining away the very capacity that had been built. One interviewee highlighted this revolving door:

> When one person leaves the administration, the output [of the project] is put on a shelf.... There is a lot of political interference preventing the administration from ensuring sustainability of measures introduced. A combination of weak enforcement with sustainability problems is preventing proper reform. (Interview 26, 2021)

In short, frequent staff turnover (due to both politicisation and low retention) meant many EU-sponsored reforms depended on individuals who might not be around long enough to see them through. What, then, did all of this yield? The section that follows shifts from the machinery of reform to its results, assessing how much of Serbia's administrative transformation was real and lasting, and how much remained on paper.

Outputs: Assessing the Impact of Reforms

This section evaluates the outcomes and impact of the EU-supported PAR in Serbia from 2000 to 2020. The assessment is organised around several key dimensions: administrative structures and processes, human resource management, and systems and tools. Overall, after two decades, Serbia's public administration has undoubtedly undergone changes: new laws and agencies exist, some services have improved, and the European principles are visible in Serbia's administrative framework. However, many reforms have been more normative than transformative – meaning they altered formal rules but have not fully changed behaviour and practices. As a result, Serbia in 2020 remained only 'moderately prepared' in the area of PAR by the European Commission's own evaluation (European Commission, 2020k; ReSPA, 2021a). These findings are detailed below, alongside a few success stories and improvements, for instance, in digital government services, that emerged especially toward the end of the period and into the early 2020s.

Structures and Processes

One major focus of EU assistance was to help Serbia establish the legal and organisational structures necessary for a modern, efficient, and accountable public administration. This includes the adoption of new laws, the creation or reform of institutions, and the introduction of standard procedures for policymaking and service delivery.

By 2020, Serbia had indeed updated a significant portion of its administrative legal framework, often with EU support (Deloitte Consulting, 2008; European Commission, 2006c). Key pieces of legislation – such as the General Administrative Procedures Act, the Civil Service Law, the Law on State Administration, laws on local self-government, public procurement laws, and e-government laws – were drafted or revised in line with European principles. For example, the EU strongly encouraged Serbia to overhaul its civil service legislation in the mid-2000s, seeing it as foundational for aligning with European standards of meritocracy and neutrality. Serbia responded by passing a new Civil Service Law in 2005, designed to establish merit-based recruitment and other modern human resources (HR) practices. The Commission regarded this as an important step toward European norms, and it became a reference point in progress reports.

Institution building was another tangible output. With CARDS assistance, Serbia set up a new Treasury Department and its supporting IT system in the Ministry of Finance, improving budget execution and fiscal transparency (Government of Serbia, 2011). It also created a central human resource management service (HRMS) by 2005, which became a cornerstone for civil service management and continued to be a major beneficiary of EU assistance in subsequent years (Council of Europe, 2021). The HRMS took over organising civil service exams, trainings, and maintaining personnel registries, functions that were crucial for depoliticising recruitment (at least in theory). In the justice sector, EU projects helped establish administrative courts to handle citizens' complaints against government decisions, strengthening accountability. Moreover, a notable institutional development was the launch of the National Academy for Public Administration (NAPA) in 2017, an EU-supported initiative to provide systematic training to civil servants (OECD-SIGMA, 2019). NAPA centralises and professionalises civil service training, which is an important mechanism to continuously upgrade skills and inculcate a public service ethos.

EU-supported PAR in Serbia also yielded a series of concrete outputs in the policymaking and coordination realm. A key structural output was the establishment and gradual strengthening of a Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) framework, supported through EU-funded PAR programmes.

Serbia has applied RIA since the early 2000s – with obligations introduced in government procedures as early as 2004 – and subsequent EU-linked reform contracts and handbooks institutionalised RIA as part of the policy cycle to promote evidence-based analysis of draft legislation. By obliging ministries to prepare impact analyses and exposing draft laws to systematic assessment, these tools aimed to make policymaking more consultative, analytical, and aligned with European standards of better regulation (Government of Serbia, 2020b). At the same time, EU engagement supported the development of central coordination structures intended to improve strategic planning and cross-ministerial coherence. Core institutions of Serbia's policy coordination architecture – including the Public Policy Secretariat and the General Secretariat of the Government – were focal points of this process, tasked with overseeing the integration of RIA and strategic priorities across the government. These bodies were reinforced through the PAR strategy and associated action plans under IPA-financed sector reform contracts, which explicitly targeted 'improved organisation and functions of the central government administration' and 'improved public policy development and coordination' as a key expected result (European Commission, 2016d, p. 1).

EU monitoring reports underscore, however, that these institutional frameworks have had mixed implementation in practice. For example, the 2024 European Commission Serbia progress report noted that although the Public Policy Secretariat exists with RIA oversight responsibilities, its comments on draft legislation were not consistently incorporated and sector strategic frameworks remained only partially streamlined (European Commission, 2024). This reflects both the formal establishment of better-regulation systems and the challenges in embedding them fully in practice – a common pattern in EU-supported governance reform. Similarly, many strategies, action plans, and handbooks produced with EU aid saw limited actual implementation (Ecorys, 2013; EPRD, 2013). As noted earlier, a common pattern was the enthusiastic adoption of new laws and the creation of bodies (which allowed Serbia to 'check the box' on EU recommendations), followed by a lull in enforcing those laws or empowering those bodies (Interview 24, 2020). One telling sign is that many reforms were essentially legislative – success was measured by passing laws rather than changing outcomes. Indeed, the 2004–2008 PAR strategy's indicators were mostly about enacting legislation, not about impacts such as citizen satisfaction or reduced corruption (GOPA, 2019a). This legislativism meant that while Serbia's administrative codebooks became quite aligned with EU norms, everyday administrative practice often did not change to the same degree.

EU-supported administrative reform in Serbia also produced tangible improvements in service delivery, notably in business registration and one-stop public services. A central output was the establishment of the Serbian Business Registers Agency in 2005, which replaced fragmented court-based registration procedures with a unified administrative authority, reducing administrative barriers and streamlining the process for starting a business (Government of Serbia, n.d.). Building on this, Serbia developed a one-stop registration system, linking it with the Tax Administration and the Central Register of Compulsory Social Security so that entrepreneurs could complete multiple procedural requirements through a single application, further enhancing efficiency and reducing opportunities for petty discretion (Government of Serbia, n.d.). These institutional outputs were complemented by broader digital governance reforms reflected in Serbia's e-Government Development Programme, which aimed to extend electronic services – including digital business registration and connected services – across public administration.

Accountability mechanisms saw, however, partial progress. New anti-corruption institutions (like the Anti-Corruption Agency in 2010, now the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption) were set up in line with European models, and administrative courts were created, as mentioned. However, these bodies often lacked teeth or independence in practice, limiting their effectiveness. Public oversight of administration, such as the role of the Ombudsman and the transparency of government data, improved somewhat in the early 2010s, but later stagnated or reversed under political pressure (Freedom House, 2021). The reversal was visible even in routine practice: as one official put it, 'We reached the level where some reports were online and could be consulted by citizens, but now they disappear again' (Interview 27, 2020). SIGMA observers also noted 'serious shortcomings in the public availability of information about the implementation of various plans or strategies' (OECD-SIGMA, 2021a, p. 6).

Human Resources

Professional, merit-based civil service systems are a core component of good governance. The EU's support to Serbia put heavy emphasis on transforming the civil service into a competent, depoliticised, and performance-driven workforce. Some key expected outputs in this area included: establishing transparent recruitment and promotion procedures, training civil servants to build capacity and ethical standards, instituting regular performance evaluations, and ensuring competitive salaries and job security to attract talent. How did Serbia fare in these aspects?

As noted, Serbia adopted a new Civil Service Law in 2005 (further amended in 2007, 2009, and, significantly, in 2018) that introduced Western-style civil service principles. The law and its amendments aimed to anchor meritocracy in hiring and promotions – for example, mandating public job announcements, competitive exams for entry positions, and merit-based criteria for senior appointments. It also set up the Civil Service Council to oversee recruitment processes and hear appeals. Additionally, the law provided for performance appraisals of civil servants and offered protections (like tenured positions) to insulate bureaucrats from arbitrary political dismissal. On paper, these reforms were aligned with EU recommendations and were seen as a milestone in Serbia's European integration process. The 2018 amendments, backed by SIGMA, sought to address specific loopholes that had allowed politicised appointments – such as clarifying the conditions for temporary (acting) appointments and strengthening the role of the central human resource management information system (HRMIS) in senior recruitment (OECD-SIGMA, 2019). Alongside legal changes, the EU helped introduce modern HR management tools: job classification systems, competency frameworks, a HRMIS to track personnel data, and improved payroll systems. Training was a major area: through dozens of projects and now NAPA, tens of thousands of Serbian civil servants received training in areas including EU affairs, languages, IT skills, and public policy over the two decades (Ecorys, 2013). These efforts created, in principle, a cadre of more knowledgeable officials who could drive reforms and manage EU integration tasks.

Despite these outputs, the professionalisation of Serbia's civil service has been frustratingly slow in practice. Many of the rules exist, but as multiple assessments note, they are not strictly implemented. A comprehensive EU evaluation in 2019 concluded that 'a fair and transparent remuneration and employment system for the civil service – albeit normatively completed – is still not in place' (GOPA, 2019a, p. xv). In other words, even though Serbia ticked the legislative boxes, the lived experience of civil servants does not fully reflect a merit-based system. To evade the merit rules, ministries routinely appoint people in an acting capacity to senior civil service posts and then simply extend those acting terms, rather than holding open competitions. Professionalisation also includes instilling a public service ethos (integrity, impartiality). Serbia, with EU support, adopted codes of conduct and set up ethics committees in institutions. Yet enforcement of ethical standards, such as conflict-of-interest rules, has been inconsistent. The Anti-Corruption Agency monitors asset declarations and conflicts for civil servants, but its findings often do not lead to sanctions without

prosecutorial follow-up, which has been weak. The culture of public trust in public service is still developing; surveys indicate that many Serbians perceive the civil service as serving the ruling parties rather than the public interest, a perception that undermines the legitimacy of the administration. That said, capacity gains were real but uneven. A few institutions became genuinely more competent. The European Integration Office (later the Ministry for EU Integration), for instance, developed strong coordination skills for managing EU-related legislation. Such pockets of excellence tended to emerge precisely where EU support coincided with committed domestic leadership. On the whole, however, the administrative system remained a patchwork of uneven capacity, still heavily dependent on external advice and pressure to sustain reform momentum.

Systems and Tools

The modernisation of administrative systems and tools – particularly through digitalisation – is a concrete area where the EU's influence can be measured. Serbia's public administration in 2000 was technologically outdated and reliant on paper-based processes. By 2020, significant strides had been made in introducing e-government solutions, improving financial management systems, and reforming specific service delivery processes. Many of these achievements are attributable to EU-funded projects, though often after considerable delays and iterative effort.

Progress was initially slow. An evaluation in 2013 described Serbia's e-government as still 'in its infancy', despite considerable IPA investment (Ecorys, 2013). Scattered successes – such as the introduction of electronic business registries and some online portals for document retrieval – coexisted with an administrative reality in which most interactions still required in-person visits and paperwork. The late 2010s, however, saw accelerated digitalisation. A flagship initiative was the development of a fully functional e-procurement platform, launched in July 2020 following the EU-funded project Support for Further Improvement of the Public Procurement System in Serbia (EU Delegation to Serbia, 2021). Earlier projects had attempted to introduce e-procurement, but it was only at this late stage that the system became operational, moving procurement notices, bid submissions, and contract awards online. The director of Serbia's Public Procurement Office described it as 'an upgraded and far more modern, efficient and transparent public procurement system in line with EU directives and standards' (EU Delegation to Serbia, 2021). While the achievement came late – essentially at the end of the IPA II cycle – it is notable, given that public procurement is among the administrative processes most vulnerable to corruption.

This trajectory of delayed but cumulative progress culminated in measurable results by the early 2020s. According to the *United Nations E-Government Survey 2022*, Serbia advanced 18 positions on the E-Government Development Index relative to 2020, reaching 40th place globally and entering the 'very high' category – a result that placed it ahead of several EU member states on specific e-service metrics and ranked it among the 10 fastest-improving countries worldwide (United Nations, 2022). These gains were partly the cumulative product of EU-supported investments in ICT infrastructure, regulatory alignment – including the adoption of EU frameworks for electronic signatures and interoperability – and sustained capacity building under successive IPA programming cycles (European Commission, 2022a).

EU assistance also contributed to the modernisation of financial management tools. The introduction of a centralised Treasury Single Account and supporting IT system in the 2000s improved control over public expenditures and cash management, connecting all budget users to a unified system and increasing the transparency of fund flows (OECD-SIGMA, 2006b). EU Twinning projects in the 2010s helped Serbia's State Audit Institution (established in 2005) develop methodologies for auditing government finances, strengthening external oversight. Numerous sectoral outputs complemented these – from systems for managing intellectual property rights to improved databases for police and border management – which, while adjacent to core PAR, collectively contributed to a more capable state apparatus.

Despite these advances, significant systemic gaps persisted. A structural impediment was the absence of interoperability across government databases, which prevented the seamless exchange of data between institutions and required citizens to submit identical information repeatedly to different agencies – a recurring friction point that undermined both administrative efficiency and public trust in digital services. Substantive progress came only in the late 2010s, when Serbia enacted legislation establishing frameworks for inter-institutional data exchange, supported by EU technical assistance in drafting interoperability standards (European Commission, 2018b). Implementation remained incomplete by 2020, with full systems integration still a work in progress. A related challenge concerned the uptake of e-government services once introduced. Early digital offerings suffered from limited public awareness, uneven internet connectivity – particularly in rural areas and among older population cohorts – and a residual preference for in-person administrative interaction that reflected ingrained behavioural patterns rather than simply a lack of access. Usage rates increased progressively, driven in part by demographic shifts, targeted digital literacy initiatives, and

supply-side mandates that relocated specific services exclusively to online platforms. While effective in generating uptake in discrete service areas, such measures also highlighted the broader cultural and infrastructural preconditions that technical e-government reforms alone cannot resolve (OECD, 2021).

Beyond digitalisation, improvements in the overall quality and timeliness of administrative service delivery remained modest. Serbia continued to score relatively poorly on composite indicators of bureaucratic burden, reflecting persistent procedural complexity despite successive reform efforts. The World Bank's Doing Business indicators (prior to the index's discontinuation in 2021) recorded measurable gains in specific areas such as business registration, while Serbia lagged considerably in permit-intensive processes such as construction permits and electricity connections, both of which involve extended multi-agency procedures (World Bank, 2020a). These patterns suggest that reform efforts succeeded in streamlining discrete, high-visibility procedures without fundamentally reducing the complexity of administratively dense regulatory processes. Citizen satisfaction remained correspondingly limited: survey evidence from the region consistently indicated low levels of public trust in administrative institutions and tepid satisfaction with service quality (OECD, 2021). Petty corruption at service delivery points – including informal payments to expedite document processing – declined where digitalisation reduced the scope for discretionary human intervention, but had not been eliminated by 2020 (European Commission, 2020b; Transparency International, 2021).

Overall Governance Outcomes and Indicators

Considering quantitative governance indicators, as showcased in Figure 2, Serbia's progress (or lack thereof) in governance can be gauged by looking at comparative metrics. The Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) provide scores from approximately -2.5 (worst) to +2.5 (best) on dimensions like Government Effectiveness, Regulatory Quality, Rule of Law, and Control of Corruption. Between 2000 and 2021, the WGI data show that Serbia saw the most noticeable improvements in the early 2000s, moving up from the lows of the Milošević era. By 2006, indicators like Government Effectiveness and Rule of Law had risen significantly from 2000 levels (though from a very low base). This correlates with the immediate post-Milošević reform push and stabilisation. However, from around 2007 onwards, Serbia's WGI scores largely plateaued or even slightly declined in some areas. For example, Government Effectiveness hovered around the 40th–50th percentile for

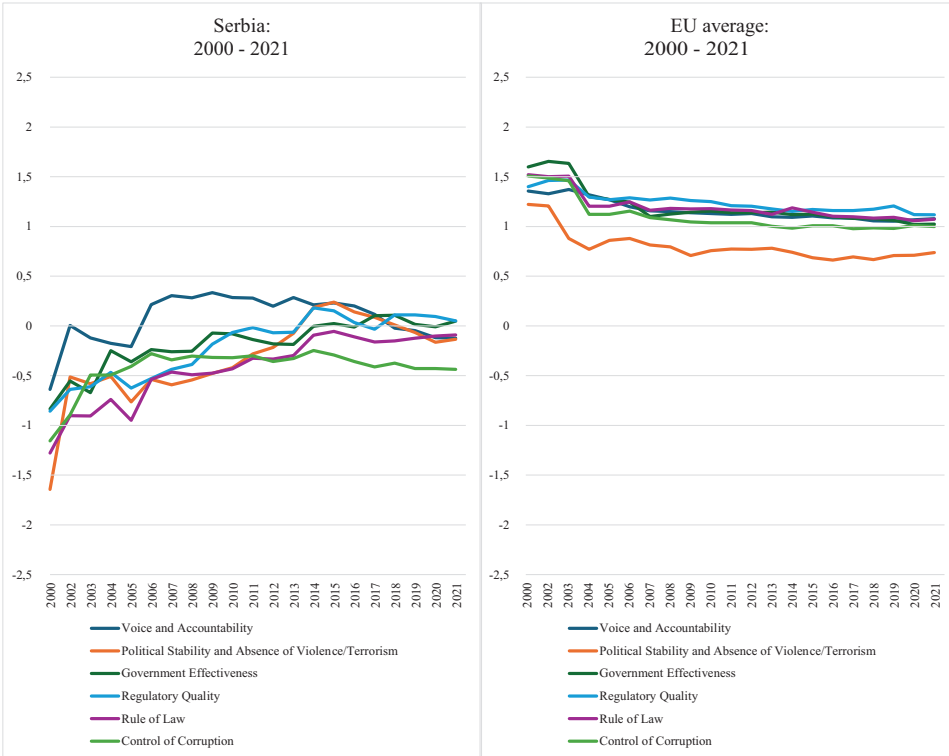

Figure 2. Government Performance in Serbia vs EU Average, 2000–2021. Source: Author's compilation based on the WGI dataset (World Bank, 2022).

many years, and Control of Corruption around the 30th–40th percentile – indicating mediocre performance that did not substantially converge toward EU levels (where most member states score in the 75th+ percentile on government effectiveness). Serbia's scores were on average below 0 (the '0' line roughly representing the global average), whereas the EU average is well above 1.0 on many indicators. This gap illustrates that while Serbia's governance became more stable and somewhat more effective than in the 1990s, it did not approach the quality of governance found in EU countries, even in some newer member states.

When comparing Serbia to its Western Balkan peers, we can see that Serbia is not an outlier – most Western Balkan states have similarly low governance scores, clustered well below EU averages (see Figure 3). This suggests that Serbia's slow progress is not unique, but rather part of a broader pattern in countries where EU accession has been protracted.

Corruption trends provide another measure of outputs. Despite establishing anti-corruption bodies and action plans, Serbia has struggled

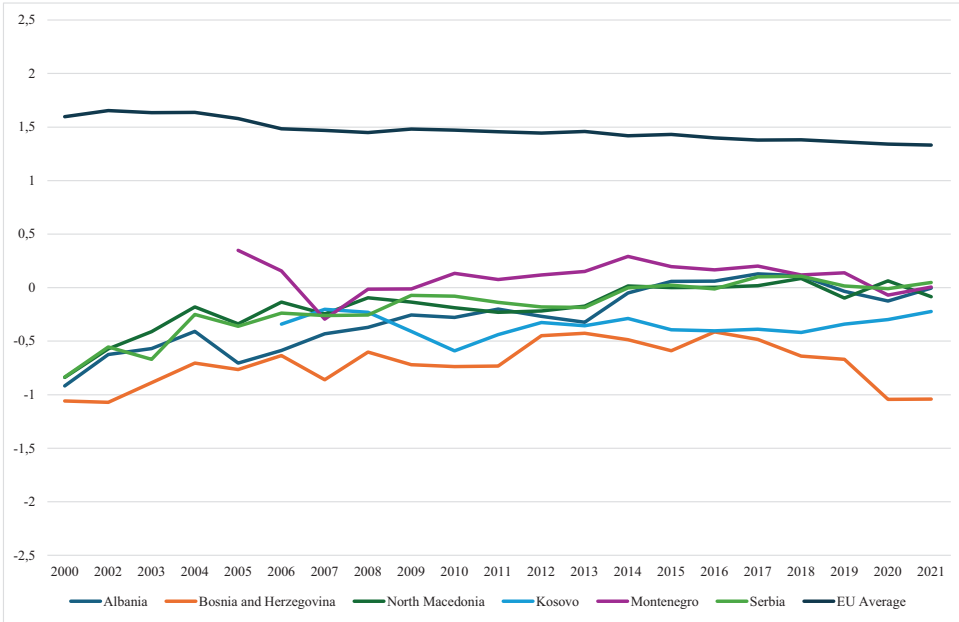

Figure 3. Government Effectiveness in Western Balkan Countries vs EU Average, 2000–2021. Source: Author's compilation based on the WGI dataset (World Bank, 2022).

to reduce corruption in a perceptible way. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) for Serbia has fluctuated in the 30s (out of 100) for over a decade – a low score indicating pervasive perceived corruption. In 2012 Serbia's CPI score was 39; by 2021 it had fallen to 38 and then 36 in 2022. This underscores that the reforms implemented did not sufficiently curb either petty or grand corruption. High-profile corruption cases seldom result in convictions, and public procurement (despite the new e-system) is still seen as vulnerable to manipulation through loopholes like exempt contracts or collusion. The Agency for Prevention of Corruption has been criticised for not taking stronger action against officials who violate conflict of interest rules or fail to declare assets properly. All this indicates that the output in terms of anti-corruption impact is minimal – one might say Serbia has institutional anti-corruption mechanisms in place, but insufficient political will to use them effectively. As Freedom House concluded starkly in its country report from 2020: '[Y]ears of increasing state capture, abuse of power, and strongman tactics employed by President Aleksandar Vucic' have undermined the country's democracy (Csaky, 2020).

On a more positive note, Serbia's reforms have at least prevented further deterioration and may have achieved a baseline stability in governance.

The Freedom House *Nations in Transit* scores show that Serbia, while downgraded to a 'Hybrid Regime', has not slid into the depths of authoritarian governance – its Democracy score was around 3.75/7 in 2023 (with 1 being worst, 7 best), which is poor but still above outright authoritarian states. The glass-half-full interpretation by some interviewees is that without EU reforms, Serbia's administration could have been even more politicised and dysfunctional: '[D]efinitely without EU support, we would not be here where we are, although in many sectors reforms should have been done quicker, earlier', noted one senior official, acknowledging the EU's role in at least nudging things forward (Interview 26, 2021). Another interviewee concurred that pressure from the Commission was indispensable for whatever gains in professionalisation and anti-corruption have occurred: 'Professionalisation of the administration, depoliticisation, fighting corruption, improving efficiency, stabilising senior management positions – those things would not happen without pressure from the Commission' (Interview 24, 2020).

Post-2020 Developments and Outlook

While this chapter primarily covers the period 2000–2020, it is crucial to consider the trajectory of Serbia's administrative reform and governance in the most recent years (2021–2025) to gauge whether trends are improving or worsening as Serbia navigates the next phase of its EU accession process.

In 2021, Serbia completed the cycle of its 2014–2020 PAR strategy. Recognising the need to maintain reform momentum, Serbian authorities – with ongoing input from SIGMA – worked on a new PAR strategic framework for the coming years. Indeed, by 2022 Serbia adopted a PAR strategy for 2021–2030 (accompanied by an initial action plan for 2021–2025). This new strategy was informed by the latest SIGMA assessments and lessons from the previous period. It sets out goals across similar areas: policymaking and coordination, public service and HR management, service delivery and digitalisation, accountability, and public finance management. The fact that Serbia developed this comprehensive long-term plan indicates a continued commitment, at least on paper, to the reform agenda. SIGMA's 2024 monitoring report noted positively that since the last assessment, 'Serbia has completed a comprehensive PAR strategic framework and enhanced transparency by launching a publicly accessible PAR monitoring portal', signalling an improvement in planning and openness (OECD-SIGMA, 2025). The establishment of an online PAR monitoring portal is particularly

noteworthy, as it could allow civil society and the public to track reform implementation more easily – a response to past criticisms of opacity.

However, the political context from 2020 onward has posed challenges. Serbia held parliamentary elections in June 2020 (originally scheduled for April but delayed by the pandemic) and again in April 2022 (snap elections aligning with presidential elections). Both elections resulted in the SNS maintaining power (with President Vučić's dominance reaffirmed), but also in lengthy government formation periods – after 2020, the new government was not formed until late October; after 2022, a new government took until late 2022 to be installed. These extended interim periods slowed down reform implementation, as acknowledged by SIGMA: 'Since the last assessment in 2021, Serbia has held two general parliamentary elections, both followed by extended government formation periods. This has slowed the pace of implementation of the PAR agenda' (OECD-SIGMA, 2025, p. 10). Essentially, administrative reforms were stalled during election seasons and transitions, resulting in a significant loss of momentum.

The EU accession process during 2021–2024 also experienced shifts. In an effort to re-energise enlargement, the EU allowed Serbia to open Cluster 4 (Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity) in December 2021, grouping several environment- and transport-related chapters. This was the first opening of new negotiation chapters for Serbia since 2019, and it brought the total to the oft-cited 22 opened chapters. However, no further clusters or chapters were opened in 2022 or 2023. EU member states have increasingly tied Serbia's progress to its alignment with EU foreign policy, particularly regarding Russia. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the EU urged candidates to join its sanctions; Serbia notably did not align, citing its own national interests and close ties. As a result, since 2022 the accession talks slowed significantly, with some member states effectively blocking new chapter openings until Serbia shows more alignment. The political message to Serbia was that fulfilling reform benchmarks alone is not enough; foreign policy alignment and resolution of open issues like Kosovo are indispensable. This creates a complex environment: on the one hand, Serbia is expected to continue with governance reforms and, on the other, the ultimate reward (EU membership) is also contingent on factors somewhat outside PAR itself.

Meanwhile, domestic public opinion on EU integration remains ambivalent, frequently fluctuating and often falling below the 50% threshold. According to the 2025 Special Eurobarometer, support for accession in Serbia reached a regional low of 33%, a sharp contrast to the 'permissive consensus' seen in Central European countries during their respective accessions (European

Commission, 2025b). In Serbia, nationalist sentiment and deep-seated scepticism, perpetuated by historical grievances (such as the 1999 NATO bombing and contemporary pressures regarding Kosovo's status), preclude a uniform pro-reform mandate. This lack of a consolidated public demand allows the government to defer sensitive reforms with minimal political risk, as public discontent remains largely fragmented and issue-specific. However, high-profile instances of maladministration or systemic corruption have demonstrated a capacity to trigger massive, albeit reactive, anti-government protests that can force limited official accountability. While the EU has sought to bolster the 'domestic accountability loop' by empowering civil society organisations (CSOs), these actors frequently operate under duress. Recent reports from the CIVICUS Monitor (2025) and the EU Delegation highlight a pattern of state-led smear campaigns, surveillance, and legal harassment aimed at de-legitimising CSOs as 'foreign agents', thereby neutralising their role as independent monitors of the reform process.

Serbia's administrative reform journey thus far underscores a fundamental insight: external support can ignite and guide reforms, but sustained change must be driven from within. The Serbian case reaffirms that building a professional, transparent administration is a slow, generational process – one that involves changing mindsets and incentives, not just laws. The interplay between international influence and domestic politics in Serbia has at times been synergistic (as seen when EU pressure and local reformist efforts produced gains in digital governance), and at other times antagonistic (as when political interests neutered reforms aimed at curbing those very interests). As Serbia navigates the coming years, its ability to achieve European standards of governance will depend on rekindling the reform momentum of the early 2000s and coupling it with the lessons learned since. If Serbia can do so – leveraging its now comprehensive reform strategies and the EU's SIGMA benchmarks – it stands a chance to break out of the stagnation and make the qualitative leap toward a more efficient, accountable public administration. That, in turn, would not only bolster Serbia's EU membership bid but also improve the daily lives of its citizens, fulfilling the ultimate promise of the reform process.

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8. Moldova: Navigating Between East and West

Abstract: This chapter examines the European Commission's engagement with public administration reform (PAR) in Moldova, a hybrid and geopolitically exposed neighbourhood state, across two decades (2000–2020). Applying the Input–Throughput–Output framework, it traces how EU instruments were deployed without the anchor of a credible membership perspective. The analysis reveals that reform progress was fundamentally contingent on domestic political ownership of reforms, leaving institutional outputs structurally exposed to political reconfiguration. Elite turnover, oligarchic capture, and sustained geopolitical pressure from Russia compounded this fragility, preventing the consolidation of durable administrative change. The post-2020 shift to candidate status offers a turning point, but bridging the gap between reform input and long-term administrative improvement remains Moldova's defining governance challenge.

Keywords: neighbourhood policy; oligarchic capture; geopolitical vulnerability; institutional fragility; budget support; reform ownership

Brief Contextual Introduction: Historical Legacies and Reform Constraints

Moldova represents a particularly demanding case of administrative transformation under conditions of institutional fragility, geopolitical exposure, and fluctuating political ownership. Unlike Romania, whose reform trajectory unfolded within a clear accession framework, Moldova's reform path between 2000 and 2020 was shaped by a neighbourhood logic: sustained European engagement without the anchor of credible membership

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conditionality. This distinction matters analytically. It affects how European Union (EU) inputs are designed, how reform processes unfold domestically, and whether institutional outputs become durable.

Moldova's administrative order emerged from layered historical disruptions. The territory's passage through Ottoman, Tsarist, Romanian, and, ultimately, Soviet rule left institutions weakly consolidated and heavily politicised. Under the Soviet regime, the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic functioned as a patrimonial communist republic in which party authority subsumed administrative autonomy. The institutional consequences of Soviet rule in Moldova were not merely organisational but deeply normative. As in other Soviet republics, the administrative apparatus was embedded within the nomenklatura system, in which career advancement depended less on professional merit than on party loyalty and informal patronage networks (Easter, 1997; Hale, 2014). Recruitment, promotion, and resource allocation were mediated through hierarchical political control rather than rule-bound administrative procedures. The formal distinction between political authority and bureaucratic neutrality – central to Weberian administrative theory – was largely absent. Public administration functioned as an extension of party governance, oriented toward plan fulfilment and compliance rather than accountability and service delivery to citizens (King, 2013; Way, 2005).

At independence in 1991, Moldova inherited this institutional configuration without a consolidated pre-communist bureaucratic tradition to draw upon. Unlike parts of Central Europe where Austro-Hungarian administrative legacies had left at least partial rule-of-law traditions, Moldova's prior incorporation into the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union meant that administrative practice had been shaped overwhelmingly by centralised imperial and Soviet command structures. As a result, early post-independence reform unfolded in a context where legal-rational authority had shallow roots and informal networks remained integral to governance (Marandici, 2022; Popescu, 2005). The early 1990s combined economic collapse, state-building pressures, and unresolved territorial conflict. The Transnistrian secession, backed by a Russian military presence, created a frozen conflict that continues to fragment sovereignty and limit state capacity (Bădulescu, 2019). The existence of a de facto breakaway territory weakens fiscal control, distorts economic incentives, and perpetuates Russia's leverage over domestic politics and policies. Administrative reform thus unfolds in a state that does not fully control its territory.

Overall, Moldova constitutes a high-fragility, hybrid-ownership case. It is neither a consolidated accession state nor a fully disengaged neighbour.

Rather, it occupies an intermediate geopolitical space between the EU and Russia, where European integration has functioned both as a strategic orientation and as a political resource mobilised by competing domestic actors. In this context, EU engagement carries significance that is not only technical but geopolitical, which in turn heightens the salience of administrative reform as part of a broader alignment trajectory. This configuration makes Moldova particularly well suited for examining the interaction between external incentives and domestic ownership (Hypothesis 1). It also allows for an assessment of reform sustainability in the prolonged absence – until 2022 – of a credible membership perspective (Hypothesis 2). Finally, the persistence of Soviet administrative legacies, combined with oligarchic political economy structures and sustained geopolitical pressure, provides a demanding environment for analysing how structural constraints shape the absorption, adaptation, and durability of EU-supported reforms (Hypothesis 3).

The analysis that follows examines the extent to which EU engagement between 2000 and 2020 translated into substantive institutional change as opposed to predominantly formal legislative adaptation. It explores how reform dynamics evolved across shifting domestic coalitions and varying degrees of external leverage, and how administrative outputs interacted with Moldova's institutional and geopolitical context. The Moldovan case thus provides a particularly instructive setting for assessing how European administrative standards are received, processed, and sustained in a state characterised by political volatility and strategic vulnerability.

Inputs: Financial, Discursive, and Policy Tools

Between 2000 and 2020, the European Commission – as the EU's executive arm – played a crucial role in Moldova's public administration reform (PAR) process. The EU acted as both a financial benefactor and a normative guide, deploying funds, technical assistance, and policy frameworks to encourage Moldova's alignment with European standards of good governance. The scale and nature of EU support evolved over time, roughly corresponding to three multiannual programming periods and instruments.

During the programming period from 2000 to 2006, EU support was relatively modest and channelled primarily through the TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States) programme. In this period, Moldova received roughly €31 million in EU assistance for public administration and related reforms. This reflected the early uncertainty

about Moldova's European orientation and the EU's cautious engagement in a post-Soviet context. TACIS, instituted under the 1994 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), aimed broadly at supporting Moldova's transition by addressing economic needs and encouraging key reforms expected by the EU. Under TACIS, projects in the early 2000s focused on sustainable economic growth, poverty reduction, and strengthening links with the EU, including seeking a viable solution to the Transnistria conflict. Importantly, one of TACIS's priority areas was 'institutional, legal and administrative reform', signalling an early emphasis on governance improvement. The European Commission and Moldova agreed on strategic planning documents – National Indicative Programmes for 2000–2003 and 2004–2006 and a Country Strategy Paper – to guide TACIS funding. These plans aligned TACIS actions with Moldova's own development strategies (like the 2004 Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy) and, later, the emerging European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). They stressed approximation of Moldova's laws and administrative practices with European principles and legislation. In practice, however, TACIS implementation suffered from fragmentation: the proliferation of multiple strategy documents and projects led to dispersed efforts and bureaucratic overload, making it harder to concentrate resources or measure impact.

Following the EU's 2004–2007 enlargements, Moldova's strategic importance grew, and EU assistance expanded accordingly. The European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), which replaced TACIS from 2007, provided about €157 million during the 2007–2013 period. The launch of the Eastern Partnership in 2009 further reinforced this commitment, establishing a dedicated multilateral framework for engagement with Moldova and other Eastern neighbours. The sharp increase in funding – five times the previous allocation – reflected the EU's growing interest in stabilising and transforming Moldova as part of its neighbourhood. The 2005 EU–Moldova Action Plan (under the ENP) became a 'central point of reference' for reforms, delineating clear priorities in governance, rule of law, economic development, and sectoral cooperation (European Parliament, 2008). Under ENPI, the Commission adopted a more sectoral approach: aid was targeted at areas like strengthening democratic institutions and public administration, justice and security sector reform, support for civil society and media freedom, social and education system improvements, and border management (particularly in cooperation with Ukraine to secure Moldova's borders, including Transnistria). PAR remained a priority – the EU expected Moldovan authorities to officially adopt a comprehensive PAR policy covering civil service, financial management and control, and

decentralisation. These expectations were integrated into programming documents like the ENPI Country Strategy Paper 2007–2013 and National Indicative Programmes for 2007–2010 and 2011–2013. Notably, however, the Commission did not specify clear indicators to track Moldova's adoption of European public administration principles during this time. Moreover, the effectiveness of ENPI assistance was undermined by the absence of an updated national reform strategy on the Moldovan side. After the impetus of the 2005 PAR strategy, Moldova had no new overarching PAR strategy until 2016, leading to a misalignment – EU programmes were guided by various EU–Moldova action plans and sector strategies, while domestic ownership and long-term planning lagged. A European Court of Auditors (ECA) review noted that EU programmes were 'not sufficiently aligned to Moldovan strategies' due to this strategic gap, resulting in a 'piecemeal approach to reforms' (ECA, 2016a, p. 43). In other words, many reform projects were launched, but they often addressed symptoms rather than the systemic overhaul of public administration, amounting to 'patchy work' on an antiquated system (Interview 32, 2021).

In the 2014–2020 period, Moldova's engagement with the EU deepened through the Association Agreement, and the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) replaced ENPI to fund cooperation. The EU allocated around €183 million for governance and reform programmes, a further increase albeit a modest one compared to the previous jump. Crucially, conditionality became more prominent: after Moldova signed the Association Agreement in June 2014, the EU explicitly tied assistance to progress on reforms in line with European principles of public administration. The Association Agreement itself committed Moldova to ensure 'good democratic governance' and to reform its public administration in accordance with EU standards. A Single Support Framework (SSF) for 2017–2020 was formulated to channel ENI funds, identifying PAR as a key priority. The SSF's objectives for PAR included 'modernisation and further digitalisation of public services', more evidence-based policy development and coordination, improved public financial management, and professionalisation and depoliticisation of the civil service (European Commission, 2017e, p. 9). In effect, by the late 2010s the EU was leveraging its aid to push for structural reforms and adherence to the European principles of public administration developed by SIGMA (Support for Improvement in Governance and Management). For example, EU Annual Action Programmes for Moldova started referencing these principles in their logic: a 2015 EU support programme defined its objective as enhancing administrative capacity 'in line with the European principles of public administration' (European Commission, 2015a, p. 20).

Furthermore, the EU and the SIGMA initiative conducted a comprehensive Baseline Assessment in 2015 to evaluate Moldova's governance against those principles. The SIGMA report found major gaps: Moldova lacked a clear vision and strategy for PAR, effective coordination mechanisms, and adequate budgeting for reforms (OECD-SIGMA, 2015b). This diagnosis helped trigger Moldovan authorities to finally adopt the new PAR strategy 2016–2020, incorporating SIGMA's findings and aiming to implement European principles in practice. For instance, the 2016–2018 Action Plan under that strategy explicitly aimed to strengthen central executive institutions to better coordinate policy and budget with EU integration goals, in accordance with SIGMA principles. However, the 2016 strategy faced limitations – it was prepared with limited consultation and not endorsed by Parliament, which weakened its political legitimacy and the commitment of agencies to its reforms. Despite such hurdles, the EU continued to support a wide array of tools to drive reforms. During 2000–2020, Moldova benefited from Twinning projects – pairing Moldovan institutions with EU member state counterparts for hands-on assistance, TAIEX (Technical Assistance and Information Exchange) missions, technical assistance projects, SIGMA policy advice, and, in later years, EU High-Level Advisers embedded in Moldovan ministries. The European Commission also provided direct budget support in certain periods, disbursing funds to Moldova's treasury in tranches linked to governance reform conditions. This mix of financial, technical, and policy instruments – the inputs of the EU's reform toolkit – was geared toward one overarching goal: to help Moldova modernise its public administration in line with European values and principles, such as legal certainty, accountability, transparency, efficiency, openness, and reliability. The stage was set for reforms, but whether these inputs were effectively translated into on-the-ground changes depended on implementation processes, which we examine next.

Throughput: Implementation Processes of EU-Supported Reforms

Having considered the EU's inputs into Moldova's administrative reforms, it is critical to assess how these resources and ideas were implemented in practice – the 'throughput' of the reform process. This involves examining both the external factors, i.e. the way the EU delivered and managed its support, and the internal factors, i.e. Moldovan political and administrative dynamics that influenced reform execution. Specifically, we look at: (1) Commission-dependent factors – such as the conditionality attached to EU

assistance and institutional capacity to design and monitor reforms – and (2) domestic factors – including Moldova's political will, its (in)stability, and its bureaucratic capacity for change. The interaction of these factors largely determined whether EU-funded initiatives were carried out effectively or stalled in bureaucratic and political bottlenecks.

Commission-Dependent Factors

The effectiveness of EU aid in driving reforms often hinges on conditionality – the EU's ability to tie funding to the achievement of specific reform benchmarks. In Moldova, the EU gradually introduced conditions on aid, but overall EU conditionality up to 2020 was only partially effective. Early on, under TACIS and even ENPI, much assistance was provided as grant aid with broad objectives and relatively weak enforcement mechanisms. The European Commission did attach some conditions, especially to budget support operations, but critics argue these conditions were not stringent enough to compel far-reaching reforms. The ECA found that under ENI, certain EU funding conditions for Moldova were 'unverifiable, aggregated or unclear' (ECA, 2016a, p. 17), meaning it was hard to tell if Moldova met them. In some cases, the Commission disbursed funds or reallocated unused funds even when key conditions had not been fully met, thus diluting the incentive effect (ECA, 2016a; Interview 10, 2020). For example, when earlier tranches were unspent due to non-compliance, instead of withholding that money entirely, the Commission often shifted it to other programmes without attaching new reform requirements. This practice, noted by the ECA, allowed for funds to be 'disbursed, even when specific conditions and performance indicators were not fulfilled' (ECA, 2016a, p. 18). Such flexibility, while ensuring aid flowed, potentially fostered complacency and created fertile ground for corruption and inefficient use of EU funds.

It was not until after 2014 – with the Association Agreement in place and a major corruption scandal erupting – that the EU imposed tougher conditions. In late 2014, following a $1bn bank fraud, the Commission's Budget Support Steering Committee decided to suspend budget support payments in 2015 pending an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and credible financial sector reforms. This signal – essentially a conditionality response to governance failure – was noted as a turning point. Even so, the overall lesson of 2000–2020 is that EU conditionality in Moldova often lagged behind the country's political economy realities. European aid came with exhortations for reform, but not always with enforceable prerequisites or immediate consequences for non-implementation. The Commission acknowledged this internally: a 2016 review stated the 'expectation is to

see maximum leverage being achieved through conditionality to advance reforms' (ECA, 2016a, p. 43), implying that previously such leverage had been underutilised. Stronger, more detailed conditions – for example, requiring adoption of merit-based civil service appointments or specific anti-graft measures before disbursing funds – might have increased Moldovan compliance. The relatively soft conditionality was partly due to the EU's geopolitical concern of not pushing Moldova away (given the Russia factor), which sometimes led Brussels to tolerate slow reforms so as to keep engagement on track. This delicate balancing act meant that while EU aid certainly influenced Moldova's reform agenda, it did not always coerce the implementation of difficult changes when domestic commitment wavered.

The way in which the EU managed and coordinated its assistance on the ground in Moldova constituted an additional structural constraint on implementation. Throughout much of the 2000s, the European Commission's institutional presence in Moldova was limited, undermining detailed contextual understanding and effective oversight of reform programmes. Until 2005, EU assistance under TACIS was administered remotely from the EU Delegation in Kyiv, which simultaneously covered Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova within an expanding portfolio, an arrangement that generated administrative overstretch and contributed to project delays. The opening of a dedicated EU Delegation in Chișinău in late 2005, which became fully operational by 2007, marked a significant improvement in on-the-ground engagement. This initial lack of capacity was observed by the European Court of Auditors (ECA), who found that in the early years of TACIS implementation, programme design and adaptation were constrained by an inadequate grasp of Moldovan institutional realities, while coordination with government counterparts and other international donors operating in the country remained hampered by the structural limitations of remote management (ECA, 2016a). One consequence was duplication of effort: for instance, multiple EU-funded projects ended up overlapping in the justice sector, straining the limited absorption capacity of Moldovan institutions and sometimes creating confusion (ECA, 2016a). It should be noted, however, that the Commission's capacity evolved in time. By the late 2010s, the delegation in Moldova had expanded and was more proactively engaged in policy dialogue. The EU also increasingly outsourced expertise through consultancies, SIGMA experts, and Twinning advisers to compensate for its own staffing limits. Nevertheless, the relative lack of a robust, continuous EU institutional presence – especially in the crucial early 2000s – meant that implementation on the EU side was not as agile or well-informed as it could have been.

Projects and reform programmes were often handled by different units or contractors, with frequent turnover of personnel. The European Court of Auditors (ECA) found that project management responsibility sometimes shifted between the headquarters in Brussels and the field or between different departments, disrupting institutional memory. Lessons learned were not always passed on, and the same mistakes – overambitious timelines, underestimation of political resistance – recurred in successive projects (ECA, 2016a). A striking illustration of this weak institutional foundation was the ECA's finding that the EU Delegation did not conduct a structured needs assessment for Moldova's public administration before programming major funds (ECA, 2016a, p. 25). In practice, the EU's interventions responded to broadly identified issues without a clear baseline or context-specific targets. These programming weaknesses were compounded by inadequate monitoring and evaluation. The Commission's standard approach was to assess progress against a set of pre-defined deliverables – a formal, checklist-based model that measured whether outputs had been produced, not whether they had generated institutional change. A senior representative of the Government of Moldova was blunt in criticising the results:

> [A]bsolutely useless deliverables. Everything is done very formally, without impact analysis, without ownership, including on the deliverables – just to deliver. The [beneficiary] authorities do not really understand what to do and enter a vicious circle of deliverables, or the [beneficiary] authority is not cooperative, and then everything is done only formally. (Interview 31, 2021)

The cumulative effect of weak programming and superficial monitoring was a pattern of fund disbursement that became progressively detached from reform performance. The ECA concluded that the Commission disbursed EU funds without sufficient documentary proof of progress against ex-ante indicators (ECA, 2019). More troublingly, even when external evaluations indicated that disbursement conditions had not been met, the Commission proceeded: in one case releasing 'more funds … than recommended' (ECA, 2016a, p. 18). In July and October 2017, the Commission suspended several budget support tranches over concerns regarding 'the respect of effective democratic mechanisms, the rule of law and human rights in Moldova', yet authorised payment in December 2017 despite no documented improvement (ECA, 2019, p. 35). In some instances, the Commission reallocated undisbursed funds – money originally withheld for non-compliance – without attaching new activities or conditions, effectively 'enabl[ing]

the disbursement of … the funds left over due to non-compliance with the conditions attached to previous tranches' and neutralising the initial incentive effect of conditionality (ECA, 2016a, p. 18).

Several factors help explain this pattern. The most consequential was geopolitical. The acuteness of the Russian threat in the region created what Montesano et al. (2016) describe as 'geopolitical blackmailing': the Commission softened its conditionality and relaxed its progress monitoring in order to sustain pro-EU elites in power domestically, calculating that maintaining Moldova's Western orientation outweighed the costs of lax enforcement. Bureaucratic incentives reinforced this tendency: Commission services responsible for cooperation with Moldova operated under allocated budgets for specific areas of intervention and faced institutional pressure to disburse funds within programming cycles or risk losing them. The Commission itself defended its decisions by noting that

> 'more for more' funding was awarded after internal reviews; those decisions were taken by the Commission under its implementation mandate of external assistance, with political guidance from the European External Action Service (EEAS), and endorsed by member states, in full respect of comitology. (ECA, 2016a, p. 40)

From a strategic perspective, continued disbursement – albeit sometimes 'blind' – ensured the EU's institutional presence in a country situated on its external border, in a region marked by intensifying competition with Russia – a consideration that carried considerable weight in Brussels. Yet the long-term costs were severe. By sustaining fund flows to local authorities irrespective of reform performance, the Commission inadvertently enabled corrupt and clientelist practices, further entrenching the state capture by powerful oligarchs that its programmes were ostensibly designed to combat.

Domestic Political and Institutional Factors

On the Moldovan side, the political environment was often the decisive factor in whether EU-backed reforms advanced or stalled. The period 2000–2020 was characterised by frequent changes of government, shifting coalitions, and power struggles. Such instability made consistent policy implementation difficult. Governments that negotiated funding or initiated a strategy were frequently out of power before seeing it through. For instance, the ambitious 2005 PAR strategy was launched under one administration but then languished as elections and changes in leadership intervened. In the absence of stable governance, long-term reforms lacked champions. Political will for

reform also fluctuated. While virtually all Moldovan governments post-2000 claimed commitment to European integration in their programmes (even the communist-led ones), in practice many reforms threatened the interests of powerful political-economic actors – the so-called 'oligarchs' and their patronage networks. When reform implementation reached a point of challenging these interests – for example, enforcing merit-based hiring that could displace political appointees, or strengthening an anti-corruption agency that might investigate sitting officials – resistance intensified.

A clear example was the period around 2013–2015. Moldova had been proclaiming European integration and receiving increasing EU aid, yet the bank fraud of 2014 – involving approximately $1 billion – revealed that genuine governance reform was far from entrenched. The scandal's aftermath saw massive street protests and brought down the pro-EU government, illustrating that nominally pro-European politicians were themselves undermining reforms through corrupt behaviour. The EU's decision to suspend financial assistance signalled significant external pressure, yet its domestic consequence was a marked deceleration of reform momentum. This environment facilitated the political ascendancy of pro-Russian, anti-reform forces, most notably culminating in the 2016 election of Igor Dodon as president. Under the Dodon administration, Moldova's political rhetoric underwent a fundamental shift; Dodon, the former leader of the Party of Socialists (PSRM), frequently critiqued the EU Association Agreement and sought to realign the country's strategic orientation toward the Eurasian Economic Union. This period was characterised by the stagnation of key governance initiatives, as the executive focused on neutralising previous institutional gains, particularly those aimed at asset transparency and anti-corruption frameworks established in or prior to 2016. This demonstrates how a change in the political climate or leadership priorities could dramatically alter the throughput of reforms, regardless of EU inputs.

On the other hand, when political alignment and will were strong, progress could accelerate. The brief coalition between Maia Sandu and other reformists in mid-2019 took swift action on some governance issues, such as attempting justice reforms, but was short-lived due to internal defections. It was not until 2021, beyond our main period of analysis, that a sustained pro-reform government took hold. Throughout 2000–2020, one recurring theme was that reforms were often pursued in form but not in substance – a phenomenon acknowledged by Moldovan officials themselves.

As one senior official observed, 'principles are easier to implement on paper but harder to change at the cultural level' (Interview 31, 2021). Legislative enactments were frequently adopted to satisfy EU conditionality

requirements, yet left largely intact the underlying political culture of hierarchical decision-making, informal party influence over administrative appointments, and elite resistance to meaningful redistribution of control over state resources (Interview 31, 2021). The disjunction between formal legal commitments and actual administrative practice was not incidental but structurally rooted: without sustained political backing from the apex of government, mid-level officials faced strong disincentives to enforce rules that threatened established patronage arrangements and the interests of politically connected actors. The recurrence of government alternation further compounded these dynamics: incoming administrations periodically suspended, reversed, or simply deprioritised reform programmes initiated by their predecessors, impeding cumulative institutional consolidation in Moldova (European Commission, 2018a).

Beyond the political realm, the capacities of Moldova's public administration itself – the very target of reforms – significantly affected throughput. The starting point in 2000 was a civil service and administrative system ill-prepared for rapid Europeanisation. Human resources were a key weakness: many civil servants had outdated skills, low morale, and were paid meagre salaries, which did not encourage initiative or retention of talent. Moreover, the civil service was highly politicised. Changes in government often led to wholesale replacement of officials in ministries and even at local levels, as incoming parties distributed positions to loyalists. This eroded what experts call 'institutional memory' – policies and reforms lost momentum because new personnel did not remember or prioritise what predecessors had done (Interview 32, 2021). One interviewee noted that many EU experts who came to assist with projects ended up resigning in frustration, citing the lack of a systemic vision and commitment for reform among local authorities (Interview 31, 2021). Such testimonies indicate that parts of the bureaucracy were passive or even obstructive, treating EU projects as box-ticking exercises rather than opportunities for genuine change.

Coordination within the government was another challenge. Effective PAR requires different ministries and agencies to work in concert (for example, the finance ministry, justice ministry, and public service agency all have roles in civil service reform or decentralisation). In Moldova, siloed decision-making and occasional turf wars limited this coordination (Interview 31, 2021). The 2015 SIGMA assessment highlighted the lack of an empowered central body to drive PAR and the absence of clear mechanisms to ensure ministries implemented cross-cutting reforms. The creation of a PAR Coordination Unit in 2005 under the Government Office was a step

forward, but it often lacked political backing and did not function seamlessly across subsequent administrations.

Corruption within the administration also directly impacted reform implementation. Persistent bribery and elite capture have undermined the quality of governance and continued to shape behaviour even after formal reforms were introduced. The European Commission's assessments repeatedly underline that Moldova needs to increase its capacity to implement reforms and provide good quality public services at all levels, highlighting that 'despite significant progress, Moldova's business environment is characterised by widespread corruption, a weak rule of law, weak institutional capacity and low-quality public services' (European Commission, 2023d, p. 57).

Finally, Moldova's administrative capacity to absorb aid had limits. Especially in the 2000s, there were more donor projects than capable staff to implement them. This led to reform overload – multiple strategies and action plans (often donor-driven) overwhelming a small pool of civil servants. It also meant that monitoring and follow-up on each initiative was weak; as soon as one project ended, attention shifted to the next, sometimes without fully institutionalising the changes from the first (Interview 31, 2021). The EU tried to mitigate this by funding coordination efforts and encouraging the government to adopt coherent strategies (hence the push for a comprehensive PAR strategy), but the fact remained that Moldova's state capacity was limited, and progress could only move at a certain pace without causing implementation fatigue or backlash.

All in all, Moldova's domestic context – turbulent politics, partial reform ownership, corruption, and a struggling bureaucracy – often undercut the throughput of EU initiatives. Even with money and plans in place, these internal factors meant that many reforms either stagnated or only partially fulfilled their objectives. The next section will examine what outputs and outcomes resulted from this two-decade engagement, given the constraints and drivers detailed above.

Outputs: Assessing the Impact of EU-Supported Reforms

This section examines the outputs of the European Commission's PAR efforts in Moldova from 2000 to 2020, in three key domains of administrative reform – structures and processes, human resources, and systems and tools – and evaluates Moldova's overall governance trajectory using international indicators. The goal is to determine how far Moldova progressed in aligning

its public administration with EU standards and how those advancements compare with broader European benchmarks by 2020.

Structures and Processes

One major area of impact was the reform of administrative structures (institutional setups, organisational frameworks) and processes (laws, procedures, decision-making patterns). In the early 2000s, Moldova's central public administration was widely seen as outdated and inefficient. By 2020, some significant structural changes and procedural improvements could be attributed to EU-supported reform initiatives, though many deeper structural problems persisted (European Commission, 2023d).

A cornerstone output was the development and adoption of strategic frameworks for reform. The central PAR strategy of 2005 was itself a product of combined domestic and EU impetus, marking the first comprehensive attempt to redesign the government apparatus on European lines. The strategy explicitly aimed to bring Moldova's public administration into compliance with 'European standards of transparency, predictability, accountability, and efficiency' (Government of Moldova, 2005, p. 33). Its adoption was a breakthrough, indicating high-level acknowledgement of European principles of public administration as a guide. Backed by this strategy, Moldova created a PAR Coordination Unit in the State Chancellery to steer changes. In the years immediately following, with support from EU advisers and projects, a series of new laws and regulations were drafted and approved to implement the strategy's vision. These included reforms to the civil service law (introducing clearer merit-based criteria for hiring and promotion), measures to improve the policy coordination and planning process in government, and laws to streamline the structure of ministries and agencies (European Commission, 2006b). For example, EU technical assistance helped the government develop and adopt Government Decision No. 1402 (2005), which reorganised the functions of the central executive and clarified the roles of ministries vs implementing agencies. Similarly, the EU supported the formulation of a new Law on Administrative Decentralisation (2006) and a Law on Local Public Administration (2006), which redefined the responsibilities of local authorities vis-à-vis the central government, aiming to lay groundwork for more autonomous and efficient local governance.

Another output was the improvement of governance processes through the introduction of European best practices. With EU project support, Moldova established procedures requiring ministries to analyse the potential impact of regulations meant to improve the transparency and rationale of

the policymaking process. The Commission also funded the creation of an Institutional Strategic Planning framework, helping each ministry to draft medium-term development plans so that government work would be more programmatic and less ad hoc. Additionally, in areas such as public procurement and financial management, new standardised procedures were introduced. The EU's assistance in drafting a modern Public Procurement Law (2007) led to more open and competitive procurement processes, aligning with EU directives. The EU similarly supported the Ministry of Finance in instituting budgetary reforms like a Medium-Term Budgetary Framework (MTBF) to link policy priorities with budget planning.

Crucially, the EU's emphasis on anti-corruption and transparency yielded several structural and process outputs. The transformation of Moldova's specialised anti-corruption agency into the National Anticorruption Center (CNA) in 2012 reflected a key European requirement: 'The creation of the new anti-corruption agency, with exclusive powers to prevent and counteract corruption, was a condition imposed by the EU for the liberalisation of the visa regime' (National Anticorruption Center, 2025). Monitoring reports highlight the development of evidence-based anti-corruption policies and the adoption of legislative frameworks designed to prevent and sanction corruption (OECD-SIGMA, 2022). Alongside this, reforms established integrity oversight mechanisms, including a National Integrity Authority (ANI) tasked with conflict-of-interest investigations and asset declaration verification, embedding institutional tools for transparency (World Bank, 2018a). While enforcement challenges remained, the legal and institutional foundations for combating corruption were significantly enhanced during this period, shaped by sustained external guidance and domestic reform commitments.

Another visible change was the creation or reform of agencies to manage the reform process itself. For example, as part of PAR efforts, Moldova established a State Chancellery department for policy coordination and monitoring units in ministries to oversee implementation of strategies. The Ministry of Justice saw its role in coordinating legal harmonisation with the EU *acquis* enhanced. Importantly, during 2016–2020, the EU deployed EU High-Level Advisers in various ministries and state institutions (Government of Moldova, 2022). These advisers, while not formal office-holders, effectively became part of the institutional reform process, mentoring Moldovan officials and shaping reforms in real time. The project supporting these advisers is noted as one of the largest single EU contributions to PAR in this period (over €11 million), and while their advice does not qualify as a concrete 'output' in the legislative sense, it had an impact on process

efficiency – for instance, helping line ministries draft better quality policy documents and ensuring inter-ministerial coordination for the Association Agreement's implementation.

The cumulative effect of these outputs by 2020 was that Moldova had, on paper, a more streamlined central government with clearer mandates and processes than it did in 2000. Redundant Soviet-era committees and departments had been gradually phased out or reformed. Decision-making rules, like requirements for public consultations on draft laws, introduced with EU help in 2008, made the process more transparent. Yet, the functioning of these structures and processes often remained suboptimal. Many of the strategy documents and legal reforms suffered from weak implementation – a fact acknowledged by a 2007 Commission evaluation which found a wide gap between policy formulation and tangible impact on outcomes, noting that while new legislation and procedures were adopted, they did not consistently change day-to-day administrative behaviour (European Commission, 2007a, p. 114).

Human Resources

Reforming the human capital of Moldova's public sector was essential, given that institutions are only as effective as the people running them. Over 2000–2020, EU programmes devoted substantial attention to professionalising the civil service, building capacity through training, and depoliticising public sector personnel management. The outputs in this area are reflected in new frameworks for managing human resources and improved competencies among civil servants, though challenges of politicisation and capacity shortfalls persisted.

One important output was the creation and refinement of a merit-based civil service system. With EU technical advice, Moldova adopted a Civil Service Law (2008) that introduced competitive examinations for entry, clearer job classifications, and performance appraisal systems. The law established the concept of a neutral civil servant distinct from political appointees. While enforcement took time, by 2020 the rules for hiring and promoting civil servants were far stronger than in 2000, when appointments were often discretionary. The EU also helped set up the Civil Service Register and supported the development of www.cariere.gov.md, a government jobs portal for posting vacancies and results, to bring transparency to recruitment. As part of this, staffing tables and qualification requirements for each ministry were drawn up (an output of an EU Twinning project with Romania in 2012), which meant each institution had to adhere to a structured human resource management (HRM) plan. These steps were

aimed at reducing nepotism and aligning Moldova with EU practices of a professional civil service.

Training and capacity-building programmes were perhaps the most tangible HR outputs. The EU financed extensive training at multiple levels of the administration. This included the development of a National Training Strategy and curricula for civil servants, executed through institutions like the Moldovan Academy of Public Administration (with the EU providing experts and materials). By 2020, hundreds of officials had benefitted from training in areas such as strategic planning, EU law, IT skills, project management, and languages. Specifically, managerial training programmes were implemented in key ministries and the State Chancellery to improve leadership skills and policy management. EU assistance introduced Training of Trainers (ToT) programmes, which expanded the cadre of local trainers who could continue instructing civil servants beyond the life of EU projects. This built a measure of sustainability into the capacity-development process. There were also specialised training outputs: for instance, under an EU project, public finance officers in municipalities received training in budget planning and financial control to support fiscal decentralisation. Similarly, legal advisers across ministries were trained on the new Administrative Code, which governs administrative procedures and was adopted in 2018 with EU input.

Another key output was the establishment of new units and roles focused on HR development. EU Twinning partnerships led to the creation of human resources divisions in each ministry where previously HR was handled ad hoc. These units standardised personnel procedures and were trained to use modern HR tools (some developed with EU support, like software for HR management). Additionally, through the Capacity Building for EU Integration project (2014–2015), Moldova set up a special team to manage EU-funded institution building programmes. This team, trained by EU experts, improved Moldova's ability to coordinate Twinning and TAIEX initiatives, ensuring that the right people were nominated to participate and that knowledge from these initiatives was fed back into institutions.

By the late 2010s, some advances in human resource governance were observable in Moldova's civil service, though they remained uneven. The legal framework for merit-based recruitment and selection, first established by the Civil Service Law of 2008, introduced competitive recruitment procedures, job descriptions, performance appraisal, and continuous professional development, aligning the system more closely with European principles. Assessments published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have noted that while the legislative framework for

HRM broadly meets international standards, limitations in practice persist, partly due to low salaries and limited attraction capacity, which undermines competitive staffing processes and reflects wider labour market challenges, demographic pressures, and low remuneration relative to private sector opportunities (OECD-SIGMA, 2023).

Despite some improvements in human resource outputs, persistent shortcomings remained a defining feature of Moldova's civil service by the late 2010s, a pattern that SIGMA's 2023 assessment confirms (OECD-SIGMA, 2023). Moldova's legal framework and institutional structures for senior posts did not yet ensure fully professionalised HRM in practice: the value of the 'Merit-based recruitment and dismissal of senior civil servants' indicator was assessed at 2 on a 0–5 scale, reflecting limited HR responsibilities for key positions, legislative gaps, and practical challenges in attracting and retaining qualified candidates (OECD-SIGMA, 2023). The report highlights that while legislation provides for competitive recruitment, many senior appointments continued to occur without open competition, and when competitions were organised, their effectiveness was low. In 2021, only about 43% of senior civil service vacancies were filled through competition, and in 2022 none of the seven senior appointments resulted from a competitive process. SIGMA also notes that key HRM powers, such as recruitment, appointment, or dismissal of non-senior staff, remain vested with politically appointed heads of authorities rather than professional HR managers, limiting the professional autonomy of senior civil servants and weakening merit-based practices. Thus, although EU-linked HRM policies, law reforms, and training represented important outputs, their translation into sustained merit-based practice and stable, professional staffing remained partial by 2020, constrained by structural weaknesses in Moldova's administration, persistent politicisation of senior appointments, and broader socio-economic pressures. The EU's contributions thus produced institutional and human capacity outputs – new laws, procedures, training programmes, and dedicated bodies – which improved the professionalism of the public administration to a degree, but the overall capacity and integrity of the civil service by 2020 remained a work in progress, heavily dependent on continuing reform efforts.

Systems and Tools

Underpinning the transformation of structures and people were the systems and tools introduced to enable a more efficient, transparent, and accountable administration. The EU's support resulted in several modern systems being put in place in Moldova's public sector – notably in the

areas of e-governance, service delivery, public financial management, and transparency mechanisms. These concrete outputs had the potential to bypass or mitigate some human and structural limitations by hard-wiring good practices into technology and procedures.

One of the headline outputs was the development of e-government infrastructure and digital services. Starting around 2010, with funding from the EU (complementing other donors like the World Bank), Moldova pursued an ambitious e-governance agenda. The e-Governance Agency (*Agenția de Guvernare Electronică*) has been central to Moldova's efforts to digitise public administration, modernise service delivery, and integrate interoperable platforms for citizens and businesses, such as the evo.gov.md platform for online public services, MConnect, and other digital services. Established in 2010 within the government's e-transformation agenda, the e-Governance Agency's work aligns with broader EU-supported governance modernisation programmes that provide technical assistance, capacity building, and digital project support as part of Moldova's PAR efforts. By 2020, more than 50 electronic governance systems had been implemented or upgraded. This included systems like e-procurement for online public tenders, e-licensing for business permits, e-civil status for digitising personal records, and e-voting pilots for certain processes. Moldova's national e-procurement system MTender was developed and piloted in early 2017 as part of the Public Procurement Development Strategy 2016–2020 and, after a period of testing with select public authorities, was made mandatory for all public procuring entities in October 2018. EU technical cooperation supported this process as part of broader public procurement and administrative reform, as the platform provides a public, online system where citizens and civil society organisations can track procurement processes and contract awards as part of broader transparency and oversight efforts. Another key output was a national digital transformation framework and associated guidance developed by Moldovan authorities with EU expert support, which laid out a methodology for modernising public services, enhancing user-centric design, and ensuring interoperability across government IT systems. EU4Digital actively supported the development of Moldova's national digital transformation strategy and helped align it with broader regional and European digital governance standards.

In the realm of policymaking tools, EU assistance helped institutionalise practices like the Policy Coordination Mechanism through the State Chancellery's online system – a platform where all draft laws and policies had to be logged, with comments from various ministries, before government approval. This ensured traceability and transparency of the decision process and is

considered an output that improved horizontal coordination. Similarly, a monitoring and evaluation system for tracking the implementation of the ENP Action Plan and later the Association Agreement was set up. By 2020, Moldova's government routinely produced monitoring reports on reforms, thanks to templates and software introduced with EU support. These reports, while sometimes criticised as formalistic, at least provided data and benchmarks on what was – or was not – done, which was a leap forward from the absence of such tracking in the early 2000s.

For public financial management (PFM), the EU provided assistance for the introduction of an integrated financial management information system within the Ministry of Finance, improving budget execution and reporting. It also supported a Treasury system upgrade that enhanced control of public expenditures. Tools like these reduced the room for arbitrary financial management and aligned practices with EU standards of fiscal transparency. Furthermore, the EU facilitated participatory tools to make the administration more accountable. One such tool was establishing formal processes and IT platforms for public consultation on draft policies (the particip.gov.md portal, for example). By 2020, it became more common for the government to solicit online feedback from citizens or civil society on proposed regulations – an output reflecting a shift toward inclusive governance. Another tool was improving the petitions and complaints system: Moldovan citizens could submit grievances or service feedback through a centralised system, with EU-supported training ensuring these petitions were logged and responded to, as required by a Law on Petitions updated in 2008.

The cumulative effect of these systems and tools was an environment somewhat more conducive to good governance practices. For instance, the digitalisation of services cut down many opportunities for petty bribery by automating processes and reducing face-to-face interactions. The transparency portals and data availability made it easier for watchdogs to identify irregularities, such as spotting inconsistencies in procurement awards. These innovations, however, had their limits. The ECA in 2016 noted that while such tools were introduced, the utilisation was not always widespread. In some rural areas or poorer municipalities, digital systems were not fully adopted due to a lack of equipment or skills. In terms of impact, a Commission report concluded that despite new systems, 'implementation has lagged' – essentially, that having tools is one thing, but effectively using them and integrating them into daily administrative culture is another (European Commission, 2007a, p. 114). For example, by 2020 Moldova had a perfectly serviceable e-procurement system (comparable to systems in

EU countries), but if procuring entities chose to circumvent it through exemptions or if corrupt cartels fixed bids, the mere existence of the system could not solve those issues. Essentially, many tools were available, but not always fully embraced.

In conclusion, the EU helped deliver a suite of modern systems and instruments that were largely absent in 2000 – from e-governance platforms to policy coordination databases. These outputs are building blocks for a more accountable administration. Moldova's challenge was never a lack of reform ideas or tools, but rather the consistent application of them. Moldova thus ended up with first-class 'reform hardware' (laws, systems) but was running it with oft-troubled 'software' (institutional practices and political culture). This gap between outputs and outcomes is critical in understanding the real impact of two decades of effort.

Overall Governance Outcomes and Indicators

When measuring Moldova's progress in public administration and governance from 2000 to 2020, the results are mixed and modest. The numerous outputs delivered with EU assistance – new institutions, laws, training, e-systems – undoubtedly prevented deterioration and introduced elements of good governance. However, they fell short of producing a qualitative leap in governance standards. In many respects, Moldova in 2020 still lagged well behind EU member states. International governance indicators provide a sobering quantification of this reality. As showcased in Figure 4, the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) indicate that Moldova's scores on key dimensions like Government Effectiveness, Regulatory Quality, and Control of Corruption hovered around the zero mark (on a scale roughly from -2.5 to +2.5) throughout the two decades – indicating a very neutral to slightly negative performance – whereas the EU average is substantially higher (often between 0.5 and 1.5). Notably, Moldova's scores in 2020 were almost the same as in 2000. There were improvements in the mid-2000s, slight declines during the instability of late 2000s, a small uptick around 2010–2014, and backsliding during 2015–2016 (corresponding with the corruption crisis and political turmoil), followed by recovery by 2020 to roughly the turn-of-the-century levels. In short, despite all the reform projects, no net substantial gain is seen in these indicators over 20 years – a strong sign that reforms did not penetrate deeply. In particular, Control of Corruption remained extremely low; Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index scores for Moldova stagnated in the 30s (out of 100) for most of the 2010s, and Moldova was ranked 120th out of 180 countries in 2019 (comparable to 2000) – reflecting that corruption stayed endemic.

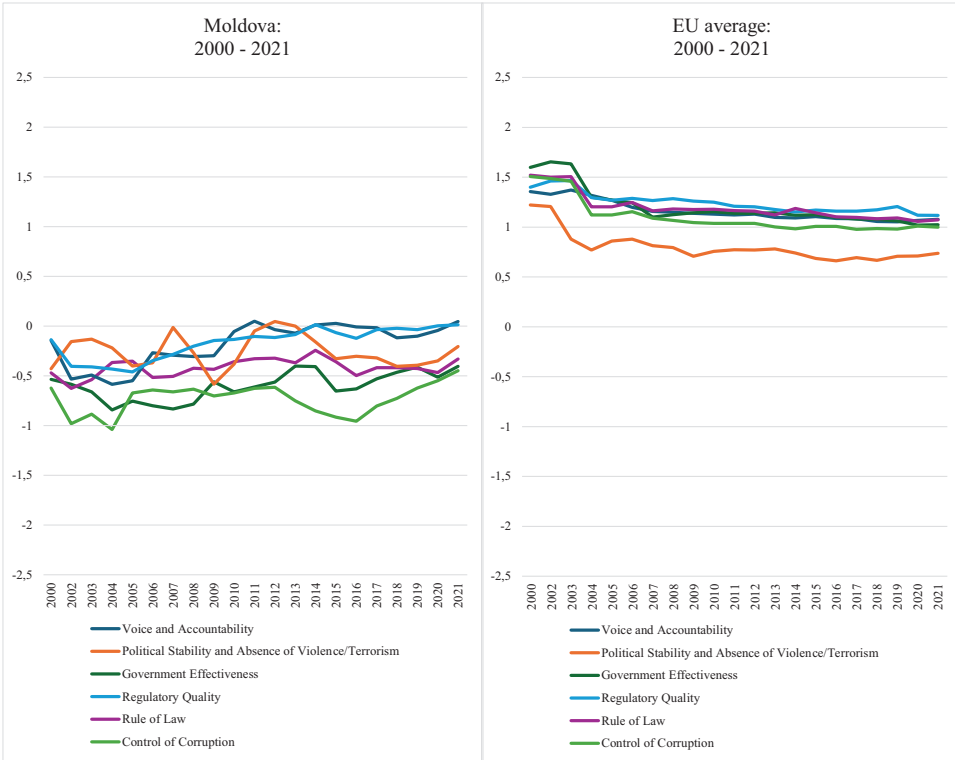

Figure 4. Government Performance in Moldova vs EU Average, 2000–2021. Source: Author's compilation based on the WGI dataset (World Bank, 2022).

Similarly, Freedom House's *Nations in Transit* scores for Moldova's National Democratic Governance and Public Service criteria remained modest. In the early 2000s, Moldova's democracy score was rated around 2.5 to 2.9 on a 1 (worst) to 7 (best) scale; two decades later, it had risen only to approximately 3.1, keeping the country classified as a 'Transitional' or 'Hybrid Regime' rather than an established democracy (Cenuşă, 2023).

Why did the substantial outputs not translate into sustainable outcomes? The evidence and evaluations suggest a pattern of 'formal' or superficial compliance. Moldovan authorities often followed the letter of EU recommendations (passing laws, creating bodies) but not the spirit (ensuring those bodies had autonomy, funding, and a willingness to act). The quote from a 2000 Commission-funded study on Moldova proved prescient: 'Activities in public administration reform … seem unlikely to have any lasting effect. All the results achieved are structurally exposed to the risk of major policy reversals' (Nomisma & Economisti Associati, 2000, p. 7). Indeed, several reforms experienced significant reversal or backsliding

during this period. For example, following a decade of progress toward a meritocratic civil service after 2010, the 2017–2018 central administrative reforms – specifically the adoption and implementation of Law No. 230/2017 – effectively re-politicised senior administrative positions. While the role of State Secretary was ostensibly created to ensure professional continuity, the appointment process in 2018 became a mechanism for political patronage. Similarly, after establishing relatively robust frameworks for the National Anticorruption Center (CNA) and the National Integrity Authority (ANI) by the mid-2010s, systemic political interference between 2016 and 2018 significantly neutralised their operational independence and enforcement efficacy.

In concluding the 2000–2020 analysis, one can argue that EU assistance was necessary but not sufficient. It provided Moldova with the means to reform and prevented severe backsliding by attaching conditions and keeping reforms on the agenda, but it could not ensure domestic actors' buy-in. Without a strong domestic political will and a societal demand for good governance (which started to appear only toward 2020), the reforms achieved incremental improvements but not the hoped-for convergence with EU standards. This realisation has informed how the EU and Moldova approached reforms after 2020, in the new context of Moldova's EU candidacy – where the stakes are higher and the standards tougher, as discussed next.

Post-2020 Developments and Outlook

Since 2020, developments both within Moldova and in the European Commission's approach have significantly shifted the landscape for PAR, offering new momentum as well as new challenges. The period after 2020 is marked by Moldova's leap towards EU candidacy, a reinvigorated reform mandate under pro-European leadership, and the EU's enhanced support and conditionality mechanisms reflecting evolving administrative standards.

A critical change was the rise of a unified reformist government in Moldova. The election of Maia Sandu – a former World Bank adviser committed to anti-corruption – as president in late 2020, followed by her Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) winning a parliamentary majority in 2021, ended the era of divided governance between pro-EU and pro-Russian factions. With full control of the government, Sandu and PAS set a clear course for deepening European integration and cleaning up governance. In 2021–2022, the new government launched investigations into past corruption,

began overhauling the justice sector by vetting judges and prosecutors, and revitalised dormant reforms, such as implementing the 2016–2020 PAR strategy. This domestic political will created a more favourable context for implementing the long-standing recommendations that had lingered from the 2000–2020 period.

The geopolitical earthquake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 had a profound effect on Moldova. It dramatically accelerated Moldova's integration with the West, as security and existential concerns galvanised both Moldovan society and EU member states to draw the country closer. In March 2022, Moldova submitted a formal application for EU membership – something that was not expected to happen so soon, but was spurred by the urgent context. In June 2022, the European Council granted Moldova EU candidate status, alongside Ukraine. This was a watershed moment, effectively opening a new chapter where EU support and scrutiny would increase. Candidacy transformed many of the 'should do' reforms into 'must do' obligations, embedding them in the accession framework.

The European Commission, in its opinion on Moldova's application, laid out key steps (conditions) for Moldova to fulfil, which essentially outline the evolving EU standards the country must meet (European Commission, 2022c). These included strengthening the rule of law (judicial reform), fighting high-level corruption and money laundering, 'de-oligarchisation' of the economy and politics (reducing the undue influence of oligarchs), PAR – implementing the European public administration principles more rigorously, and improvements in human rights and functioning of democratic institutions (European Commission, 2022c). Notably, these steps highlight areas that overlap with the weaknesses identified over 2000–2020. The difference now is the political imperative: meeting these conditions is necessary for accession talks to proceed. In its 2023 Enlargement Report, the Commission acknowledged Moldova's progress on some of these steps, including initial justice reforms and effort to curb oligarchic influence by passing party financing laws, and recommended starting accession negotiations, while emphasising that the remaining reforms, especially in justice and anti-corruption, must be completed (European Commission, 2023f). EU leaders concurred, and by December 2023 they decided to move forward with accession negotiations, which formally began with the first Intergovernmental Conference in June 2024. Parallel to these political developments, Moldova's public mood and constitutional framework have also been oriented firmly Westward.

In October 2024, a national referendum narrowly approved a constitutional amendment enshrining EU membership as a strategic national

objective. The final result – a margin of 50.35% in favour compared to 49.65% against – exposed a significant socio-political cleavage, with pro-European support heavily concentrated in the Chișinău metropolitan area and the diaspora, while several rural regions and autonomous territories like Găgăuzia demonstrated resolute opposition. While this outcome legally anchors the state's European trajectory, it simultaneously heightens the political imperative for the government to move beyond symbolic alignment toward tangible governance outcomes. The razor-thin mandate serves as a sobering revelation that underscores the necessity for more effective anti-corruption measures and public service enhancements – reforms that are increasingly viewed by the electorate not merely as accession criteria, but as existential requirements for maintaining domestic legitimacy.

On the EU side, support for Moldova post-2020 has increased to unprecedented levels, but with more intensive oversight. The EU created new financial instruments tailored for aspiring members in the Eastern Partnership. Under the EU's Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI-GE), launched in 2021, Moldova benefits from a Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP) for 2021–2027 aligned with the country's Association Agenda and recovery needs. Key focus areas include good governance, rule of law, and institutional strengthening, reflecting that governance reform is now seen as integral to everything from economic development to security. In 2021, the European Commission unveiled a €600 million Economic Recovery Plan for Moldova, targeting investments in infrastructure, energy, and human capital – but tied to governance improvements to ensure effective use of funds. More recently, in early 2025 the EU agreed on a dedicated Reform and Growth Facility for Moldova worth €1.9 billion (European Commission, 2025a). This facility is essentially a massive aid package to be disbursed over coming years, linked to a Moldovan 'Reform Agenda' with specific milestones. It is designed to accelerate Moldova's convergence with the EU by funding critical reforms and infrastructure, acting as both carrot and stick (since disbursement depends on reform progress). This approach mirrors elements of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) used for Western Balkans, suggesting the EU is now treating Moldova much like an accession country in terms of aid and expectations – a clear shift from the more partnership-oriented ENP approach of the 2000s.

Finally, EU standards themselves have evolved, especially in the realm of governance and rule of law, partly in response to lessons learned from past enlargements. There is now a greater emphasis on sustainable implementation and monitoring. For instance, the EU's *Principles of Public*

Administration and new rule-of-law criteria mean that Moldova will face continuous evaluation on how well laws are applied in practice, not just whether they are adopted. The EU's enlargement methodology (revised in 2020) places the chapters on Judiciary and Fundamental Rights and Justice, Freedom and Security early in the negotiation and keeps them open until the end, to ensure thorough reforms – this will apply to Moldova's accession process. In essence, the bar for success has been raised: going forward, it will not be enough for Moldova to tick legislative boxes; it must demonstrate measurable enforcement of EU-aligned reforms, including, for example, by increasing conviction rates for high-level corruption, depoliticising civil service appointments, and improving citizen satisfaction with public services.

In conclusion, the post-2020 period offers a more optimistic scenario for Moldova's reforms. The combination of firm domestic political commitment, the existential motivation provided by security concerns, and the EU's robust conditional support creates a window in which many of the reforms long stagnant could finally be institutionally embedded. Indeed, early signs (such as judicial reforms underway, and improvements in energy sector governance during the 2022–2023 energy crisis, supported by EU assistance) show Moldova can move quickly when circumstances demand. The legacy of 2000–2020 – the strategies, systems, and trained officials – provides a foundation that can now be leveraged to meet the evolving EU standards. If the momentum is maintained, Moldova could achieve in a few years of accession preparation what it struggled to do in the previous two decades, namely: entrench rule of law, accountability, and effective public administration. The journey is far from over, but the narrative has shifted from one of frustration at stuck reforms to one of hopeful, if challenging, transformation as Moldova navigates decisively toward the EU. Whether the geopolitical shock of 2022 can durably reshape Moldova's domestic political economy – where patronage networks remain structurally embedded – remains an open question.

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PART IV

How Great Expectations Are Dashed Away, and How to Prevent That: Key Findings and Recommendations

The problem – [due to] our naivety – is that we say it takes time, we assume a positive line, but improvement is not a direct line; it's a permanent struggle. It can get worse before it gets better. It can get worse in any country.
– Interview 8 (2020)

We have only designed what looked like a model, but everyone should know that there is no copy-paste; every country should design its own administrative system considering its historical legacies, culture, politics.
– Interview 1 (2019)

9. Comparative Analysis and Key Findings

Abstract: This chapter synthesises the empirical evidence from Romania, Serbia, and Moldova to evaluate three analytical hypotheses about the conditions under which EU-supported administrative reform achieves sustainability. It demonstrates that well-targeted Commission support generates durable institutional change only when aligned with genuine domestic political ownership. It shows that EU leverage is strongest under credible accession conditionality, weakens in post-accession settings, and diminishes further in the absence of a membership perspective. Finally, it establishes that communist administrative legacies and contemporary patronage-based incentive structures influence how deeply EU-supported reforms are absorbed. Taken together, the evidence confirms that Europeanisation is a two-level game: external pressure and resources are necessary but insufficient without a receptive and committed domestic political environment.

Keywords: reform sustainability; EU leverage; domestic ownership; patronage; Europeanisation

Hypothesis 1: Alignment Between EU Support and Domestic Ownership as a Condition for Sustainable Institutional Change

Hypothesis 1 posits that public administration reform (PAR) supported by the European Union (EU), particularly through the European Commission, produces sustainable institutional change when domestic political ownership and administrative commitment align with well-targeted Commission support. The comparative evidence across the three cases allows us to evaluate whether such alignment translated into sustainable institutional

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transformation rather than short-term or formal compliance. EU support programmes that were tailored to specific reform gaps and that engaged domestic stakeholders meaningfully tended to produce more sustained changes than broad, donor-driven initiatives with little local buy-in.

In all three countries, the EU progressively learned to target assistance to priority areas of governance weakness, rather than spreading resources too thinly. For example, in Romania, after initial broad support provided through the PHARE (Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies) programme, the Commission and Romanian authorities established country-specific programmes, such as the Operational Programme Administrative Capacity Development (OP DAC) to channel large-scale funds explicitly into PAR. This ensured that hundreds of projects were not just isolated technical tweaks, but aligned under a coherent strategy with defined axes. By concentrating ~€208 million in EU funds (2007–2013) and then ~€563 million (2014–2020) on Romania's governance improvements, the Commission created a critical mass of interventions in those areas. An interviewee noted that 'OP DAC operated like a reform strategy' itself by prioritising key modernisation actions through its €250 million budget (Interview 18, 2021). In Serbia, a similar shift occurred: the EU moved from many small projects, primarily funded through the CARDS (Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation) programme, to more ambitious projects such as a sector reform contract providing budget support of €80 million for PAR, focusing resources on comprehensive reforms rather than piecemeal interventions. This sector-wide approach was explicitly designed to be well-targeted at Serbia's core governance challenges and to maximise impact by linking funds to priority reforms rather than disparate projects. Even in Moldova – where the aid total was smaller – the EU scaled up support from just €31 million in 2000–2006 to €157 million in 2007–2013, increasingly earmarking funds for governance and rule-of-law reforms as Moldova's ambitions with the EU grew. The European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) and, later, the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) explicitly identified PAR as a key priority, signalling a more targeted approach than the earlier, more general aid provided through the TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States) instrument. Over the years, EU support became more effective as it evolved from broad, untargeted aid to focused programmes aligned with specific reform strategies, seeking to address the whole-of-system bottlenecks in each country's administrative system.

Hence, variation in reform outcomes across Romania, Serbia, and Moldova must also be understood in light of the different levels of financial

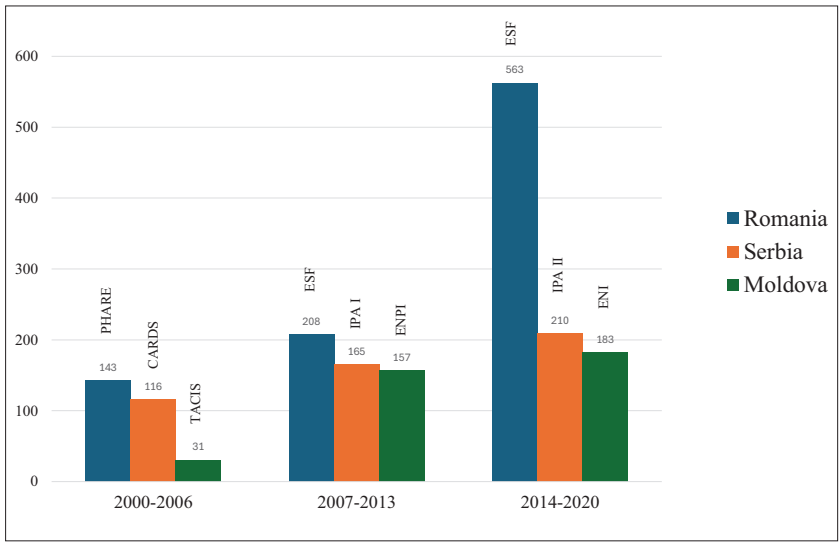

Figure 5. European Commission Instruments Supporting PAR in Romania, Serbia, and Moldova Between 2000 and 2020 (in Millions of Euros). Sources: Author's compilation based on national programme documents and EU reports.[1]

support each country received from the EU. The magnitude and structure of EU funding reflected the country's institutional relationship with the EU – whether as a member, a candidate, or a neighbourhood partner – and strongly influenced the scope and ambition of supported reforms. As shown in Figure 5, Romania, as a full EU member, received by far the highest cumulative support for governance reform over the two decades studied, followed by Serbia as a candidate country, and Moldova as a neighbouring country. This stratified funding approach highlights how the EU's modality of engagement – accession vs pre-accession vs neighbourhood – directly shapes the scale and intensity of its reform investment, particularly in the domain of public administration.

Equally crucial is the degree of local ownership – the commitment of domestic institutions to drive and sustain the reforms. The comparative evidence strongly affirms that when local actors are genuinely involved, reforms have a better chance of success. As a principle, external support is most effective when managed as a partner-owned and partner-led process.

1 See: Business and Strategies Europe, 2015; Deloitte Consulting, 2008; EPRD, 2013; European Commission, 2007a, 2007b, 2010a, 2013b, 2013c, 2020a, 2020b, 2020j; Government of Moldova, 2022; Government of Romania, 2010, 2015b, 2020, 2021; Government of Serbia, 2011; MWH Consortium, 2006; Particip GmbH, 2009.

In practice, however, achieving local ownership was challenging and varied across cases and time periods.

In Romania, local ownership was strongest when EU incentives aligned with domestic pressure for change (for instance, during pre-accession when meeting EU membership conditions was a national priority, or during public outcry against corruption in the mid-2010s). The EU's large post-accession funding programmes initially suffered from weak domestic buy-in – Romanian political commitment to administrative reform waned once the immediate incentive of accession passed. Learning from this, the Commission tied the later Operational Programme Administrative Capacity (OP AC) funds to Romania's own strategy (the 2014–2020 Public Administration strategy) and introduced ex-ante conditions to force Romanian authorities to take responsibility for their reform plans. By explicitly linking EU funds to a national strategy and concrete benchmarks, the OP AC programme tried to foster greater local commitment – essentially saying, 'We will finance your reform priorities, but you must define and own them'. This led to somewhat better ownership in the later period (Romania did adopt a national strategy and meet various benchmarks to unlock funds), though as Chapter 6 noted, genuine administrative culture change remained slow.

In Serbia, the EU made local ownership a central objective, especially in the 2014–2020 phase. The shift to budget support (direct funding to the state budget in return for reforms) was explicitly aimed at increasing high-level commitment and domestic control over implementation. A senior Serbian official explained that when funds go directly into government budgets (instead of being managed by EU contractors), 'the actual reform depends on real political support across the whole government' (Interview 24, 2020). In other words, the Serbian government had to take charge of using the €80 million in budget support to achieve agreed reform targets – which, in theory, strengthens ownership. Indeed, the 'carrot' of €80 million for PAR was quite large, showing how important Serbia's PAR is for the Commission, and was expected to motivate Serbian leaders to invest their political capital in making the reform succeed. The evolution of Serbia's PAR strategies since 2004 reflects a transition toward greater domestic ownership, as EU support was increasingly integrated into locally developed frameworks. By involving Serbian ministries in joint working groups, the reform process moved beyond top-down imposition toward a co-design model. Nevertheless, the efficacy of these strategies remained tethered to fluctuating political will. The Serbian experience demonstrates that while local participation mitigates resistance, the 'EU carrot' is often insufficient to prevent strategically designed reforms

from stagnating when they clash with the interests of less reform-oriented administrations.

In Moldova, achieving local ownership was perhaps most difficult given the tumultuous politics and weaker state capacity. The 2015 European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) review explicitly introduced 'local ownership' as a guiding principle, moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach and allowing partners like Moldova to set their own reform priorities in agreement with the EU (European Commission, 2015b). Despite this, Moldova's domestic ownership remained limited in the 2000s–2010s: reforms were often done to please the EU on paper, while political elites lacked genuine commitment to implementation. The lack of consistent local drive is reflected in how Moldovan officials 'cherry-picked' EU conditions in earlier years and how many EU-sponsored changes were reversed or hollowed out by domestic actors (more on this under Hypothesis 3). Recent developments, however, show the critical importance of local political leadership: the election of a reform-oriented government (President Maia Sandu's administration since 2020) suddenly injected real domestic will to utilise EU support effectively. With Moldova's own leaders now pushing anti-corruption and administrative overhaul, the same EU tools that previously yielded little are starting to show results – underscoring how essential local ownership is to convert inputs into outcomes.

When EU support was both well-targeted and locally owned, the case studies show more tangible improvements. For instance, in Romania, the establishment of one-stop public service centres and e-government systems gained momentum only when there was a local champion or administrative unit ready to implement them using EU funds. In Serbia, one notable success has been the development of digital government services (like e-procurement and e-permitting systems) – these were areas where EU assistance provided technology and training, but Serbian ministries genuinely wanted these systems (to reduce red tape and also because they were politically visible modernisation wins). The result was new e-governance tools that are cited as successes in Chapter 7. Such outputs contrast with areas where EU projects failed to achieve intended outcomes due to lack of local ownership – for example, EU-funded training programmes in Moldova that produced manuals and recommendations, only for them to be shelved by uninterested agencies (Interview 31, 2021). These failures are precisely what Hypothesis 1 highlights: without sincere local engagement, even well-designed support will have limited effect.

It is telling that the principle of local ownership is now ingrained in EU policy rhetoric, urging the inclusion of local governments and civil

society as true stakeholders in reforms. This reflects lessons learned from the past: only when national and local authorities embrace the reforms as their own – setting agendas, co-financing projects, and adjusting reforms to local conditions – do changes last. A comparative perspective across our cases confirms this. The comparative evidence largely supports Hypothesis 1, though with important variations across modalities and political contexts. The next sections will show how this interplays with the leverage and incentives the EU had in each context (Hypothesis 2) and the underlying domestic conditions (Hypothesis 3). Notably, even the best-targeted, locally owned EU support can be undercut by adverse domestic factors – a point we return to under Hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 2: Variation in EU Leverage Across EU Integration Modalities and Its Impact on Reform Depth and Sustainability

Hypothesis 2 asserts that variation in EU leverage across EU integration modalities – member state, candidate country, and associated/neighbourhood state – shapes the depth and sustainability of administrative reform outcomes. The rationale is that the conditional promise of membership is the most powerful incentive the EU can offer; once membership is achieved or off the table, the EU has fewer tools (relying on softer influence or smaller incentives). The comparative findings strongly support this hypothesis. In shorthand: the shadow of accession loomed largest in Serbia, was absent in Moldova (until very recently), and post-accession Romania saw EU influence diminish – albeit not disappear.

EU leverage is classically exemplified in the enlargement process, where candidate countries must adopt extensive reforms to qualify for membership. Serbia's experience underscores how potent this mechanism can be – and also its limits. From 2000 onward, Serbia's governments explicitly tied their reform agenda to the goal of EU accession. The Commission leveraged this by making clear that progress on democratic governance and administration was mandatory for advancing towards the EU. Concrete instances of leverage include the EU suspending negotiations in 2005 when Serbia failed to cooperate with the war crimes tribunal, and resuming them only after compliance. This showed that the EU could exert hard pressure when the prize of membership was at stake. In PAR, the EU made the adoption of European principles of public administration, such as having a merit-based civil service and following professional policymaking procedures, part of the official accession criteria – effectively forcing Serbia's hand if

it wanted to open and close EU accession chapters. As Chapter 7 noted, the period up to Serbia's candidacy (2000–2012) saw significant legal and institutional reforms, as it emerged from the Milošević era and pursued EU-linked reforms. However, Serbia's case also highlights that EU accession leverage, while strong, is not limitless. After initial leaps, progress plateaued once Serbia reached a certain point without immediate membership. From ~2007 onwards, Serbia's WGI scores mostly stagnated or even dipped slightly. Government Effectiveness hovered around the 40th–50th global percentile and never broke out of the negative range (staying around -0.1 to -0.3 in score). Despite opening accession negotiations in 2014, by 2020 Serbia had only provisionally closed two out of 35 chapters. One reason was diminishing returns of conditionality: as the 'easy' reforms were done, what remained were tougher political changes, such as depoliticising the administration and genuinely tackling high-level corruption that directly threatened entrenched domestic interests. Here, EU leverage, while still present, struggled against domestic pushback.

Serbian elites calculated that full EU membership remained a distant prospect, allowing EU pressure to be strategically managed or deferred. This period saw the emergence of 'accession fatigue', as protracted reforms failed to yield immediate political dividends, such as a definitive membership timeline. This dynamic conforms to the external incentives model (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004; 2019), which posits that the efficacy of conditionality is contingent upon the credibility and proximity of the reward. In the Serbian context, as the broader enlargement process stagnated and domestic public support for integration fluctuated, the perceived utility of the membership incentive diminished. Nevertheless, empirical evidence suggests that substantive reform milestones were primarily achieved through EU leverage, exercised either via the formal *acquis* conditionality or through the targeted application of financial assistance.

The European Commission's strategy after 2014 to intensify leverage by focusing on fundamental clusters (public administration, rule of law, economic governance) kept Serbia's government under a reform microscope. The sector reform contract mentioned earlier is a good example: it introduced strict reform targets that Serbia had to meet to get each tranche of the €80 million, effectively mimicking a mini 'accession conditionality' within the aid programme. This had some effect – for example, Serbia merged its Public Administration and Finance ministries' reform plans to satisfy an EU condition for disbursement, showing the EU could still twist arms when funds were on the line. Overall, Serbia demonstrates that as long as the prospect of membership remained alive, the EU retained considerable

leverage to demand changes (the country consistently adjusted laws and institutions in line with EU reports and recommendations). The flip side is that without a tangible prospect of EU membership or if domestic costs are too high, even a candidate may stall – a point that connects to Hypothesis 3.

Once a country becomes a member, the classic conditionality tool disappears – the EU can no longer dangle membership as a reward. Hypothesis 2 suggests EU leverage in members is much weaker, and Romania's trajectory illustrates this, albeit with some important nuances. In the lead-up to accession (2000–2006), Romania was under very strict conditionality: the EU repeatedly postponed Romania's entry from 2004 to 2007 precisely because of inadequate progress in governance and administrative capacity. This pressure worked to an extent – Romania passed a civil service law, set up new agencies (like the National Agency of Civil Servants), and took anti-corruption steps under EU scrutiny. However, even by 2007, the EU had serious reservations about Romania's reforms, so it imposed the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) upon accession to maintain leverage. The CVM was essentially a post-accession conditionality focused on judicial reform and anti-corruption, with the implicit threat that failure to reform could lead to consequences like withheld EU funds or delayed Schengen entry. The CVM did keep up some pressure – Romania knew that a negative CVM report could be politically embarrassing and limit its benefits of membership (indeed, the CVM was cited by some member states to justify excluding Romania from Schengen for years). Thus, even as a member, Romania felt a residual leverage via these mechanisms, though they were far weaker than the pre-accession conditionality mechanism. The fact that it took until 2022 for the EU to declare Romania had met CVM benchmarks, and only in 2024 was Romania admitted to Schengen, shows that the EU did exert prolonged influence – but mostly through naming-and-shaming and limited carrots, not anything as compelling as the threat of 'no membership'.

The impact of reduced leverage in the post-accession period is evident in Romania's governance outcomes under the WGI. Romania made notable improvements by the late 2000s – for instance, Government Effectiveness climbed from around -0.25 in 2000 to +0.23 by 2014, reflecting enhancements in administrative capacity during the EU accession drive. But after joining, backsliding occurred: by 2020, Romania's Government Effectiveness score fell back to roughly -0.26, essentially the same level as in 2000. In other words, the initial gains were not fully sustained once EU pressure relaxed. Romania's ranking on Control of Corruption also stagnated despite making progress during the 2010–2015 period when an energised anti-corruption agency, the National Anti-Corruption Directorate (DNA), jailed many officials.

By 2019 perceptions of corruption remained very high. The democratic backsliding seen in some areas, such as the attempts in 2017–2018 by the Romanian government to weaken anti-corruption laws, underscores that after accession, EU leverage to prevent such backsliding was limited to moral pressure and the threat of triggering Article 7 or infringement procedures. Following accession, the EU lost some of the leverage needed to continue to influence domestic politics in post-communist members. This certainly resonates in Romania: while the EU did still influence via instruments like the European Semester recommendations (soft influence) and by conditioning certain funds, these were nowhere near as compelling as the pre-accession conditionality. As a result, domestic politics started to dictate the pace of reform more clearly after 2007. When domestic political will was high (say in 2016, a technocratic government pushed reforms aligning with EU advice), progress occurred; when domestic politics turned against reform (2017–2019 populist measures), the EU's ability to stop it was constrained to issuing warnings. Romania's wavering trajectory in governance quality reminds us that EU membership is no guarantee for upholding EU values. In essence, after accession the 'stick' largely disappeared; the EU had only smaller carrots (like structural funds, which Romania certainly wanted but which it eventually learned to absorb without always meeting the spirit of good governance) and moral suasion. The comparative evidence strongly supports Hypothesis 2, although the strength of EU leverage varies over time and interacts with domestic political dynamics. In Romania's case, EU leverage post-2007 was markedly weaker, and one can correlate that with the loss of reform momentum and instances of backsliding that would likely not have occurred if EU membership were still on the line.

That said, the post-accession phase did not leave the EU entirely without instruments. In addition to the CVM, access to the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIFs) was made conditional upon the fulfilment of ex-ante requirements. To unlock substantial cohesion funding, Romania had to adopt sectoral strategies (for example, in public procurement), establish anti-fraud coordination mechanisms, and demonstrate minimum administrative capacity for fund management. These conditions were formally satisfied, suggesting that financial incentives continued to matter even after membership. However, once funding streams were operational, leverage became more diffuse. Compliance was assessed primarily against procedural benchmarks, while the depth and effectiveness of reforms were monitored less stringently. The ultimate leverage – suspension of funds – was rarely used. In 2018, the threat of cutting some cohesion funds for rule-of-law breaches was floated at the EU level but not seriously applied to Romania.

Therefore, the comparative point stands: in EU members, the EU's influence relies on softer conditionality and peer mechanisms, which are less effective than the hard conditionality applied to candidates.

Hypothesis 2 predicts that EU leverage is weakest in countries that do not have a credible path to membership. Moldova's case up to 2020 exemplifies this. Despite the EU's extensive Neighbourhood Policy and Eastern Partnership programmes, the absence of the membership carrot significantly limited the EU's ability to spur deep reforms in Moldova. As noted in Chapter 8, the ENP offered incentives like financial aid, easier trade, or visa liberalisation, but these were comparatively 'smaller carrots'. For years, Moldova's elites engaged in 'cherry-picking' EU conditions – implementing easier actions to gain rewards (like passing certain laws to get tranches of aid or to achieve visa-free travel), while evading more painful reforms (like genuinely tackling high-level corruption or depoliticising the civil service). This selective compliance was possible because ultimately the cost of fully complying was higher than the rewards on offer. Moldova's leaders knew that no matter how much they reformed, membership was not on the table (until the seismic events of 2022); thus, the transformative power of EU conditionality was fundamentally capped.

Quantitatively, this is reflected in stagnant governance indicators for Moldova. Over 20 years of ENP engagement, Moldova's scores on WGI dimensions like Government Effectiveness remained around 0 (the global average), with virtually no net improvement from 2000 to 2020. This striking lack of progress underscores how, without a strong external lever, domestic inertia and vested interests can perpetuate a status quo. The EU did attempt to increase leverage through gradual escalation of conditions – for instance, after the 2014 Association Agreement, the EU explicitly tied aid to reform progress in Moldova. Budget support instalments were withheld in 2015–2016 when the infamous $1 billion bank fraud came to light, to pressure Moldova on anti-corruption. While these actions show the EU using what leverage it had (money and political pressure), the leverage was reactive and limited in scope, as conditionality has very limited effectiveness when membership is not available, leading to only sporadic compliance. This dynamic persisted until 2022, when the prospect of EU candidate status – catalysed by the geopolitical shock of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and by the reformist political orientation of the Maia Sandu government – decisively altered the incentive structure. The acceleration of reforms that had stalled for years, and the rapid submission of a membership application followed by systematic efforts to satisfy the criteria for candidate status, offer a compelling confirmation of Hypothesis 2: when the membership incentive was

substantially enlarged, even a historically reluctant reformer responded with demonstrable urgency. The credibility of the EU's offer matters immensely. For years, the EU's approach to neighbours was 'more for more' – more aid for more reform – but without the anchor of eventual accession, this often rang hollow. Local leaders often treated EU recommendations as optional. This is encapsulated by the fact that EU conditionality was most effective when credible EU membership has been on the table. Without that, as Hypothesis 2 states, the EU's influence in neighbours remained the weakest.

EU accession leverage, as the preceding cases illustrate, is neither uniform in its application nor deterministic in its effects. Its force is mediated by the domestic political and institutional contexts through which it operates, a mediation that accounts for the variation observable across and within the three cases. Romania experienced strong accession leverage yet continued to struggle with patronage and politicisation; Serbia has been subject to sustained conditionality pressure yet its reforms plateaued; even in Moldova, partial reforms occurred under ENP conditions that were ostensibly weak. Leverage, in other words, is a necessary but insufficient condition for sustained institutional change. Hypothesis 3 addresses this explanatory gap by turning to the domestic side of the equation: the configuration of political will, institutional capacity, and reform ownership that determines whether external pressure translates into durable administrative transformation.

Hypothesis 3: Communist Legacies and Political Incentive Structures as Conditions of Reform Absorption and Sustainability

Hypothesis 3 posits that communist administrative legacies and contemporary political incentive structures condition the absorption and sustainability of EU-supported reforms. Regardless of the strength of EU leverage or the design of support instruments, reform depth ultimately depends on whether domestic institutional configurations and elite incentive structures facilitate or obstruct substantive transformation. The role of political will – understood here as the genuine commitment of ruling elites to pursue reforms that may constrain their own power, such as anti-corruption measures or the depoliticisation of administrative appointments – emerges from the comparative evidence as the single most consequential domestic variable. Across all three cases, EU-driven reforms advanced only to the extent that domestic political leaders permitted, championed, or, at a minimum, tolerated them.

In Romania, political will for reform was neither consistent nor structurally embedded. In the early 2000s, significant segments of the political class had little interest in dismantling patronage networks or establishing a genuinely independent civil service – reforms in these domains were driven predominantly by EU conditionality requirements and a narrow stratum of reform-oriented technocrats. Legislative compliance was accordingly achieved under external pressure, but implementation remained shallow and selective. Political will intensified during discrete episodes – most notably in 2015–2016, when a technocratic government installed following mass anti-corruption protests pursued institutional transparency and procedural simplification with greater conviction. Conversely, when governing coalitions perceived anti-corruption enforcement as a political threat, Romania experienced overt attempts to reverse earlier gains – exemplified by the January 2017 emergency ordinance to decriminalise certain corruption offences, which provoked the largest public protests in the country's post-communist history. The EU exerted sustained pressure throughout these oscillations, but its influence ultimately depended on domestic political calculations over which it had limited control. The persistence of politicisation of Romania's civil service reflects the depth of the underlying problem: administrative culture was never comprehensively reformed because the actors who stood to lose most from depoliticisation retained sufficient power to resist it. As Chapter 6 concluded, the EU could encourage and assist, but it could not unilaterally transform Romania's administrative culture – a culture in which politicisation and patronage persisted because they served the interests of domestically powerful actors. Romania's eventual exit from the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism in 2022, more than 15 years after accession, suggests that while EU leverage set the reform agenda, cumulative progress required not only sustained external pressure, but also a gradual, generational shift in domestic political norms.

In Serbia, political will fluctuated significantly across the period, closely tracking shifts in governing coalitions and the relative influence of reformist versus nationalist political factions. The pro-European orientation of the immediate post-Milošević period generated early reform momentum, particularly when reformist technocrats occupied key institutional positions – the European Integration Ministry and reform-oriented public administration portfolios in the mid-2000s – enabling substantive progress on EU-supported reform priorities. However, this commitment proved structurally fragile. As the initial democratic transition consolidated into competitive authoritarian governance, successive administrations increasingly subordinated reform implementation to the imperatives of

coalition management, patronage distribution, and the preservation of informal power networks. The analytical challenge is not simply that political will diminished, but that the incentive structures facing Serbian elites actively penalised deep reform in areas that threatened established power arrangements. In domains where modernisation aligned with elite interests – e-government services, for instance, attracted strong support from officials who saw digitalisation as compatible with centralised control and international visibility – the government engaged productively with EU advice and deployed EU funds effectively. But in areas where reforms directly threatened the ruling coalition's capacity to reward political loyalty through administrative appointments, progress remained marginal: Serbia's civil service continued to be characterised by pervasive politicisation throughout the period (European Commission, 2020f; OECD-SIGMA, 2017b). Serbia maintained a broad consensus on EU membership as a strategic objective, but consensus on the specific governance reforms that membership requires proved considerably weaker, particularly where those reforms imposed direct costs on incumbent elites.

In Moldova, the absence of genuine and consistent political will constituted the most significant domestic impediment to reform throughout the 2000–2020 period. Moldovan political elites routinely professed pro-European intentions – even the communist government of the mid-2000s framed EU integration as a priority – but these declarations frequently masked a structural reluctance to implement reforms that would disrupt established rent-seeking arrangements and opportunities. Endemic corruption and oligarchic influence reached their most concentrated expression during the ascendancy of Vladimir Plahotniuc, who, despite holding no formal government office, exercised pervasive informal control over Moldova's judiciary, law enforcement agencies, and key state institutions through the Democratic Party of Moldova between approximately 2015 and 2019 – a period during which Moldova nominally maintained a pro-European governing coalition while systematic state capture intensified. The 2014 banking fraud and the subsequent political and institutional crisis illustrate how deeply embedded domestic malfeasance can neutralise even sustained external normative pressure. In this environment, the EU's reform instruments produced predominantly formal compliance: Moldova adopted legislation and established institutional bodies that satisfied EU recommendations on paper, but neither empowered those bodies nor systematically enforced the laws they were designed to uphold. A substantive shift became visible only from 2019–2020, with the emergence of new reformist political forces centred on President Maia Sandu and the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS). The

immediate acceleration of previously stalled measures – including judicial vetting, anti-corruption enforcement, and more effective deployment of EU assistance – confirmed rather than contradicted the underlying hypothesis: when domestic leaders committed credibly to governance reform, EU support became markedly more effective. For the preceding two decades, however, Moldova exemplified the proposition that without sustained domestic political will, EU assistance could maintain institutional functionality and prevent systemic collapse, but could not generate convergence with European governance standards in the face of predatory or ambivalent domestic elites.

Alongside political will, the administrative and institutional capacity inherited from the communist period – and subsequently shaped by the turbulence of the 1990s – constituted an independent structural constraint on reform outcomes. The variation in starting conditions across the three cases is analytically significant: countries that entered the reform process with more developed institutional foundations and a more professional civil service ethos were better positioned to absorb EU-supported reforms, even where political will remained inconsistent.

Romania's administrative legacy was characterised by a highly centralised, patrimonial bureaucracy with few traditions of impartial, rules-based administration. Human capital within the civil service was initially limited – characterised by undertrained personnel, politicised appointment practices, and an organisational culture that prioritised hierarchy and institutional opacity over transparency and accountability. The EU's substantial investment in training and institutional development – approximately €1 billion over two decades (see Figure 5) – was designed to compensate for these structural deficits. Measurable progress was achieved: by 2020, Romania had established modern human resource management systems, e-governance infrastructure, and cohorts of competent, professionally trained civil servants. Yet, as Chapter 6 concluded, Romania acquired the institutional tools of modern European governance – tools that serve as a check against severe deterioration and as an engine for incremental improvement – without fully consolidating the administrative culture required to deploy them effectively. Frequent institutional reorganisation, a persistent brain drain of skilled personnel to the private sector and EU institutions, and the continued politicisation of senior appointments undermined the sustainability of capacity gains. Romania's trajectory illustrates that a legacy of low administrative capacity and systemic corruption can be improved through sustained external investment, but not rapidly: even after nearly two decades of EU membership, Romania's governance indicators trail

the EU average, and the structural conditions that originally constrained reform – high adaptation costs, limited domestic incentives for deep change, and weak institutional absorptive capacity – have been attenuated rather than eliminated.

Serbia's administrative legacy presented distinct challenges rooted in the country's particular historical trajectory. The disintegration of Yugoslavia, the conflicts of the 1990s, and the Milošević regime's systematic politicisation of state institutions left Serbia with a bureaucracy that was simultaneously bloated, fragmented across overlapping institutional jurisdictions, and penetrated by entrenched patronage networks. These conditions amounted to what the governance literature characterises as 'limited statehood' – a configuration of weak state capacities and contested authority that fundamentally constrains the absorptive capacity for externally promoted reform. Capacity deficits manifested concretely in high staff turnover, limited expertise in evidence-based policymaking, and inefficient administrative structures. Early EU assistance necessarily focused on foundational tasks: rebuilding ministerial capacity, training officials in legislative drafting and budget management, and establishing basic coordination mechanisms across government. Even by 2020, the Serbian administration continued to face significant challenges in retaining skilled civil servants – with low public sector salaries driving exits to the private sector – and in implementing complex, multi-agency reforms. SIGMA's 2017 assessment continued to identify substantive gaps in policy coordination, administrative accountability, and merit-based human resource management across the Serbian civil service (OECD-SIGMA, 2017b). Serbia's legislative frameworks adopted with EU assistance were unevenly enforced, and formal institutional redesign frequently outpaced the development of the administrative capacity required to operationalise it.

Moldova's administrative legacy was the most structurally disadvantaged of the three cases: a Soviet-era bureaucracy situated in one of Europe's poorest states, further debilitated by the institutional collapse and pervasive corruption of the 1990s transition. The unresolved Transnistria conflict compounded these challenges, depriving the Moldovan state of full territorial control and imposing the governance constraints characteristic of a 'limited statehood' condition. EU programmes operated in an environment where foundational institutions – an independent judiciary, a professional civil service, and reliable policy coordination mechanisms – were either absent or severely dysfunctional. An EU-supported project might produce a technically sound administrative code, but local courts and agencies frequently lacked the capacity or institutional integrity to enforce new provisions. Moldova had

no dedicated civil service management body for much of the period, policy coordination mechanisms remained rudimentary, and corruption penetrated the civil service at multiple levels, with administrative posts subject to political patronage. A comprehensive baseline assessment published by SIGMA in 2015 documented these structural deficits systematically, identifying major gaps in strategic vision, institutional coordination, budgetary planning, and human resource management (OECD-SIGMA, 2015b). On the basis of this assessment, the EU prioritised assistance in developing Moldova's 2016 PAR strategy to establish the foundational frameworks that were still absent. That strategy itself, however, struggled to gain traction – constrained by incomplete political backing and by the limited implementation capacity it was designed to address. The pattern illustrates a structural challenge common to low-capacity reform environments: weak institutional capacity produces partial reforms, which in turn generate insufficient capacity gains to break the cycle. Moldova's post-2022 reform acceleration under the impetus of EU candidacy – including targeted measures to raise civil service salaries, recruit externally trained professionals, and channel international technical assistance more effectively – represents an attempt to disrupt this pattern. Whether these measures will prove sufficient to overcome two decades of accumulated institutional deficit remains an empirical question that the next phase of Moldova's accession process will answer.

Hypothesis 3 confirms the decisive role of domestic political incentive structures and inherited administrative legacies in conditioning reform absorption and sustainability. Europeanisation, in this light, is not an externally driven process of institutional transplantation but a domestically mediated political process shaped by the interaction of elite incentives, institutional capacities, and reform ownership. The EU can provide the stimulus, resources, and strategic direction, but where domestic actors are unwilling or unable to sustain reform objectives, institutional change remains fragmented, shallow, and reversible. As one Romanian interviewee observed, EU support was an indispensable catalyst for initiating change – but transformative outcomes proved elusive wherever local ownership was absent (Interview 15, 2021).

Taken together, the three hypotheses paint a mutually reinforcing picture of the Europeanisation process across the cases examined. EU support yields the most durable results when it is well-targeted and domestically owned (Hypothesis 1). The EU's incentive structures operate with graded strength – most powerfully under a credible accession framework, considerably less so under neighbourhood arrangements (Hypothesis 2). And domestic politics and institutional context ultimately determine the depth

and durability of reform outcomes (Hypothesis 3). These conditions do not operate independently but interact: reform sustainability is most likely when well-targeted Commission support aligns with domestic political ownership and administrative commitment, when EU leverage within specific integration frameworks generates credible incentives, and when domestic political incentive structures and inherited administrative legacies permit the absorption of reforms beyond formal compliance. Where any of these elements weakens – whether through declining leverage, limited ownership, or entrenched patronage networks – reforms tend to stagnate, remain partial, or become reversible. These findings carry direct implications for both EU and domestic policymakers. The next chapter translates the analytical conclusions into strategic recommendations for strengthening the alignment between EU instruments and domestic reform capacity.

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10. Strategic Recommendations for EU and Domestic Policymakers

Abstract: Drawing on the comparative findings from Romania, Serbia, and Moldova, this chapter translates the book's analytical conclusions into actionable recommendations for both supranational and national actors. For the European Commission and its instruments, it proposes strengthening ex-ante conditionality, shifting from compliance checklists to outcome-oriented monitoring, institutionalising independent technical audits and citizen satisfaction surveys, and increasing programming flexibility to match local administrative realities. For governments in reforming states, it emphasises the imperative of genuine political ownership, cross-party consensus on reform priorities, merit-based civil service management, and civic engagement in both the design and oversight of reform programmes. The chapter argues that sustainable administrative transformation requires not better tools alone, but a shared culture of accountability between external supporters and domestic reformers.

Keywords: conditionality design; outcome monitoring; civic oversight; merit-based recruitment; political ownership; accountability

Recommendations for EU Institutions

The comparative analysis presented in the preceding chapters identified a consistent pattern: EU-supported administrative reform yielded the most durable results when external assistance was matched by genuine domestic political ownership, and produced the weakest outcomes when either programming design or domestic commitment was deficient. This chapter translates those analytical findings into actionable guidance for both supranational and national actors. The recommendations that follow

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are organised in two parts. This first part addresses the European Commission and the broader European Union (EU) institutional framework, proposing adjustments to the design, delivery, and oversight of reform support, from strengthening conditionality to institutionalising outcome-oriented monitoring and increasing programming flexibility. The second part addresses domestic governments and stakeholders, emphasising the conditions under which domestic actors can convert external assistance into sustainable institutional change. Throughout, the focus is on feasible adjustments that do not require treaty revision or institutional redesign, but rather a reorientation of existing capacities toward greater analytical rigour, accountability, and responsiveness to local conditions.

Strengthen Conditionality and Incentives

The EU could tie funding to concrete ex-ante conditions that must be met before money is disbursed, rather than relying on 'checklist compliance'. For example, require that key frameworks, such as a merit-based civil service law, an anti-corruption action plan, or long-term co-financing and implementation commitments, are formally in place and active prior to releasing major tranches. This moves beyond box-ticking; it ensures foundational reforms are not just adopted on paper but start being implemented as a precondition for aid. If a country's public administration lacks a basic strategy or legal framework, insist it is developed (with EU technical help, if needed) up front. Such ex-ante conditionality existed in some cases, but it should be applied more consistently to avoid building reforms on sand.

The EU could improve the conditionality attached to EU aid by making it specific, requiring it to be observable, and tying it to a timeline. Vague or qualitative conditions are ineffective – indeed, the European Court of Auditors (ECA) found that in Moldova some EU funding conditions were 'unverifiable, aggregated or unclear', making it hard to tell if Moldova met them (ECA, 2016a, p. 17). To avoid this, the Commission should define clear indicators or actions, to create a concrete reform road map. Importantly, progress toward these benchmarks needs to be tracked and reported transparently (see monitoring-related recommendations below).

The credibility of conditionality hinges on the EU's willingness to actually withhold or redirect funds if conditions are not met. On a few occasions, we found that there was a tendency to disburse funds despite non-compliance – for instance, the Commission reallocated unused funds to other programmes without attaching new reform requirements, instead of suspending them. This flexibility enabled the disbursement of funds left over, but it also undermined the EU's leverage as the funds had not

been initially disbursed due to non-compliance, creating fertile ground for inefficient use of EU funds. Going forward, the Commission should be prepared to pause or cancel payments when governments backtrack or stall on agreed reforms. One model is the 2015 suspension of budget support to Moldova after a major corruption scandal – a tough move that proved a turning point. Even partial withholding can send a powerful signal. If political or geopolitical considerations make full suspension difficult, the EU can channel funds through alternate modalities, such as via civil society or local governments, until conditions are met, rather than funnelling money to central authorities who are not delivering.

While maintaining strictness, the EU can also add 'carrots' for over-performers. For example, create a performance reserve or bonus for countries that meet reform milestones ahead of schedule – similar to how some EU structural funds reward good results. This could be an extra allocation for the best performers or fast-tracking them for other EU programmes or integration steps. Such positive reinforcement, alongside penalties for non-performance, would make the conditionality regime more balanced. It signals that not only is backsliding punished, but genuine progress earns tangible rewards. This approach was hinted at in the revised enlargement methodology (greater rewards for reforms), and it can be operationalised without treaty change, for example, through Commission decisions or programming documents.

When setting reform conditions, the Commission needs to ensure they are realistic given the country's administrative capacity – otherwise both sides end up frustrated. The EU sometimes demands reforms on overly optimistic timelines despite limited local capacity, which leads to unrealistic goals and problematic situations in implementation. Going forward, conditions could be more systematically accompanied by EU support to fulfil them (technical assistance, training), agreed upon after dialogue with the government to ensure there is ownership at the highest level of the administration for whole-of-system reforms. This can make compliance feasible and not just a one-sided wish list.

Improve Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms

The EU could move beyond reliance on self-reporting by government ministries and basic EU Delegation reporting by instituting independent performance evaluations of reform programmes on a regular basis (mid-term and ex-post), carried out by teams that include external experts and joint EU-national peers. For example, a peer review mechanism could bring public administration experts from other EU or candidate countries to evaluate

progress in a beneficiary country, together with Commission officials. This external eye would provide more objective assessments of what is working and what is not. It also encourages knowledge sharing (peer countries can offer practical advice). Such evaluations could be published and discussed at high political levels to spur action on recommendations. They would complement (not replace) formal reporting, adding depth and credibility.

In addition to financial audits, which ensure money was spent legally, the EU could deploy technical audit teams to check whether the substance of reforms has been delivered in line with the expectations. These could be specialist consultants or Commission experts who verify, for instance, that a training programme actually improved trainees' skills, or that an IT system funded by the EU is fully functional and being used by the administration. The goal is to audit outcomes, not just paperwork. Currently, fear of the ECA centres on financial propriety, but there is no equivalent rigorous check on results. Technical auditors could fill this gap by reviewing project deliverables and reform milestones in the field. If such 'outcome audits' find that a project met all spending rules but failed to achieve its objectives, this should trigger management action – possibly linking back to conditionality and withholding future funds or requiring remedial steps. This approach would cultivate a results-oriented culture in EU aid. Indeed, it was acknowledged that at times funds were disbursed even without fully delivering the expected results (Interview 10, 2020); a performance audit mechanism would make such lapses less likely by spotlighting underperformance.

Additionally, the feedback of end users (citizens, businesses, civil servants on the ground) could be incorporated into the evaluation of EU-funded reforms. Quantitative outcome indicators could be complemented with qualitative measures of citizen satisfaction and perceptions of change. The EU could support annual citizen satisfaction surveys about public services in reforming countries, using standardised questionnaires to track trends over time. If, for example, an EU-funded administrative simplification claims to reduce red tape, are businesses actually feeling an improvement? If a new e-government portal is launched, are citizens using it and finding it helpful? Direct feedback can reveal implementation gaps that statistics miss. Additionally, feedback channels could be created: for instance, online platforms or mobile apps where citizens can report problems with public services or provide suggestions. Moldova is piloting an 'e-Democracy' platform that integrates e-petitions, e-feedback, and e-surveys – giving citizens a one-stop channel to voice opinions and see government responses in real time. The EU could encourage and fund such tools as part of governance projects. Not only do they enhance throughput legitimacy (by involving

citizens in the process), they also supply valuable data for evaluations. When citizen input is systematically gathered and reported, it becomes a powerful accountability tool: officials are aware that the public will rate their services.

The Commission could also upgrade its monitoring from a compliance checklist to a more dynamic, problem-solving approach. Task managers in EU Delegations could utilise modern project management dashboards that track not only activities and spending, but also intermediate results. When monitoring reveals a project is lagging or context has changed, there should be a protocol to adjust course and revise work plans, extend timelines, or reallocate resources, rather than waiting for a mid-term review or project end. The EU can institute quarterly implementation reviews for major reform contracts, where EU and government counterparts jointly review progress data and troubleshoot issues. This also ties into institutional learning: lessons from these reviews should be fed back into programme design (discussed more below). A more agile, learning-oriented monitoring system will improve throughput by ensuring problems are caught early and successes can be replicated.

Enhance Transparency and Civic Oversight

The EU could formalise the role of civil society and independent watchdogs in monitoring EU-funded reforms. Many programmes already mention stakeholder consultation, but it is often ad hoc or on paper only. One recommendation would be to create joint monitoring committees for major reform programmes that include not just government officials and the EU, but also non-governmental experts. These committees would review progress reports, verify information, and provide on-the-ground perspectives. For instance, in Serbia an €80 million EU sector reform contract was initially touted as a 'transparency instrument' with civil society involved in monitoring – yet 'in reality no public reports or data on targets achieved were made available' and civil society organisations' involvement evaporated (Interview 23, 2020). To avoid such tokenism, the EU should require that a few civil society representatives sit in annual review meetings for budget support and key projects, and that their reports or dissenting opinions are appended to official reports. Civil society can also be funded to perform shadow monitoring, by tracking, for example, how a reform is experienced by citizens, and publishing independent scorecards. The EU can encourage such mechanisms in candidate countries – for example, by funding civic tech initiatives and integrating their tools into government systems. When citizens and NGOs have a seat at the table, it both improves throughput

accountability and bolsters output legitimacy (people trust reforms more if they have oversight).

Transparency is a force multiplier for oversight. The EU could insist that data on the implementation of EU-funded projects and reforms be made public by default (with exceptions for sensitive security details). This includes publishing performance indicators, disbursement amounts, project documents, and government compliance reports on easily accessible platforms. Where possible, data should be in open formats so that media and civic hackers can analyse it. Some improvements are already visible – for instance, many countries now have online portals showing procurement or budget data, often introduced with EU support. These portals made it easier for watchdogs to spot irregularities. However, utilisation of such tools can be uneven, and rural areas or less skilled users might not benefit directly from it. The EU can do two things: (1) attach conditions that governments regularly update and publicise data on reform progress, including, for example, requirements that a PAR strategy's implementation gets a public progress dashboard, or that all EU-funded civil service training participants are listed online with departments, ensuring transparency in who benefits; and (2) invest in capacity building for data use, teaching journalists and local NGOs how to interpret budgets and monitor results. Ultimately, a culture of transparency will deter misuse of funds and keep pressure on officials to deliver results. It also shifts the output legitimacy dynamic if citizens are treated as partners who have the right to know how reforms are progressing.

Beyond oversight of implementation, the EU could encourage more domestic participation at the input stage – i.e. in the design of strategies and programmes. This could be achieved by mandating that governments conduct public consultations to solicit feedback from citizens, civil society, and businesses when drafting major reform strategies that EU funds will support. For example, if a country is developing a new PAR strategy to meet EU advice, a series of stakeholder workshops and an online consultation should be part of the process, with the EU providing technical support for this process. Not only does this improve the strategy (with ideas from those who will be affected), it also creates buy-in, making implementation smoother. The partnership principle in EU cohesion policy, which involves local stakeholders in planning, could be mirrored in pre-accession assistance. In Moldova, the absence of broad consultation for the 2016–2020 PAR strategy and lack of parliamentary debate weakened its political legitimacy and the commitment of agencies to its reforms – a clear lesson that upfront inclusion matters. Therefore, EU Delegations could make stakeholder engagement a standard requirement for the approval of new aid-funded reform plans.

Increase Flexibility and Learning in Programme Design

To optimise the efficacy of EU interventions, it is essential that the Commission prioritises a granular understanding of local institutional contexts. Before finalising project architectures or conditionality frameworks, the Union could conduct comprehensive baseline assessments of a partner country's absorptive capacity, including staffing constraints, prevailing political economy factors, and longitudinal lessons from previous iterations. A recurring pitfall in the 2000s involved the deployment of overly ambitious, 'one-size-fits-all' designs – conceived at the headquarters level – that failed to align with on-the-ground realities. For instance, early projects often overestimated the ability of understaffed ministries to simultaneously integrate multiple complex IT systems and extensive training modules.

Moving forward, major sectoral interventions could be preceded by a rigorous capacity audit evaluating the implementer's technical track record, its 'reform bandwidth', and the availability of domestic resources to ensure post-donor sustainability. This evidence-based approach necessitates scaling project objectives to realistic, attainable benchmarks; in the context of fragile administrations, incremental success is preferable to comprehensive, high-risk failures. This strategic shift was exemplified by the transition from the fragmented and overly complex CARDS (Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation) projects toward the more consolidated and strategic interventions of the later IPA (Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance) cycles. To formalise this improvement, future programming could adopt a phased implementation model, prioritising foundational institutional requirements before advancing to complex structural changes, thereby mitigating the risks associated with excessive reform density in low-capacity environments.

Furthermore, EU programmes could be made more adaptive to changing circumstances to improve the effectiveness of the throughput processes. In practice, this means designing projects with flexibility to adjust activities, timelines, and even objectives after kick-off, in response to new information. The Commission's rules allow some flexibility, especially during an inception phase at a project's start, but these have been underutilised. During this phase, overly optimistic goals can be revised, and indicators, as well as promised rewards, should be updated to match reality. The EU could encourage project teams to treat initial plans as hypotheses to be tested, not immutable commitments. Embracing such adaptive management will make EU interventions more resilient and impactful.

Additionally, while the EU tends to accumulate extensive evaluations, audits, and reports on its assistance, these need to feed back into new

programming in a more systematic way. Another key recommendation is to integrate a 'lessons learned' checkpoint for each new strategy or project design: the drafting team must explicitly state how they have addressed weaknesses identified in previous efforts. For instance, if earlier projects found that local ownership was lacking, the new project could have a component addressing this challenge. The same applies to repeating designs that failed before: avoid them or alter them. One concrete suggestion is to maintain an internal database of common pitfalls and successful approaches in PAR, drawn from evaluations in each country, and require programming staff to consult it. Highlighting learned lessons in staff guidelines can empower teams to take bolder steps, like setting tougher conditions or trying a new instrument used in a different context. Ultimately, becoming a learning organisation will allow the EU and the Commission to continuously refine its toolkit and avoid 'reinventing the wheel' each cycle.

Support Administrative Capacity and Expertise

A recurring issue has been that EU Delegations or Commission units are overstretched, which hampers thorough oversight and engagement on the ground. To implement the above recommendations regarding stricter monitoring and more adaptive management, the EU must invest in its own capacity. This means ensuring Delegations in beneficiary countries have enough qualified staff with expertise in PAR to follow reforms closely. If hiring more permanent staff is difficult, alternative solutions include deploying experts from the Commission's reform support services, seconding officials from EU member states for fixed terms, or using frameworks to bring in external monitors. The key is to reduce the ratio of projects per manager so that each gets adequate attention. For example, in the mid-2010s, one task manager in an EU Delegation might have had to manage dozens of projects simultaneously, while also designing new ones – a workload that virtually ensures superficial monitoring. Boosting staff levels and focusing their mandate on results – not just procedural compliance – will pay off in more successful outcomes. Additionally, staff could be trained in the political economy of the host country so they can spot and address local obstacles. In Moldova, the lack of a resident Delegation until 2005 meant the Commission could not properly understand and assess local needs or adapt programmes in real time – a lesson that presence matters. Today, Delegations exist everywhere, but their capacity must match the scale of aid and strategic importance of each country.

Additionally, the quality of the expertise contracted by the EU to provide technical assistance for reforms could be more rigorously vetted, to make

sure they have the right skills, including local knowledge or language where relevant. Past evaluations noted cases of 'dubious quality of TA', with foreign experts lacking the needed skills or understanding of local context (Particip GmbH, 2009, p. 3). To improve this, the EU could create a roster of pre-approved senior experts with proven track records in similar reforms. Furthermore, the EU could build in feedback loops for technical assistance performance: for example, gather feedback from the beneficiary institutions on the experts' usefulness, and have an option to replace underperforming experts quickly. Overall, quality control mechanisms, such as peer reviews of technical assistance outputs, or beneficiary satisfaction surveys for training provided, should be standard practice.

Sustainability is also of crucial importance. The EU could accompany every reform input with support that ensures the local administration can sustain and fully utilise it after EU assistance ends. Too often, the EU fosters the adoption of new laws, new IT systems, new agencies, but the skills and institutional culture to adopt these in practice often lags. To close this gap, projects need stronger capacity-building components: comprehensive training programmes, mentorship for civil servants, manuals and guidance that remain after experts leave, and perhaps modest follow-up funding dedicated solely to implementation support. For example, if a new e-procurement platform is rolled out (an output), the EU could fund a two-year helpdesk or a series of refresh trainings to ensure all agencies adopt it and know how to use it, rather than assuming usage will be automatic. Another approach is embedding advisers inside key ministries for longer periods. The EU has already tried High-Level Advisers in some countries, such as the deployment of EU-funded senior experts working in Moldovan or Serbian ministries for a couple of years. Expanding such programmes can help transfer know-how more deeply, as these advisers can coach their local counterparts daily. The ultimate aim is to leave behind stronger institutions that no longer need intensive external help. This links to conditionality, too: EU could make sustained capacity (like maintaining qualified staffing of a new policy unit) a condition, to avoid scenarios where reforms backslide after project completion.

Another key recommendation pertains to the improvement of donor coordination and coherence. Within the EU system, better coordination between the Commission, EU member states' aid programmes, and other donors, such as the World Bank or the United Nations, is crucial. While this is not solely within one actor's control, the EU can lead by example. At the country level, EU Delegations could convene regular donor coordination meetings in governance/PAR to ensure everyone is informed about who is

funding what. This prevents duplication and mixed messages. There have been cases where coordination was ad hoc, and so more formal structures (like sector working groups chaired by the government with donor participation) should be supported. Additionally, aligning conditionality and guidance across donors can enhance impact, as governments are more likely to pursue reforms when the EU, the World Bank, and the IMF consistently support common objectives – complementing rather than duplicating or conflicting with one another's efforts. The EU could develop joint reform matrices with other donors so that government progress is assessed against a unified set of benchmarks. Internally, coherence between the EU's political dialogue, including, for example, progress reports and technical and financial assistance, is important – the political side should flag issues that the assistance side can then target with support and assistance conditionality, thereby seeking to maximise the leverage of the EU's assistance.

Recommendations for Domestic Actors

Sustainable improvement ultimately depends on domestic political will, good governance practices, and citizen engagement. These recommendations are aimed at government leaders, public administrations, and civil society in countries receiving EU support – especially Romania, Serbia, Moldova, and similar contexts. By taking ownership of reforms, strengthening accountability, and actively involving society, domestic actors can turn external assistance into sustainable change. The emphasis is on feasible steps that do not require perfect conditions – even within existing constraints, much can be done to improve input legitimacy (local buy-in), throughput processes (implementation quality), and output legitimacy (citizen satisfaction with results).

Demonstrate Genuine Political Will and Ownership

Rather than treating EU-mandated reforms as mere box-ticking exercises for external approval, domestic leaders could integrate them into their own vision for the country's development, embedding reforms into the national agenda. This means publicly championing key reforms, such as civil service professionalism, anti-corruption measures, and digitalisation, as things that will benefit the nation, not just please Brussels. Governments can initiate their own monitoring of reform progress at the cabinet level – for example, a prime minister could demand quarterly reports from ministers on how they are implementing the PAR strategy. Such signals from the top

that this is 'our' reform, not just an EU request, cascade down and motivate the bureaucracy. One good practice is to incorporate EU-related reform targets into domestic performance management by making, for example, the achievement of certain EU benchmark outcomes part of ministers' or senior officials' evaluations. When domestic politicians internalise the reform conditions, the reforms are more likely to be carried out earnestly. Conversely, when political will is half-hearted, reforms stay superficial. Narrowing this gap requires political leaders to prioritise long-term institutional gains over short-term patronage.

To prevent reforms from stalling due to political turnover or polarisation, it is important to seek broader buy-in beyond the ruling party by building cross-party and public consensus. Governments (especially in young democracies) could reach across the aisle and to society to forge a basic consensus on governance reforms. This could involve inviting opposition parties, local government representatives, or business and civil society leaders onto a national council or working group on key reforms (for example, civil service reform or decentralisation). Additionally, consulting the public through hearings or even referendums on big governance changes can confer legitimacy. Moldova's 2024 referendum to enshrine EU membership as a strategic goal, while narrowly passed, binds future governments and underscores the need to continue building domestic consensus and delivering governance improvements that citizens can feel in their day-to-day lives. The lesson is twofold: (a) legal or constitutional commitments, supported by multiple stakeholders, can lock in the direction of reforms; (b) that consensus must be continually nurtured by tangible results (more on delivering results below). By contrast, if reforms are seen as the project of one party or imposed from outside, they risk being reversed or ignored when political winds shift. Therefore, domestic actors should institutionalise reforms (through laws and strategies endorsed by Parliament) and cultivate reform champions across the spectrum (for instance, former officials, experts, and civic leaders who speak out in support of the reform path).

Domestic authorities must resist the temptation to go for quick wins like passing laws or creating new agencies just to impress foreign partners, without ensuring these changes work in practice. To counter this, governments could set up internal mechanisms to track implementation: for example, if a new civil service law is passed, the government could mandate semi-annual reviews of how many civil servants have been hired under the new merit system, what challenges arose, and other similar implementation-related aspects, and publish these findings. This creates pressure to move beyond paper. As another example, if new one-stop service centres are opened (with

EU funding), the government could gather user feedback and service data to see if they are actually improving service delivery times, and take corrective action if not. Moldova's experience up to 2020 showed that many tools were available, but not always fully embraced – such as having an e-procurement system but agencies still bypassing it. To avoid such scenarios, enforcement measures are needed domestically: make it obligatory (with sanctions for non-use) for officials to use new systems or follow new procedures. If a law is passed to depoliticise appointments, an independent body should audit appointments and publicly flag any that violate the merit principle. Thus, the political leadership could shift its metric of success from 'Did we adopt the required reform steps?' to 'Are these reforms working on the ground?' This shift in mindset – from performative compliance to genuine problem-solving – is fundamental for meaningful progress. It might involve tough choices, like disciplining one's own party members or interests that flout new rules, but that is exactly what demonstrating real political will entails.

Strengthen Domestic Accountability and Fight Corruption

Domestic actors could empower oversight institutions, i.e. the institutions that hold the government accountable – this includes supreme audit institutions, anti-corruption agencies, judicial bodies, and parliaments. A concrete step is to guarantee the operational independence and sufficient resourcing of these institutions. For example, ensuring that the national audit office can audit any use of public funds (including EU funds) freely and publish its reports without interference. If audits or anti-corruption investigations uncover problems, such as fraud in procurement or abuse of office, the government must allow due process and follow-up on recommendations, even if politically inconvenient. Too often, officials in some countries have undermined watchdog bodies, firing reformist officials, cutting budgets, or simply ignoring their reports. This erodes both domestic and EU trust. Instead, a government serious about reform will treat oversight institutions as allies that can identify weaknesses. For instance, Romania's experience in the mid-2010s showed a surge in high-level corruption cases prosecuted by the National Anti-Corruption Directorate (DNA), which, while politically tumultuous, actually improved the country's image and accountability. While circumstances differ, any country can at least publicly commit to non-interference in such bodies' work and follow-up actions. Parliamentary oversight is another lever: parliaments could use EU reports and domestic audits to question ministers on reform progress, efficiency and impact. Robust domestic oversight will reinforce EU conditionality and deter misuse of funds or reform roll-back.

Transparency in government operations must also be increased and guaranteed. Governments should proactively open up their data and decision-making. This includes publishing budgets down to the project level, disclosing all public procurement tenders and their outcomes online, and making asset declarations of officials public. Several countries have made strides here – for instance, putting procurement online. But, as noted, having an e-procurement portal is only the first step; it must be comprehensive and mandatory. All contracting authorities, including state-owned enterprises and local governments, should be required to use the transparent e-procurement system for all purchases above a minimal threshold (and allowing a few exceptions). If legal loopholes allow bypassing it (through exemptions or low-value splitting of contracts), those should be closed. Additionally, integrating civic monitoring into these systems can greatly enhance oversight. Domestic authorities should welcome initiatives creating an official channel for citizen reports of irregularities (backed by whistle-blower protections) and responding publicly to them. Another key area is transparency of reforms: governments can create public dashboards or portals showing the progress of reform initiatives, showcasing, for example, the number of laws adopted, training sessions held, or service delivery metrics, as applicable. Not only does this inform the public, it also pressures ministries to keep their data up to date and not fall behind. When citizens can see what is being done (or not done), it is easier to hold the government accountable – either through elections, media, or civic action.

Domestic reformers should also treat civil society organisations (CSOs), independent media, and citizen groups as partners in the identification of problems and the design of solutions, rather than as peripheral or adversarial actors. In practical terms, governments can establish formal mechanisms for civic engagement in reform oversight. One such mechanism would be a Civil Society Advisory Board for public administration reform, convening quarterly with senior government officials to review implementation progress and provide structured input. To enable meaningful participation, governments should share relevant documentation in advance, including draft self-assessment reports and performance indicator data, so that civil society representatives can analyse findings independently and formulate substantiated recommendations before formal consultations take place. A complementary approach would be to involve CSOs systematically in the monitoring committees overseeing EU-funded programmes. Civil society organisations frequently possess targeted expertise that government bodies lack: digital rights organisations, for instance, are well placed to audit the accessibility and effectiveness of e-government platforms, while open data

CSOs can apply analytical tools to public spending datasets to identify irregularities and inefficiencies that internal monitoring may overlook. Governments should also institutionalise responsiveness to citizen feedback, where user surveys or formal complaint mechanisms document persistent problems, such as informal payments at service delivery points or chronic delays in permit processing, the obligation falls on government to investigate, implement corrective measures, and communicate outcomes publicly. Such responsiveness is not merely good practice; it signals that reforms constitute genuine institutional change rather than performative compliance.

The role of a free and investigative press in this accountability architecture deserves explicit acknowledgement. Practices that constrain independent media, including the use of strategic litigation, the selective withdrawal of state advertising, and regulatory pressure on critical outlets, have been documented across the region by organisations, including Reporters Without Borders and the European Federation of Journalists, and have been flagged in Commission progress reports as governance concerns in their own right (Council of Europe, 2024; European Commission, 2025d; Reporters Without Borders, 2025). Governments should instead treat investigative journalism as a legitimate source of independent feedback: when media reporting uncovers mismanagement or corruption within EU-funded programmes, the appropriate institutional response is to investigate, remedy the systemic failure, and communicate transparently – not to suppress scrutiny. An open government approach that actively welcomes accountability from non-state actors strengthens throughput processes by enabling early and independent identification of implementation failures and enhances output legitimacy by demonstrating to citizens that public institutions are genuinely transparent and responsive. As a reinforcing dynamic, this alignment with EU democratic values generates tangible benefits in Commission assessments, strengthening a country's reform credibility and, in candidate states, its accession trajectory.

Invest in Administrative Capacity and Meritocracy

Sustainable reform hinges on a competent, merit-based public administration to carry it out. Domestic authorities should redouble efforts to depoliticise hiring and promotions, ensuring that the best people are running key institutions. Many countries have civil service laws on the books that call for meritocracy – the challenge is enforcing them in spirit. To do so, governments can empower independent civil service commissions (or similar bodies) to oversee recruitment and block politicised appointments. They should also lead by example: top officials must refrain from

nepotism and patronage, sending a message that positions will be earned by qualifications, not political connections. The EU has often pushed this principle of merit-based civil service appointments, and domestic leaders should embrace it as a fundamental building block for an effective state. One practical step is to increase the transparency of recruitment: publish all job openings, use standardised tests and recruitment procedures, involve external observers in interview panels, and publish the scoring/rationale for selections. Countries like Estonia and Latvia in the 1990s–2000s made strong efforts to build impartial, digital civil services which later paid dividends in better governance. Moldova, Romania, and Serbia have all established dedicated training schools for the civil service; these are good moves, but they are only part of the equation. Retention of skilled staff is also critical: governments should analyse why trained civil servants leave and attempt to address those issues. Making civil service a prestigious, stable and well-paid career will ultimately ensure that capacity built through EU projects, like trained policy analysts or IT specialists, stays in the administration.

With many new systems and practices being introduced via reforms, continuous capacity building is needed. Domestic actors should not wait for donors to offer training – they can initiate their own programmes, too. For example, allocate a small percentage of each ministry's budget to staff training and exchange. Encourage civil servants to attend courses and then – importantly – have them apply that knowledge internally. Additionally, promote a mindset of problem-solving and ethics in the civil service. This can be done through workshops on integrity, creating internal 'communities of practice', such as a network of change agents across ministries who share experiences in implementing reforms. The idea is to create an internal engine for reform that does not rely solely on external push. Some countries have tapped their diaspora for expertise – inviting skilled professionals abroad to advise or even take positions in government (Moldova and Ukraine have done this at times, appointing diaspora experts in ministries). Of course, ensuring these new faces are accepted requires political backing. Governments could implement a young professionals programme, recruiting top local graduates into public service on a merit basis and giving them rapid exposure to reform projects, perhaps rotating through different departments. This injects energy and new ideas. Over time, a cadre of well-trained, reform-minded bureaucrats can significantly improve throughput, as they will implement projects more effectively and even help insulate reforms from political swings, since they can ensure continuity.

Often reforms stall due to siloed government structures – one ministry does not know what the other is doing, or there is turf conflict. Domestic

actors should create strong coordination mechanisms for cross-cutting reforms. For example, given that PAR spans multiple ministries, it is crucial to set up a high-level steering committee chaired by a top official (the Prime Minister or the Minister of Public Administration) that meets regularly to track progress and resolve inter-agency issues. Ensure the Ministry of Finance is on board, too, since budgeting for reforms is crucial. Another approach is to designate a reform delivery unit in the government – a team that monitors priority reforms and ensures timely implementation. Several countries have experimented with delivery units in the Prime Minister's Office to keep reforms on schedule. The presence of such a unit signals that implementation is a priority, not an afterthought. Coordination should also extend vertically: involve sub-national levels of government when reforms will affect them (for instance, if administrative simplification is happening, municipal offices need to be included in planning since they interface with citizens). Regular communication – circulars, workshops, joint IT systems – between central and local authorities can ensure reforms are uniformly implemented nationwide. Additionally, domestic governments must coordinate donors from their side: having an aid coordination unit that aligns donor projects with national priorities can reduce duplication and administrative load. Moldova lacked a clear vision and coordination for PAR at one point, resulting in disparate projects that did 'patchy work' on an old system; learning from that, Moldovan authorities post-2020 adopted a central reform agenda to which international donors could align. Investing time and structures in organising the reform effort can greatly enhance the throughput efficiency of reforms and ensure inputs (money, expertise) are used optimally.

Foster Citizen Engagement and Public Trust

Sustained administrative reform requires not only institutional redesign but active public legitimation. Technical governance reforms frequently remain opaque to citizens, generating apathy or scepticism that can undermine the political sustainability of the reform agenda. To address this, governments should communicate reform objectives and achievements in accessible, concrete terms – foregrounding tangible improvements in service delivery, reductions in administrative burden for businesses, and enhanced local capacity following professional development programmes. While the contribution of EU financial support warrants acknowledgement, public communication should centre on the direct impact of reforms on citizens' daily lives, thereby building the social support and patience that comprehensive, long-term reform processes require. Estonia's experience with early e-government reforms – most notably, online tax filing – is frequently

cited as a case where visible, user-centred improvements generated public appreciation for administrative modernisation and created a reinforcing cycle of institutional trust. Analogous early wins in countries such as Serbia or Romania – the consolidation of fragmented procedures into a single service point, or tangible improvements in public sector remuneration following efficiency gains – could generate comparable goodwill, sustaining political support for more structurally demanding reforms. Transparency about setbacks is equally important: where a reform is not meeting its stated objectives, public acknowledgement of the shortfall and a clear account of corrective measures can itself serve as a demonstration of accountability, reinforcing rather than undermining public trust.

Beyond communicative transparency, governments should establish institutionalised channels through which citizens can provide structured input on public services and reform implementation – channels that are demonstrably responsive. Citizens frequently possess direct, practical knowledge of administrative dysfunctions: the procedures that generate informal payment demands, the offices characterised by chronic delays, the services most in need of simplification. Mechanisms such as annual citizen satisfaction surveys at ministerial and municipal level, grievance and reporting hotlines, and digital feedback platforms should be systematically deployed and their outputs published. Survey findings revealing, for instance, that satisfaction with local administrative services is below a defined threshold should trigger targeted improvement measures with defined timelines and public reporting. Digital platforms that allow citizens to log service complaints and track institutional responses offer a further accountability mechanism, aggregating citizen input in ways that generate public pressure for agency-level response. Civil society organisations can complement these instruments through independent social audits and community scorecards, particularly in sectors such as health and education, providing appraisals of service delivery that are independent of official self-reporting. The critical condition for these mechanisms to generate institutional trust is closure of the feedback loop: citizens must observe that their input produces demonstrable responses – investigations into reported irregularities, redesign of burdensome procedures following business consultation, and public communication of actions taken. Over time, the experience of consequential participation strengthens citizen ownership of the reform agenda and creates constituencies that actively defend governance gains against potential reversal.

The most durable foundation for public trust in administrative reform, however, is the consistent delivery of outputs that improve citizens' lived

experience of the state. Sequencing reform implementation to yield early, visible benefits – particularly in high-salience areas such as public services, healthcare administration, infrastructure management, and anti-corruption enforcement – does not substitute for structural transformation but complements it, generating the political capital needed to sustain more demanding reforms over time. If a comprehensive public administration overhaul is under way, an early priority might be the simplification of a high-frequency citizen transaction – such as the issuance of civil documents – from a multi-step to a single-step process, achievable through administrative decree and immediately demonstrable to the public. Similarly, credible enforcement action against a well-documented corruption scheme, accompanied by transparent public communication of both the action taken and the systemic fix, signals the seriousness of anti-corruption commitments in ways that legislative adoption alone cannot. Connecting reform outputs explicitly to their causes – demonstrating, for instance, that procurement reform generated savings subsequently invested in public infrastructure, or that civil service reform reduced document processing times from ten days to two – transforms abstract institutional change into legible public benefit. As a cumulative effect, as reform outputs become more visible and more directly attributable, citizen scepticism gives way to demand for further improvement, constituting a self-reinforcing dynamic. Politically, this dynamic also serves to insulate the reform agenda: citizens who have experienced concrete governance improvements develop a stake in their preservation, reducing the electoral viability of programmatic reversal.

All in all, these recommendations are designed to strengthen the alignment between incentives, processes, and accountability mechanisms across the EU-supported reform cycle. Many do not require new legislative frameworks or institutional creation, but rather a reorientation of existing capacities – greater analytical rigour and adaptability on the EU side, and greater proactivity and accountability on the domestic side. Strengthened monitoring and feedback mechanisms enable both the Commission and partner governments to identify implementation failures – whether rooted in programme design, administrative capacity, or political resistance – at an early stage and to adapt accordingly. Enhanced transparency and civic participation transform reform from an externally mandated obligation into a domestically legitimated process, broadening the coalition of actors with a stake in its success. Above all, a sustained orientation toward tangible, citizen-centred outputs provides the clearest available basis for rebuilding public trust in governance institutions – trust that has been eroded, in all

three cases examined, by decades of incomplete reform and the persistent gap between formal commitment and administrative reality. The EU's post-2020 financial instruments, combined with a stricter conditionality framework and the political will visible in at least some of the countries under review, provide grounds for measured optimism. The recommendations advanced in this chapter seek to translate that conjunctural opportunity into durable institutional change: ensuring that programme inputs generate the throughput quality and reform depth that sustainable governance outputs require and that those outputs are ultimately experienced by citizens as meaningful improvements in the conduct of public administration.

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11. Conclusion: The Journey from Communism to European Governance and Beyond

Abstract: This concluding chapter synthesises the book's core findings within the broader institutional and geopolitical context of EU enlargement. It argues that the European Commission is best understood as a constrained actor – deploying an increasingly sophisticated toolkit under formidable structural conditions, while navigating the limits of external influence over deeply entrenched domestic political economies. The chapter traces how successive crises – from the Eurozone emergency to Russia's invasion of Ukraine – both challenged and reinvigorated the EU's commitment to administrative reform across its neighbourhood. It concludes by arguing that Europeanisation of public administration is a generational undertaking demanding genuine partnership with local reformers, sustained political commitment, and long-term investment in merit-based, citizen-oriented institutions.

Keywords: conditionality; enlargement geopolitics; democratic resilience; public administration reform; merit-based administration; transformative power

The Journey from Communism to European Governance Is Long and Arduous

Three decades after the fall of communism, the transition to European-style governance in Romania, Serbia, and Moldova remains long, uneven, and fraught with challenges. These countries have, to varying degrees, embarked on ambitious administrative reforms with the encouragement and support

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of the European Commission. Yet progress has often been halting. Old habits die hard: entrenched communist-era practices, patronage networks, and institutional cultures continue to exert a powerful drag on reform efforts. As one interviewee noted, an EU-designed model can only go so far; real change must be home-grown and adapted to local realities (Interview 1, 2019).

Romania's experience exemplifies both the achievements and limitations of this journey. On the one hand, Romania's EU accession in 2007 was a milestone that capped intensive pre-accession reforms – from adopting merit-based civil service laws to creating new agencies and e-government tools. The European Commission's leverage through conditionality and funding helped institutionalise some key changes. On the other hand, Romania entered the EU with many unresolved governance problems. Even as a member state, it has struggled with the legacy of centralised governance and the politicisation of its public administration. Old patterns like excessive politicisation, patronage-based appointments, and bureaucratic opaqueness persisted well into EU membership, necessitating continued EU monitoring under the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism for years. Indeed, the depth of communist legacies – such as the habit of political interference in administrative decisions and a culture of impunity among political figures – meant that formal alignment with EU rules did not automatically translate into normative change in daily administrative practice. Romania's reforms advanced most when strong domestic political will converged with EU accession pressure – most notably during periods of sustained anti-corruption drives – and stalled when that domestic commitment wavered. Romania's trajectory thus illustrates the pattern established in Chapter 9: reform outcomes were shaped less by the design of EU instruments than by the domestic political conditions under which those instruments were deployed.

Serbia's path has been even more challenging in some respects, illustrating how a credibility gap in the EU accession perspective can blunt reform momentum. Serbia declared EU membership a strategic goal and has engaged in the negotiation process since 2014, but the reforms on the ground have often been half-hearted. The country is assessed as 'moderately prepared' in areas pertaining to public administration reform, according to successive European Commission evaluations – a designation that signals the persistence of fundamental gaps beneath a surface of formal engagement. The 2023 EU progress report for Serbia recorded 'limited progress' in PAR, with advances confined largely to technical areas such as e-government services and training, while structural deficiencies in civil service depoliticisation, merit-based recruitment, and policy coordination remained unresolved (European Commission, 2023e). High-level political support

for truly depoliticising and professionalising the bureaucracy has been lukewarm; for example, in 2022, Serbia's government did not even convene its inter-ministerial PAR council, indicating reform was not a priority. The lack of a credible near-term EU membership prospect has allowed Serbian elites to rhetorically commit to EU norms while balancing EU conditionalities with internal political dynamics and vested interests. With the carrot of accession appearing distant, the stick of EU conditionality carries less weight. Moreover, EU actors themselves have sometimes sent mixed signals: in the name of regional stability or geopolitical considerations, the EU has been reluctant to confront Serbia's democratic backsliding too harshly, which local leaders interpret as leeway to slow-roll reforms. The result is a reactive and inconsistent enlargement process that has not fully delivered on its transformative promise – a dynamic that breeds public disillusionment in Serbia, where trust in the EU has fallen to notably low levels amid nationalist and pro-Russian narratives.

Moldova's trajectory showcases both the vulnerabilities and the potential in the journey toward European governance. For much of the past two decades, Moldova was on the periphery of the EU's enlargement policy – part of the European Neighbourhood rather than a membership track – and thus it lacked the powerful incentive of a guaranteed accession. Nevertheless, the Commission and other European institutions sought to export principles of good administration through instruments like association agreements, visa liberalisation action plans, and technical assistance projects. Moldova's reforms were heavily dependent on the orientation of the government in power. Pro-European governments enacted waves of reform, while oligarchic or pro-Russian-leaning regimes often stalled or even reversed progress. Throughout, the shadow of external influence loomed large: Moldova, despite having had nominally pro-European parties in power, has been heavily influenced internally by external geopolitical pressures, particularly from Russia. Russian leverage – whether through control of the Transnistria region, energy blackmail, or disinformation campaigns – consistently tested Moldova's resilience. Indeed, many of Moldova's governance setbacks have been intertwined with the tug-of-war between European integrationists and Eurasian influences. It is in this context that the European Commission often had to recalibrate its approach, balancing reform advocacy with geopolitical realities.

Notably, the past few years have seen Moldova move decisively closer to the EU. Spurred by Russia's war against neighbouring Ukraine, Moldova's government, under President Maia Sandu's reformist leadership, applied for EU membership in 2022 and won formal candidate status by mid-2022.

This historic shift meant that, almost overnight, Moldova went from a neighbourhood partner to a future member in the making. The Commission responded by intensifying support and scrutiny: it identified key challenges – such as comprehensive judicial reform, anti-corruption measures, and strengthening administrative capacity – as prerequisites for progress. While enormous hurdles remain (the country faces active Russian meddling and a separatist conflict in Transnistria), Moldova has shown that swift progress is possible when domestic political will aligns with EU direction. By June 2024, accession negotiations had officially begun, reflecting the EU's recognition of Moldova's steady progress on its commitment to EU integration even amid security threats. The Moldovan case reinforces another central insight: geopolitical shocks can be both obstacles and catalysts. Russia's aggression created new security and energy crises for Moldova, but it also galvanised the EU to more proactively anchor Moldova (and Ukraine) to Europe, thus supercharging the reform agenda in these countries.

Across all three cases, it is evident that the journey from communism to European governance is not a linear path but a rocky road with advances and setbacks. Each country inherited structural problems – such as endemic corruption, politicised state institutions, weak rule of law, and underdeveloped administrative capacity – that run deep in the fabric of society after decades of authoritarian rule. Overcoming these is not simply a matter of adopting EU regulations or ticking off legislative checklists; it requires profound shifts in political culture and administrative behaviour. As seen in Romania, EU membership did not in itself displace entrenched patterns of clientelism and weak bureaucratic accountability; post-accession conditionality weakens considerably at the moment of entry, and domestic power structures can reconsolidate around the formal institutional architecture rather than being displaced by it. Reforms in such contexts were often primarily externally driven, which raises questions about sustainability when that pressure diminishes. As the comparative analysis in Chapter 9 demonstrated, the depth and durability of reform in all three cases was ultimately conditioned by the degree of domestic political ownership – a finding that carries significant implications for the Commission's future approach.

What, then, can be said of the European Commission's performance as the driver and supporter of these reforms? The evidence suggests that the Commission has been operating in a devilishly difficult context, doing a pretty good job in very hard settings rather than failing at an easy one. Since 2000, the Commission has deployed an evolving toolkit of financial aid, technical assistance, policy guidance, and conditionality to nudge these administrations toward European standards. From the PHARE (Poland

and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies) programme and the European principles of public administration developed by SIGMA (Support for Improvement in Governance and Management) in the early 2000s to the more recent accession negotiation benchmarks and annual Rule of Law Reports, the EU built a comprehensive framework intended to 'Europeanise' post-communist administrations. This study documented how that toolkit was gradually institutionalised and refined over two decades. The Commission learned from early setbacks – for example, it recognised that simply transplanting Western European administrative models would not work without adapting to local conditions. It also became evident that certain reforms needed not just new laws but new mindsets based on transparency, accountability, efficiency, and openness – a far tougher challenge. The Commission pushed for the creation of insulated agencies, such as civil service commissions or anti-corruption directorates, to try to lock in impartial governance norms, or it tied financial aid to action plans on PAR, hoping to entice compliance. These efforts did yield some results – one can see improvements in bureaucratic procedures, efficiency, and service delivery in many instances. Crucially, while modest governance improvements suggest the need for periodic strategic reassessments of the EU's assistance, it is important to commend the Commission's sustained commitment to supporting domestic reforms in these countries despite facing multiple internal and external shocks that could have derailed its focus and investments.

Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, the EU weathered a cascade of crises – the painful ratification of the Lisbon Treaty (2007–2009), the financial and Eurozone crisis (2008–2013) which diverted political attention and resources, the refugee crisis of 2015–2016, the disruptive Brexit referendum in 2016 and the UK's withdrawal, the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic from 2020, and, most recently, Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Each of these emergencies demanded urgent responses and often absorbed the energies of Brussels. Yet, remarkably, support for administrative reform in enlargement and neighbourhood countries did not vanish from the agenda. If anything, the Commission adapted and reinforced its approach over time. For instance, even as the EU underwent introspection post-Brexit, it launched a refreshed 'Fundamentals First' enlargement strategy, prioritising rule-of-law and governance issues before all else. When the credibility of the enlargement process began to be questioned in 2020, the Commission introduced a revised negotiation methodology to inject new dynamism and stricter conditionality into the process. And when the war in Ukraine upended the geopolitical landscape, the Commission did not retreat behind

fortress Europe; instead, it boldly recommended opening accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and accelerating the Western Balkans' path. Such steps underscore the EU's enduring commitment to integrating post-communist states into the European family, despite all difficulties. The fact that programmes for administrative capacity building continued – and in some cases, expanded with new funding streams – through budgetary hardship and crisis management speaks to Brussels' strategic understanding: stabilising and democratising its neighbourhood through good governance is not a peripheral luxury, but central to Europe's own security and values.

None of this is to say the Commission's approach has been flawless. This research has illuminated several limitations and inconsistencies in the EU's driver role. For one, the enforcement of conditionality has often been uneven. The Commission can prescribe reforms and tie them to rewards, such as membership or funds, but its ability to ensure implementation is limited – especially after a country joins the EU or if political winds shift. We saw how domestic politics can outmanoeuvre external influence: elites adept at lip service can formally adopt EU-recommended laws and institutions, then quietly subvert them through informal practice (for example, keeping 'acting' loyalists in key posts to avoid meritocratic hiring, or creating anti-corruption bodies that are then starved of resources or politicised). The Commission has struggled to counter such backsliding beyond naming and shaming. In Romania, post-accession monitoring under the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) flagged problems but could not prevent periodic reversals or stalled progress in judicial reform. In the Western Balkans, the EU has at times continued accession talks even when democratic standards declined, which has enabled backsliding, rewarded autocrats, and sidelined civil society in the name of stability. This points to a degree of policy incoherence: the EU's geopolitical interests have occasionally trumped its governance ideals. The Commission found itself walking a tightrope between being a strict reform taskmaster and a pragmatic diplomat. As a result, there have been instances where the EU's rhetoric (strong on values and reform commitments) did not fully match reality on the ground, as critical observers and even the Commission's own reports have noted. All these factors complicate the assessment of the Commission's performance. Nevertheless, on balance, the evidence leans towards viewing the Commission not as an inept actor, but as a constrained one – a driver trying to steer a very cumbersome vehicle on a bumpy road, with only partial control over the engine. Given the formidable structural obstacles embedded in each country's institutional legacy, and the successive crises – financial, migratory, constitutional, public health, and geopolitical

– that have intermittently constrained the EU's own bandwidth and political coherence, the incremental improvements achieved – in particular, in digitised services and formal institutional frameworks – represent modest but tangible gains. The Commission did maintain and even improve its efforts to foster Europeanisation of administrations despite everything, which itself is a testament to the EU's resolve and vision for a continent that is whole, free, democratic, and well-governed. The journey so far reveals that Europeanisation of governance is a generational undertaking: it progresses not in a straight line, but in hard-fought steps forward – and occasional steps back – requiring persistence from both Brussels and the national capitals.

A Vision for the Next Decade

The preceding two decades of transition demonstrate that administrative reform is characterised more by protracted incrementalism than by rapid structural transformation. Looking toward the next decade, a critical question remains: Will the reform process achieve a sustainable momentum, or will it continue to be defined by stagnation and fragmented implementation? The 2020s began with a paradoxical landscape for governance reforms in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. The geopolitical shock of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine served as a catalyst, prompting the EU to re-prioritise enlargement as a strategic imperative. The granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, alongside a renewed impetus to unblock the Western Balkan integration process, has opened a strategic window of opportunity that could potentially revitalise domestic reform agendas. Conversely, significant scepticism persists. By the late 2010s, the credibility of the EU's enlargement promise had reached a historical nadir, characterised by deep-seated 'accession fatigue' and cynicism stemming from years of stalled progress. Furthermore, the ascendancy of illiberal and Eurosceptic movements within the Union – manifesting as populist challenges to liberal democratic norms – presents a formidable internal constraint. The potential for these forces to exert greater influence over the EU's institutional direction risks a shift toward a more inward-looking Union, potentially resulting in a greater tolerance for 'illiberal hybridity' among candidate states. Such a scenario would undoubtedly affect how boldly and consistently the EU can champion governance reforms abroad. Thus, the coming decade sits at a crossroads: one path leads to a reinvigorated European project that extends its democratic governance model outward, and the other to a more fragmented or hesitant Europe that struggles to promote those values even internally.

Within this context, Romania, Serbia, and Moldova each face distinct prospects post-2020, even as their fates remain tied to the broader European trajectory. For Romania, now almost two decades into EU membership, the challenge is to avoid complacency and keep improving its administration to meet the European principles of public administration. The next decade will test whether Romania can entrench a culture of meritocracy and accountability in its civil service and management of public funds, beyond the minimum requirements. The Romanian public's expectations for less corrupt, more efficient governance are high, and any backsliding could trigger domestic backlash, as seen in the mass protests against corruption in 2017–2018. Therefore, one can envision Romania in 2030 being significantly more citizen-centric in its administration – but achieving that will demand continuous domestic political will, bolstered by peer pressure from EU institutions and member states. In short, Romania's story is shifting from one of catching up to one of convergence: aligning not just its laws but its administrative culture with that of more established democracies. The conclusion of this research emphasises that sustained commitment is crucial – if Romania's leaders maintain focus and commitment to administrative reforms, the country could become a showcase for successful post-communist integration, rather than a cautionary tale of stalled transition.

For Serbia, the next decade represents a definitive crossroads for its European aspirations. The current state of play is sobering: after more than 12 years of accession negotiations (formally launched in January 2014), the process has reached a period of protracted stagnation. While Serbia has successfully opened 22 of the 35 negotiating chapters, it has provisionally closed only two (Science and Research; Education and Culture) – a tally that has remained unchanged since 2021. This lack of progress reflects a widening gap between the government's stated strategic goals and the reality of backsliding reforms in fundamental areas such as the rule of law and democratic institutions. Consequently, public support for membership continues to fluctuate, increasingly tempered by a pervasive cynicism regarding the EU's willingness to expand and the tangible benefits of a stalled integration path. As noted in a recent policy analysis, 'the EU's credibility in the Western Balkans is in crisis' – Brussels is seen as talking up reforms while tolerating regression, which 'undermines the transformative potential of the accession process' (Marović, 2025). To alter this trajectory, bold steps will be required by both Serbian authorities and the EU. Optimistically, one scenario is that the geopolitics of the 2020s forces a strategic reset: with war on the continent and rival powers (like Russia and China)

seeking influence in the Balkans, the EU might fast-track integration of those Western Balkan states ready to align with its values. This could mean offering Serbia a clearer, time-bound road map to membership – but only if Serbia genuinely delivers on key reforms. The Commission has already signalled a tougher stance by emphasising strict rule-of-law benchmarks and even contemplating post-accession safeguard mechanisms, such as the ability to suspend EU funds or voting rights if a new member backslides. Such measures, if credibly enforced, might reassure reformist elements in Serbia that their sacrifices will not be in vain, while warning entrenched elites that EU membership will not be an unconditional blank check. In the best case, by 2030 Serbia could find itself alongside other front runners on the doorstep of EU membership – but to do so, it must accelerate reforms in earnest over the next few years. That means depoliticising its civil service, strengthening independent institutions, and aligning its foreign policy fully with the EU (including sanctions on Russia) as a demonstration of loyalty to European values. The political will for such moves in Belgrade remains uncertain. If current leadership continues to hedge and stall, the danger is that Serbia falls behind in the new enlargement wave, cementing a decade of lost opportunity. The alternative, a more pessimistic vision, is a continued stagnation where Serbia remains in the EU's waiting room indefinitely, with a stagnant reform agenda and growing influence of authoritarian powers – a scenario that would be dire both for Serbia's citizens and for EU credibility. Avoiding that outcome will require a conscious and collaborative effort to reaffirm the EU's standing as a credible normative power in the Western Balkans, closing the gap between lofty rhetoric and the reality of incentives on the ground.

Moldova enters the next decade with newfound momentum but also a daunting to-do list. Having officially opened accession negotiations in 2024, Moldova now faces the same rigorous scrutiny and transformation process that countries like Romania once underwent – but perhaps compressed under a tighter timeline due to geopolitical urgency. The vision for Moldova is hopeful: if reforms stay on track, it is conceivable that within 10 years Moldova could be on the cusp of EU membership, fully pivoted away from the shadow of post-Soviet governance. Achieving this will require innovative approaches and resilience. The EU is already deeply engaged in Moldova, using its PAR toolkit in an intensive way: providing high-level advisory missions, significant financial aid earmarked for rule of law and institution building, and stringent benchmarks for each phase of negotiations. One potential game changer for Moldova is the idea of 'gradual integration' – allowing the country to participate in certain EU programmes and markets

(even before full accession) as it meets specific targets. This approach could lock in reforms by rewarding success early and often, rather than the old model of 'all or nothing' at the end of a long tunnel. For instance, if Moldova reforms its public procurement and financial management systems to EU standards, it might gain earlier access to certain EU funds or a customs union, which in turn increases the stakes of maintaining those standards. Domestically, Moldova must also strengthen its bulwark against corruption and politicisation. Recent years have already seen some encouraging signs – for example, a rigorous vetting of judges and prosecutors is under way, and civil society is actively involved in monitoring government performance. Over the next decade, fostering a culture of transparency, accountability, and professionalism in the Moldovan public sector will be essential. This includes not only passing laws but changing mindsets: civil servants should embrace a service-oriented ethos, political leaders should respect the autonomy of administrative institutions, and citizens should come to expect and demand fair and prompt public services as their right. It is a tall order, but the prospect of EU membership can be a powerful motivator and anchor for these shifts. The European Parliament has already praised Moldova's reform efforts while candidly highlighting remaining issues like money laundering and Russian interference. Such frank assessments, coupled with robust support, will continue to guide Moldova. By 2035, one dares to imagine a Moldova that is far less vulnerable to oligarchic capture or foreign subversion – a country with a competent, depoliticised civil service that reliably delivers for its people, embodying the European principles it aspires to. This would not be just a victory for Moldovans; it would validate the EU's transformative power in one of the most challenging environments.

In contemplating the future of PAR in Europe, one must also reckon with the broader evolution of the European Commission's own approach. The Commission of the 2020s and 2030s will need to be both guardian and innovator: guarding the core values of democratic governance, while innovating in how it promotes and secures those values amid changing circumstances. Based on the lessons drawn in this research, a few strategic adjustments seem prudent moving forward.

To restore faith in the enlargement process, the EU must make its commitments more credible to candidate countries, and vice versa. This means setting clearer, measurable targets for reforms and unequivocally rewarding those who meet them. Proposals like establishing a 2030 accession horizon for the best performers, with interim rewards such as market access or observer status in institutions, could inject new momentum. The Commission has signalled support for such ideas by updating its methodology

and endorsing a gradual integration approach. Following through on these will be crucial. When aspiring members see that difficult reforms, such as prosecuting high-level corruption or depoliticising appointments, lead to tangible progress in integration, it empowers reformers inside those countries and marginalises sceptics. However, the experience of previous enlargement rounds, from post-accession democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland to the protracted Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) for Bulgaria and Romania, demonstrates that speed without sufficient institutional depth produces fragile outcomes that are costly to reverse. The current momentum toward accelerated accession timelines is welcome, but risks becoming counterproductive if it decouples the pace of formal integration from the depth of institutional transformation in candidate countries.

In essence, the Commission's toolkit must evolve to be more carrot and more stick at the same time: offering closer integration benefits sooner for those who deliver, and credibly sanctioning those who flagrantly deviate from the path, including the option, however nuclear, to pause or reverse integration steps if fundamental EU values are breached. Ultimately, the future of PAR in Europe will hinge on something less tangible but most critical: political will. This includes not only the willingness of leaders in places like Bucharest, Belgrade, or Chișinău, but also the resolve of politicians and publics in existing EU member states. It bears emphasising that enlargement is a two-way street. The EU can only integrate new members if its own citizens believe in the project and if its institutions are ready to uphold standards impartially. The coming years will test the EU's internal cohesion on this matter. If economic troubles or migration fears stoke more populism, enlargement could face new roadblocks; conversely, if European leaders make a compelling case that bringing in committed democracies from the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe strengthens the Union's security and prosperity, public opinion could swing in support. There are early signs of a narrative shift: the European Parliament called enlargement 'the most effective EU foreign policy instrument' (European Parliament, 2023) and urged a reinvigoration of the process. Likewise, in response to the Ukraine war, previously sceptical voices have acknowledged that the EU must not abandon its neighbours. Transforming these declarations into consistent policy will require statesmanship and vision at the highest levels.

The evidence presented in this book points to a single, overarching conclusion: sustainable reform requires the convergence of external support and domestic political commitment. When those forces aligned, change proved possible even in the most challenging institutional environments.

When they diverged, even the most sophisticated EU instruments could not compensate. In closing, one can articulate a hopeful vision for the future: a Europe that, by 2035, has managed to welcome new members like Serbia and Moldova (and perhaps others) into its fold, not as reluctant adoptees but as countries genuinely transformed in the way they govern. In this vision, public administrations across Central and Eastern Europe would be less bureaucratic, more reliable and predictable, faster in delivering services, and closer to the people – in short, state apparatuses that exist to serve citizens, not the other way around. Achieving this will require navigating the minefield of political changes, economic uncertainties, and security threats that undoubtedly lie ahead. Yet, the very act of articulating this vision is important: it reaffirms what the ultimate goal of all these reforms is. It is not checklists or chapters or funds – it is improving the daily lives of ordinary people by ensuring they have a state that is honest, efficient, and responsive. The European Commission, for its part, appears set to continue championing this cause. As this study has shown, despite setbacks, the Commission's commitment to supporting democracy, the rule of law, and human rights both inside and outside its borders has not wavered. If anything, the challenges of recent years have reinforced the understanding in Brussels that Europe must either export stability, good governance, and democracy, or risk importing instability.

The journey from communism to European governance has indeed been long and arduous, and it is not over yet. But standing at this point in history, armed with decades of lessons, both Europeans and their post-communist partners can approach the road ahead with tempered optimism and determination. By continuing to support and apply pressure, to innovate and collaborate, the European Union can yet fulfil its transformative promise. And by embracing and internalising European principles, countries like Romania, Serbia, and Moldova can overcome the gravitational pull of the past. The next chapter of this story is waiting to be written – jointly, by Brussels and by each national capital – and if it follows through on the insights and recommendations discussed, it could move Europe closer to the vision of a unified administrative space underpinned by liberal democratic governance. In the end, that is the lodestar guiding all these reforms: the creation of public administrations that uphold the dignity, rights, and aspirations of the people they serve, truly bringing government closer to the people.

Each country must indeed 'design its own system', as our opening quote reminds us, but with continued partnership and commitment, those systems can all converge toward the shared values and standards that define a

democratic Europe. The decade ahead offers a chance – perhaps the best in a generation – to finally marry the rhetoric of Europeanisation with reality, completing the post-communist transition and ensuring that the hard-won gains are irreversible. It is a chance that must not be squandered. The long journey will continue, but with hope and resolve, its destination draws nearer.

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About the Author

Dr Claudia Bădulescu is a Government of Ireland Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of Sociology, Centre for European and Eurasian Studies, Maynooth University, Ireland. A political scientist specialising in European integration and democratic transformation in post-communist Europe, she holds a PhD from the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence. Her research examines the European Union's role in supporting institutional reform, democratic resilience, and administrative capacity building across Central and Eastern Europe and the EU's wider neighbourhood. Prior to her academic career, she worked as a Senior Project Manager at the French *École Nationale d'Administration* in Paris, where she designed and managed EU-funded projects supporting administrative reform in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa, experience that informs the empirical and policy dimensions of this book. *From Communism to European Governance* builds directly on her doctoral research at the EUI. She is co-editor of *The Palgrave Handbook of Dissensus over Liberal Democracy in Europe* (2026, with Ramona Coman, Thomas Christiansen, and Marta Simoncini) and co-editor, with Luca Tomini, of a special issue of *European Politics and Society* (2026) entitled *Dreams, Deeds, and Disenchantments: EU Actors and Instruments Addressing the Autocratization Challenge in the EU's Neighbourhood*. Her wider research interests span Europeanisation, the promotion of democracy and the rule of law, post-communist transition and democratic consolidation, party politics in Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, and differentiated integration within the European Union.

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