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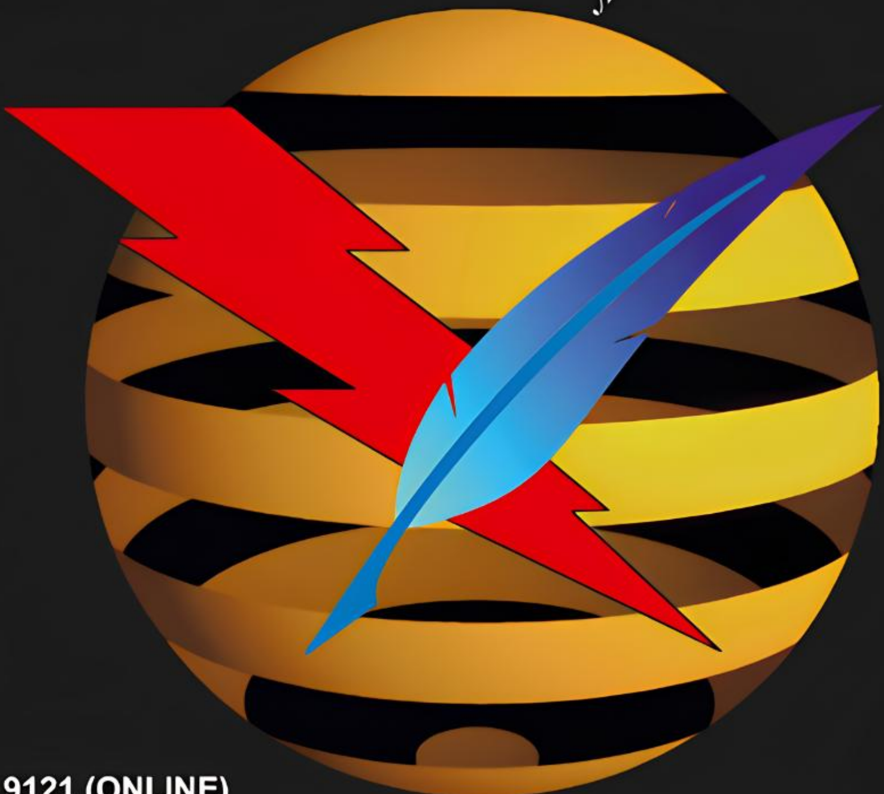

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POWER, IDENTITY, AND THE PLURALITY OF VOICES IN THE DECOLONIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE IN AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES[1]

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Abstract. *This paper critically examines the scope of decolonization in African higher education, focusing on how power, identity, and epistemic voice shape the struggle over knowledge restructuring. It engages Jonathan Jansen's caution against granting epistemic authority exclusively on the basis of identity, showing that such a move risk weakening academic rigor. At the same time, the paper argues that identity cannot simply be dismissed: it remains fundamental to decolonization, since it draws attention to the plurality of epistemic voices involved, including students, academics, indigenous communities, and administrators, each contributing perspectives shaped by history and lived experience. Focusing on case studies from South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana, selected for the distinct ways they illustrate identity-driven activism, indigenous knowledge recovery, and institutional curriculum reform respectively, the paper examines the tensions and possibilities that arise when these voices contest authority in curriculum reform and institutional practice. In the final analysis, the paper proposes a model of decolonization rooted in epistemic plurality and dialogue, in which the recognition of marginalized perspectives is balanced against intellectual rigor, offering a more inclusive and transformative approach to knowledge production in African universities. The paper adopts the methods of conceptual analysis and philosophical argumentation, engaging primarily with scholarship on decolonial theory and African philosophy of education.*

Keywords: *Decolonization, Epistemic authority, Identity, Plurality, Knowledge reform, Academic precision, Dialogue.*

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1. Introduction

There is no doubt that the decolonization of knowledge in African universities has become one of the most pressing debates in contemporary higher education. This can be traced from the RhodesMustFall movement in South Africa to student-led curriculum protests in Kenya and Ghana, all calling for the dismantling of colonial legacies in education that have deepened over the past two decades. As Achille Mbembe argues, these struggles are not simply institutional or political; they raise profound moral questions about power, legitimacy, and epistemic authority (Mbembe, 2016: 2-5). The central questions are these: Who has the right to speak about decolonization? What counts as legitimate knowledge in a postcolonial university? And how should universities navigate the tension between preserving scholarly rigor and recognizing marginalized views?

Jonathan Jansen, however, has maintained that appeals to identity as the primary basis for epistemic authority pose serious risks to the integrity of the university (Jansen, 2019: 15). According to Jansen, when identity, particularly membership in a historically oppressed racial group, is used as the key justification for leading decolonial reform, academic standards risk being conceded to majority demands (Jansen, 2019: 22-25). Yet Jansen's caution has its own limitations, since an uncritical dismissal of identity risks foreclosing the epistemic contributions that arise from the lived experience of marginalized groups. Identity, far from being irrelevant, can offer genuine insight into the blind spots of colonial knowledge systems (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018: 37-40). The real challenge, then, lies not in whether identity should matter, but in how it is positioned within a wider discussion about knowledge, authority, and reform.

In addressing these issues, this paper argues that the decolonization of African universities cannot be reduced to identity claims, nor can it disregard them. Instead, it requires acknowledging the plurality of epistemic voices involved, including students, academics, indigenous knowledge holders, and administrators, each offering diverse viewpoints shaped by history and lived experience. It is only by forming a dialogical space in which these voices can contest and complement one another that African universities can move towards a genuinely decolonized knowledge system.

Building on this argument, the paper pursues three specific objectives: first, to examine Jansen's critique of identity-based epistemic authority and its limitations; second, to analyze how identity and institutional power jointly shape epistemic struggles in African universities; and third, to develop, through comparative case studies, an ethical-epistemic model of decolonization grounded in epistemic plurality and dialogical responsibility.

Methodologically, the paper adopts conceptual analysis and philosophical argumentation rather than empirical fieldwork. The literature engaged was selected on the basis of its direct relevance to the identity-authority debate in African higher education, drawing principally on the work of Jonathan Jansen, Achille Mbembe, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, and other leading decolonial theorists, alongside primary accounts of the case studies discussed below. To ground the conceptual analysis, the paper brings together case studies from South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana. These three countries were chosen because each illustrates a distinct facet of the decolonization debate rather than a single, uniform pattern: South Africa offers the clearest instance of identity-based student activism over curriculum reform; Kenya illustrates the challenges and possibilities of assimilating indigenous epistemologies into formal education under global academic pressures; and Ghana provides insight into institutional efforts to harmonize community participation with academic ideals and language policy.

Taken together, these cases allow the paper to test its emerging model against a range of institutional contexts, rather than relying on a single national experience. By drawing these cases into dialogue with the theoretical debate, the paper develops a model of decolonization rooted in epistemic plurality, one that seeks to merge recognition of marginalized voices with a continued commitment to academic rigor.

2. Colonial heritages and the struggle for epistemic reform

According to Mahmood Mamdani, the present-day African university is unmistakably a colonial creation. Institutions such as the University of Cape Town, Makerere University in Uganda, and the University of Ghana were originally modeled on British or European structures of higher education (Mamdani, 2007: 14-18). They were designed not primarily to foster indigenous intellectual traditions, but to reproduce colonial administrative and economic systems. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o puts it, the colonial institution of higher education became "the factory of the colonial mind," privileging Western languages, histories, and sciences while disregarding African epistemologies (Thiong'o, 1986: 87). This legacy has persisted long after the formal end of colonial rule.

A continuing feature of this legacy is the dominance of Eurocentric curricula, in which subjects such as philosophy, history, and literature were presented as universal, yet in practice mirrored specific European traditions and omitted African voices (Mudimbe, 1988: 65-70). African philosophy, for example, was long denied academic legitimacy, dismissed as folklore or myth rather than treated as a rigorous intellectual discipline (Hountondji, 1996: 21-25). In the sciences too, indigenous knowledge systems, such as traditional medicine or ecological wisdom, were relegated to the margins, if recognized at all. As a result, African students have frequently been educated to become “strangers to themselves,” trained in concepts and frameworks that fail to address their own social realities (Thiong’o, 1986: 44-45).

The struggle to reform these structures dates back to the earliest postcolonial decades. Prominent leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana (Nkrumah, 1970: 78) and Julius Nyerere in Tanzania (Nyerere, 1967: 2-4) sought to transform education into a vehicle for national liberation and cultural renewal. These reforms, however, regularly met resistance from entrenched academic leadership and international donors, who preferred continuity with Western models. In many instances, efforts at curriculum indigenization were dismissed as ideological or politically motivated rather than academic (Falola, 2001: 112-115). As a result, the promise of decolonization in the 1960s and 1970s gave way to what has been called the “neo-colonial university,” in which African institutions remained dependent on foreign endorsement for academic legitimacy (Ake, 1979: 9-12).

As Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues, the insistence on decolonization in these debates is therefore not purely about representation but about epistemic justice (Santos, 2014: 21-23). This raises the question of how universities can recognize and incorporate different knowledge systems without sacrificing intellectual rigor. It is against this background that current student movements, faculty debates, and policy reforms must be understood. The legacy of colonial arrangements continues to shape the terms of engagement, making the struggle for knowledge reform both necessary and genuinely contested.

3. Identity and epistemic authority: Jonathan Jansen’s view

In his work The Problem with Decolonisation: Entanglements in the Politics of Knowledge, Jonathan Jansen raises pointed questions about how the call for decolonization has been articulated in African universities (Jansen, 2023: 139-141). He argues that although the demand to dismantle colonial epistemologies is legitimate, the manner in which it is often pursued risks undermining the intellectual integrity of the university. His central concern lies with the use of identity as a claim to epistemic authority, that is, the assumption that belonging to a historically oppressed racial or cultural group automatically confers legitimacy in leading decolonial reform (Jansen, 2023: 139).

For Jansen, this shift from academic argument to identity-based entitlement represents a form of epistemic populism (Jansen, 2023: 142). He worries that academic discussion becomes reduced to questions of who speaks rather than what is claimed, thereby weakening the standards of justification that define the university as a site of critical inquiry. In this sense, the politics of identity threatens to displace the politics of knowledge. Jansen maintains that being Black, African, or indigenous, while significant, cannot alone constitute a warrant for epistemic authority; claims to knowledge must still be subjected to rigorous critique and intellectual evaluation (Jansen, 2009: 112-115).

One of Jansen's central examples is the South African RhodesMustFall movement, which called for the removal of colonial symbols and the transformation of curricula. Although he recognizes the symbolic and political power of these protests, he criticizes the tendency among some activists to conflate political representation with epistemic legitimacy (Jansen, 2023: 143). For Jansen, the mere fact of having suffered colonial or racial oppression does not guarantee that one's knowledge claims are correct or academically sound. What is required, instead, is an ongoing process of discourse, evidence, and intellectual exchange.

There is significant strength in Jansen's argument. His insistence on preserving the norms of critical inquiry protects the university from collapsing into an arena of competing identities in which scholarly standards are discarded (Jansen, 2023: 144). In an era where higher education risks becoming politicized, his warning against reducing knowledge to identity serves as a reminder that intellectual merit cannot be bypassed. The force of this argument becomes clearer when the alternative is spelled out concretely. Consider a doctoral committee that waives its usual standards of argument and evidence for a thesis on the grounds that the candidate's positionality as a member of a historically marginalized group already secures the thesis's legitimacy. The result is not empowerment but a quieter form of harm: the candidate is denied the rigorous engagement that would have strengthened the work, and the degree itself is devalued for every graduate who holds one, since credentials only retain their worth if they certify something real.

Jansen's later research on South African universities documents exactly this kind of institutional drift, showing how the erosion of scholarly accountability, once tolerated in the name of transformation, tends to metastasize into more general patterns of institutional dysfunction that ultimately harm the very students the erosion was meant to protect (Jansen, 2023b). This is not an argument for leaving existing standards untouched; the case studies discussed later in this paper show standards themselves can and should be revised. It is an argument that whatever revision occurs must still be a revision of standards, arrived at through justification, rather than their quiet abandonment in particular cases.

Nevertheless, Jansen's critique is not without limitations, and it is here that the disagreement among scholars becomes most instructive. By focusing on the risks of identity politics, Jansen risks downplaying the epistemic value of lived experience and historical marginalization. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, for instance, argues that identity, shaped by colonial histories, offers a vital vantage point for identifying epistemic injustices and silences that a purely procedural standard of rigor may miss (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018: 42-44). On this reading, Jansen's emphasis on academic argument as a neutral standard understates how the very criteria of "rigor" have themselves been shaped by colonial epistemic hierarchies; abandoning identity altogether risks entrenching the very exclusions that decolonization seeks to undo. Mbembe pushes this disagreement further, insisting that decolonization is not about replacing one orthodoxy with another, but about expanding the horizon of knowledge to include voices historically rendered invisible (Mbembe, 2015: 9-11). Where Jansen treats identity claims chiefly as a threat to be contained, Mbembe and Ndlovu-Gatsheni treat them as an underused epistemic resource; the tension between these positions, rather than being resolved in favor of either, is what motivates the model developed later in this paper.

Jansen may therefore be correct to caution against the uncritical use of identity as epistemic authority, but his position requires supplementation rather than outright rejection. Identity should not be the sole basis for legitimacy, but neither should it be dismissed as a meaningful resource for epistemic insight. This tension between protecting academic rigor and recognizing marginalized voices constitutes the principal challenge of decolonization in African universities.

4. Identity, power, and the epistemic struggle

Debates over decolonization in African universities cannot be understood apart from the entanglement of identity and power in the production of knowledge. Identity is not simply an abstract label, but the product of historical processes of colonial domination, racial exclusion, and epistemic silencing (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020: 15-17). Colonial education systematically positioned European identities as universal bearers of truth while relegating African identities to the margins of irrationality or folklore (Mudimbe, 1988: 64-68). In this sense, to question who has the right to speak in the university is also to question whose knowledge has historically been considered valid, and whose has been dismissed.

It is against this historical background that identity becomes fundamental to epistemic struggle. When students and academics invoke their Blackness, Africanness, or indigeneity in discussions about curriculum reform, they are not simply making essentialist claims; they are pointing to centuries of marginalization that denied their communities epistemic recognition (Jansen, 2023: 142). Identity here functions as a reminder of epistemic injustice, understood as the structural exclusion of certain groups from participating in knowledge-making (Fricker, 2007: 1-3). The appeal to identity can thus serve as a corrective, drawing attention to voices that have long been silenced in academic dialogue.

At the same time, identity can become a double-edged sword when treated as the sole basis of epistemic legitimacy (Jansen, 2023: 145). If the claim to authority rests entirely on identity, it risks collapsing into identity essentialism, the assumption that one's social position guarantees epistemic correctness. This can produce a new form of exclusion, in which alternative perspectives, even those from within marginalized groups, are delegitimized (Mbembe, 2017: 173-176). As Miranda Fricker argues, epistemic justice requires more than simply recognizing identity; it requires a fair distribution of credibility and recognition within epistemic practices (Fricker, 2007: 7-10).

The dimension of power further complicates matters. Universities are not neutral spaces; they are organized by hierarchies of administration, funding, and academic status that shape which voices are heard and which are marginalized (Mamdani, 1989: 19-22). Student movements regularly contest these structures, yet administrators and senior academics may exercise institutional power to define the boundaries of legitimate reform. Likewise, global academic networks, including journals, ranking systems, and funding bodies, continue to privilege Western epistemologies, subtly shaping what counts as "rigorous" or "academic" (Santos, 2014: 23-26). The struggle for epistemic authority within African universities is thus entangled with broader struggles against global systems of knowledge control.

Recognizing this entanglement allows for a more sophisticated understanding of identity in decolonization debates. Identity cannot be dismissed as irrelevant, since it reveals the historical wounds of epistemic exclusion; nor can it be absolutized, since doing so risks reproducing exclusionary practices. The challenge is to situate identity within a wider framework of discourse and critical reflection, one in which power relations are exposed and interrogated, and in which epistemic legitimacy is not monopolized by any single group. It is in this space that the idea of a plurality of voices emerges as an essential condition for a genuinely decolonized institution of higher education.

5. Plurality of voices and epistemic authority

The central challenge in the decolonization of African universities lies in determining whose voices should be prioritized in restructuring knowledge systems. As Jansen cautions, identity-based claims risk devolving into an exclusionary politics in which authority is conferred not on the basis of epistemic merit, but on historical suffering or positionality (Jansen, 2019: 22-24). At the same time, dismissing identity altogether overlooks the epistemic resources embedded in lived experience and indigenous worldviews. What is needed is a framework that takes seriously the plurality of voices without reducing legitimacy to identity alone.

Furthermore, contemporary studies have moved in the direction of this pluralist position. Mbembe argues that the university must expose itself to a "plurality of epistemic traditions" if it is to recover its relevance in the Global South (Mbembe, 2015). Similarly, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni contends that decolonization consists of more than the replacement of Eurocentric content; it requires acknowledging what he terms "epistemic diversity," in which African, diasporic, and indigenous perspectives are engaged in genuine dialogue (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018: 67-69). This pluralist turn remains an active site of debate: writing more recently, Mitova (2023) questions whether epistemic decolonisation, as theorised, can meaningfully address the material problems facing African higher education, or whether the project risks becoming an end in itself. In practice, this means that the epistemic authority of students, scholars, indigenous leaders, and administrators should not be arranged into a hierarchy of voice, but instead negotiated in ways that foster inclusive participation.

This plurality, however, is not free of tension. As Tuck and Yang remind us, decolonization is not a metaphor but involves substantive shifts in power (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 1-40). Accommodating epistemic plurality therefore involves reconciling competing claims without erasing the material histories of dispossession that make decolonial demands necessary in the first place. It also requires safeguards against epistemic relativism, in which all voices are treated as equally authoritative regardless of rigor. Walter Mignolo's concept of "pluriversality," a world in which many epistemic traditions coexist without collapsing into a homogenizing universalism, offers a useful guide for escaping this danger (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018: 135-139).

In this respect, an ethical-epistemic model of decolonization becomes appropriate. Such a model affirms the legitimacy of multiple epistemic voices while grounding authority in discourse, shared accountability, and academic integrity. This approach reframes decolonization not as a zero-sum contest between Eurocentric and Afrocentric knowledge systems, but as an ongoing negotiation that strengthens African universities by expanding their epistemic possibilities.

6. Country case studies: Examining experience in South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana

The tensions between identity, authority, and epistemic plurality are not merely speculative. They are visible in actual struggles across African universities, where debates over curriculum reform, student activism, and institutional transformation have taken center stage. Examining the experiences of South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana together illustrates both the challenges and the possibilities of pursuing decolonization within universities.

South Africa offers perhaps the clearest instance, with the RhodesMustFall and FeesMustFall movements of 2015-2016 sparking a global conversation about decolonization. Students called not only for affordable education but also for the removal of colonial symbols and the incorporation of African epistemologies into curricula (Habib, 2019). Although some progress has been made, critics such as Jansen maintain that much of the movement devolved into identity-driven politics, with limited long-term curricular restructuring (Jansen, 2017: 56-59). Mbembe, by contrast, insists that these movements effectively exposed the Eurocentric norms underlying South African universities and compelled institutions to confront the plurality of epistemic voices (Mbembe, 2015).

In Kenya, the struggle has taken a somewhat different form. Here, the central tension lies in reconciling global academic standing with decolonial imperatives. Universities such as the University of Nairobi have adopted reforms aimed at “Africanizing” curricula while still maintaining links to global accreditation standards (Zeleza, 2016). Scholars such as Henry Odera Oruka have long called for the retrieval of indigenous philosophy through Sage Philosophy, seeking to validate indigenous thought as legitimate rational discourse (Oruka, 1991). More recently, Kipkoech (2024) finds that debates in Kenyan universities continue to focus on whether this retrieval represents genuine epistemic development or a symbolic gesture that leaves structural disparities intact, given that indigenous knowledge remains largely confined to lower levels of the education system rather than integrated at university level.

Ghana presents another instructive example. The University of Ghana, Legon, has experimented with African Studies as a required foundational course for undergraduates, aimed at cultivating a sense of historical and cultural grounding (Ampofo, 2008: 330-333). Nonetheless, faculty debates reveal a tension between promoting African epistemologies and ensuring that students remain competitive in the global academic arena. Kwame Gyekye and Kwasi Wiredu's earlier calls for conceptual decolonization in philosophy demonstrate the possibilities of a thoughtful engagement with both African and Western traditions, though more recent scholars warn against treating this balance as a straightforward synthesis (Wiredu, 1996: 20-23; Gyekye, 1997: 45-47; Inusah and Quansah, 2023: 61-65). In addition, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has argued, language policy, which continues to privilege English over African languages, remains an unresolved obstacle to epistemic plurality (Thiong'o, 1986: 11-13).

Given these, these cases show that decolonization is neither uniform nor linear. South Africa centers on the politics of student identity and activism; Kenya illustrates the problem of epistemic recovery under neoliberal pressures; and Ghana reveals the challenges of institutionalizing decolonial reform in curriculum and language policy. What unites them is a shared pursuit of an epistemic model that respects plurality while avoiding both Eurocentrism and an uncritical Afrocentrism. These case studies underline the need for an ethical-epistemic framework that treats decolonization as a process of discussion, negotiation, and transformation, rather than as a one-off replacement of content.

Examines side by side, the three cases also reveal a common structural pattern that the ethical-epistemic model developed below must address. In each country, identity-based demands, whether expressed as student activism, indigenous philosophical recovery, or curricular Africanization, achieved real institutional attention only when they were accompanied by sustained dialogue with existing academic standards, rather than by an outright rejection of them. Where this dialogue was absent or short-lived, as Jansen observes of aspects of the South African case, reform stalled at the symbolic level. Where it was sustained, as in Ghana's incremental curriculum experiments, it produced more durable institutional change, even if slower and more contested. This pattern suggests that epistemic plurality and academic rigor are not opposed poles to be traded off against each other, but conditions that must be pursued together if decolonization is to move beyond protest into lasting institutional transformation. It is this insight, distilled from the three cases, that grounds the model proposed in the following section.

7. Ethical-epistemic model for decolonization

The foregoing discussion has shown that decolonization in African universities cannot be reduced to either an identity-based claim to authority or an abstract defense of universal values. Both approaches, pursued in isolation, fail to grasp the ethical and epistemic stakes of the debate. What is needed is a model that upholds the dignity of historically marginalized voices while also protecting the epistemic integrity of the academy. This section proposes such a model, here termed the ethical-epistemic model of decolonization.

Fundamentally, this model rests on two complementary values: epistemic humility and dialogical responsibility. Epistemic humility acknowledges that no single perspective, whether grounded in identity, disciplinary expertise, or institutional power, can claim exhaustive authority over truth. This value requires all participants in the decolonial process to remain attentive to their own fallibility and the partiality of their perspectives (Code, 2006: 45-48). Such humility guards against the excesses of relativism on the one hand and epistemic authoritarianism on the other. Epistemic humility is not merely an abstract disposition; it has concrete implications for how knowledge claims are evaluated in practice. Consider, for example, a biomedical researcher studying a plant remedy long used by traditional healers to treat a particular ailment. An arrogant epistemic stance would dismiss the healers' knowledge outright as mere superstition until it has been repackaged and "validated" through Western clinical trials, treating indigenous classification systems as raw data rather than as a form of knowledge in its own right.

Epistemic humility, by contrast, would lead the researcher to recognize that generations of careful observation may have identified ecological relationships, dosages, or contraindications that a first clinical trial could easily miss, and to treat the healers as co-inquirers rather than mere informants. José Medina (2013: 42) captures this distinction well, arguing that epistemic humility functions as a virtue precisely because it counters the arrogance and closed-mindedness that lead privileged knowers to dismiss unfamiliar perspectives without serious engagement, while equally guarding against an uncritical reversal in which every claim, regardless of scrutiny, is granted equal authority. Applied to the university, the same posture would require a curriculum committee revising a philosophy syllabus to engage seriously with Akan or Yoruba conceptions of personhood as philosophy in their own right, rather than treating them as cultural artefacts to be studied from the outside by a discipline whose Western categories remain unquestioned. In each case, epistemic humility does not require abandoning standards of evidence or argument; it requires recognizing that those standards themselves must remain open to correction from perspectives that have been historically excluded from shaping them.

Dialogical responsibility foregrounds the duty to remain open to reasoned exchange across contested identities and knowledge claims. It stresses the ethical obligation of academics and institutions to foster spaces of inclusive engagement. Rather than favoring specific voices a priori, this value calls for processes that allow diverse epistemic positions, indigenous knowledge systems, critical traditions, and international scholarship, to meet one another in discussion (Santos, 2014: 188-190). It is in this dialogical encounter, rather than in exclusion or one-sided imposition, that the transformative possibility of decolonization depends.

Dialogical responsibility is best understood through its practical demands rather than as an abstract ideal. Consider a university curriculum committee tasked with revising an introductory course following student calls for decolonization. A one-sided imposition would take one of two forms: either the committee defers entirely to disciplinary convention and treats the students' demands as a public-relations problem to be managed, or it defers entirely to the loudest activist voices and rewrites the syllabus without engaging the substance of their claims. Dialogical responsibility requires neither. It obliges the committee to convene students, faculty, and where relevant indigenous knowledge holders as co-investigators in an actual exchange, each accountable to the others for the reasons behind their claims, rather than as parties to be placated or overridden. This is close to what Paulo Freire (1970) called "problem-posing education," in which teacher and student jointly examine the world as co-investigators, in contrast to a "banking" model in which knowledge simply flows one way from an authority to a passive recipient. Extended to the university as a whole, this means that indigenous knowledge holders invited into a curriculum review are treated as interlocutors whose claims must be engaged and, where warranted, contested, not merely as sources of "local content" to be inserted into an otherwise unchanged syllabus. Dialogical responsibility, understood this way, does not guarantee agreement; it guarantees only that disagreement takes the form of genuine exchange rather than silence, dismissal, or capitulation.

In practice, the ethical-epistemic model can be operationalized in three ways. First, curricular reform should be guided not by the wholesale elimination of Western thought, but by its critical repositioning alongside African academic traditions and Global South epistemologies (Mitova, 2020: 195-198). Second, institutional governance should establish mechanisms for shared authority between faculty, students, and communities, ensuring that decisions about knowledge construction are genuinely participatory (Jansen and Walters, 2022). Third, research practice should move towards partnership with indigenous perspectives, recognizing indigenous contributions as legitimate bases of knowledge while still subjecting them to critical analysis in dialogue with other traditions.

These three measures are not merely aspirational; they are designed to respond directly to the institutional barriers already documented in this paper's case studies. Jansen's own research found that decolonization reforms typically stall not from a lack of goodwill but from an absence of what he calls a "theory of change": senate committees draft reports, resources are allocated for symposia, and then the political pressure passes, leaving the institutional curriculum untouched (Jansen, 2023: 152-154). The three measures proposed here are constructed precisely to close that gap. Curricular repositioning (the first measure) gives reform a substantive content beyond symbolic gestures, so that it cannot be satisfied by cosmetic changes such as adding a handful of African authors to an otherwise unchanged reading list. Shared institutional authority (the second measure) addresses the problem of momentum directly: where decolonization initiatives depend entirely on the goodwill of a single vice-chancellor or the urgency of a protest cycle, they collapse once that pressure lifts; embedding shared authority in governance structures, rather than in a temporary committee, is what allows reform to outlast the moment that produced it.

Partnership with indigenous knowledge holders (the third measure) closes the remaining gap between symbolic recognition and epistemic substance, ensuring that indigenous contributions shape the curriculum's content rather than merely decorating its margins. Taken individually, each measure could be dismissed as insufficient on its own; taken together, they form a structure in which content, governance, and epistemic partnership reinforce one another, which is precisely what the case studies in this paper show is missing when decolonization efforts fail to outlast their initial moment of protest.

In proposing this model, the aim is not to resolve every tension inherent in the decolonization project, but to offer a conceptual orientation that allows such tensions to become productive rather than paralyzing. By holding together, the ethical call for recognition with the epistemic demand for justification, African universities can move beyond the impasse between identity-based authority and universalist evaluation (Gordon, 2022: 120-123). Understood in this way, the struggle for voice becomes less about who is entitled to speak and more about how different voices can speak with one another in the collective task of reimagining knowledge.

A possibly objection here is that this model, whatever its appeal, does no real work: if the model simply asks both sides to be humble and to keep talking, it risks becoming a way of avoiding hard choices rather than making them. This objection misreads what the model is for. It is not a decision procedure that tells a curriculum committee in advance which claims to accept; it is a standard against which competing claims can be tested and, where necessary, adjudicated. Return to the case, discussed earlier, of a student movement demanding the wholesale removal of a discipline's canonical texts on the grounds that they are colonial impositions. Judged by identity-based authority alone, the demand's legitimacy rests on the identity of those making it. Judged by universalist evaluation alone, the demand can be dismissed without engaging its substance at all.

The ethical-epistemic model requires something harder of both sides: the students must offer reasons, not only standing, for why specific texts obstruct rather than merely offend, and the discipline must be prepared to actually revise its canon where those reasons hold, rather than treating "rigor" as a permanent shield against change. This is adjudication, not evasion, and it is precisely because the model forces both sides to do this work that it can distinguish a demand grounded in a substantive epistemic grievance from one that is not, a distinction that neither identity-based authority nor universalist evaluation, taken alone, is equipped to draw. Lewis Gordon's account of the "disciplinary decadence" that results when a field defends its boundaries reflexively rather than in response to reasoned challenge is instructive here (Gordon, 2022: 120-123): it names exactly the failure mode the model is designed to prevent on the side of the university, just as identity essentialism, discussed earlier in this paper, names the corresponding failure mode on the side of the activist demand.

8. Conclusion

The struggle over decolonization in African higher education is, ultimately, a struggle over authority in knowledge, that is, over who speaks, who is heard, and on what grounds. Identity-based claims to authority foreground histories of silencing, but they cannot, by themselves, withstand the demands of rigorous scholarship. Abstract universalism, on the other hand, risks reproducing exclusion if it ignores colonial histories. The ethical-epistemic model proposed here reconciles this tension by combining epistemic humility, dialogical responsibility, and the recognition of a plurality of voices. Decolonization thus becomes a continuing negotiation, one that maintains rigor while widening participation. The task, at this point, is not to substitute one orthodoxy for another, but to build a dialogical academy in which multiple traditions can contest, correct, and learn from one another. In this approach, plurality is not a threat to truth but its very condition.

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GOVERNANCE, SOCIAL MEDIA AND GOVERNMENT POLICY IN NIGERIA[1]

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Abstract. *This study examines the role of social media in governance and government policy in Nigeria. Specifically, it analyses how social media facilitates civic engagement, political mobilisation, and public discourse; interrogates the policy and regulatory instruments deployed by the Nigerian state in managing social media activities; and assesses the broader implications of social media for governance, public policy, and democratic norms. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study relies on case study analysis of two high-profile governance episodes: the #EndSARS movement (2020) and the Twitter suspension (2021). Data are drawn from secondary sources, including government documents, policy instruments, media reports, and scholarly literature. Findings indicate that social media has significantly expanded citizen participation and advocacy, enabling rapid mobilisation and influencing government responses. At the same time, it presents governance challenges, including misinformation, hate speech, and tensions between digital rights and state regulation. Government interventions, ranging from legislative proposals and administrative codes to coercive measures, reveal persistent tensions between state authority, democratic accountability, and public trust. The study concludes that while social media constitutes a powerful tool for participatory governance, heavy-handed regulation risks undermining its democratic potential. It therefore recommends that Nigeria adopt transparent, rights-respecting, and consultative regulatory frameworks, strengthen institutional capacity for digital governance, and sustain continuous dialogue with citizens to balance policy objectives with democratic freedoms.*

Keywords: *Social media, Governance, Government policy, Government regulation, Policy instruments, Civic engagement.*

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1. Introduction

In contemporary governance, social media has emerged as a dominant arena for public discourse, civic engagement, and political mobilisation. Platforms such as Twitter (now X), Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp have transformed the ways citizens interact with governments, engage public institutions, and express opinions on public policy. The digital revolution has reconfigured governance practices globally by blurring traditional boundaries between state actors and citizens (Janssen & Estevez, 2024; Yang et al., 2024). As a result, social media has become central to political communication, advocacy, and policy debates in both established and emerging democracies.

What initially functioned primarily as a medium for social interaction and entertainment has evolved into a multifaceted infrastructure shaping politics, business, culture, and collective action (Hang, 2024). In governance terms, social media has democratised the production and dissemination of information, allowing citizens to bypass traditional gatekeepers such as state-controlled media and political elites (Castells, 2012). This transformation has significantly altered state-society relations by amplifying citizen voices and expanding the public sphere.

Historically, communication technologies have always influenced governance dynamics. Radio and print media played key roles in policy dissemination and political mobilisation during the colonial and postcolonial periods, while electronic media expanded state communication capacities in the late twentieth century (Okon, 2021; Jones, 2023). Social media, however, represents a distinct shift due to its interactive, decentralised, and user-driven nature (Omar & Ondimu, 2024). These characteristics enable real-time engagement and collective mobilisation on a scale previously unattainable.

In Nigeria, the rapid expansion of social media use has been driven by increased internet penetration, smartphone accessibility, and mobile broadband expansion. This has intensified public participation in national debates and enhanced the visibility of citizen grievances within policy discourse (Adeniran, 2021). Thus, Nigeria provides a particularly important context for examining the relationship between governance, social media and government policy. This is because of the country's expanding digital environment, as well as its complex federal political structure. For instance, as of October 2025, Nigeria had approximately 109 million internet users. This represents an internet penetration rate of 45.5 per cent, while social-media user identities stood at about 47.8 million, which is approximately 20.0 per cent of the country's population (DataReportal, 2026). Similarly, the data from the Nigerian Communications

Commission indicate that broadband subscriptions increased from about 96.3 million as of December 2024 to more than 109.6 million as of December 2025. This reflects the continuing expansion of digital connectivity in the country (NCC, 2026). This notwithstanding, Nigeria's digital transformation should be understood within a broader global context of expanding but uneven internet access (ITU, 2025). Politically, however, Nigeria operates a federal structure comprising the Federal Government, 36 states and 774 Local Government Areas, with governmental responsibilities distributed across these levels (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). This multi-level structure matters for understanding the governance implications of social media, as digital platforms provide channels through which citizens interact with, scrutinise, and make demands upon public institutions at different levels of government.

Social media occupies a dual position in Nigeria's governance landscape; it functions as an instrument of citizen empowerment and as a source of political tension. On the one hand, digital platforms have enabled citizens, civil society organisations, and particularly youth groups to engage policymakers, demand accountability, and mobilise around reform-oriented causes. This was vividly demonstrated during the #EndSARS movement of 2020, when online mobilisation translated into nationwide protests against police brutality and governance failures (Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018). On the other hand, social media has been associated with the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and cyber harassment, raising concerns about national security, social cohesion, and public order (Chen et al., 2023).

In response to these perceived risks, the Nigerian government has increasingly pursued regulatory interventions aimed at managing online discourse. Legislative proposals such as the Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill (2019), alongside administrative measures and platform restrictions, including the 2021 Twitter suspension, have generated intense debate about digital rights, democratic governance, and the appropriate scope of state regulation. These developments raise fundamental questions about how governments can regulate digital spaces without undermining freedom of expression and participatory governance.

Against this backdrop, this study examines the interaction between social media, governance, and government policy in Nigeria. Specifically, the study:

1. Analyses the policy, legal, and regulatory instruments employed by the Nigerian state to govern social media and digital communication;

2. Examine how social media has reshaped state-citizen relations through selected governance and policy episodes in Nigeria; and
3. Assess the implications of social media and its regulation for democratic norms, public trust, governance, and policy outcomes in Nigeria.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What policy, legal, and regulatory instruments have the Nigerian state employed to govern social media and digital communication?
2. In what ways has social media reshaped state-citizen relations through selected governance and policy episodes in Nigeria?
3. What are the implications of social media and its regulation for democratic norms, public trust, governance, and policy outcomes in Nigeria?

2. Conceptual framework: Social media, digital governance and democratic accountability

This study is anchored in the concept of governance as the interaction between state institutions, non-state actors, and citizens in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of public policy (Rhodes, 1996; Kooiman, 2003). Governance extends beyond formal government authority to include processes of accountability, participation, transparency, and legitimacy, reflecting both institutional arrangements and societal norms that shape decision-making and policy outcomes (Stoker, 1998; Bevir, 2013). Within this framework, social media represents a critical infrastructure of contemporary governance, influencing how power is exercised, contested, and negotiated in the public sphere (Castells, 2012).

Digital governance refers to the application of digital technologies in governing processes, including policy communication, service delivery, citizen engagement, and regulation of digital spaces (Lindgren & Jansson, 2013; Janssen & Estevez, 2024). Social media constitutes a core component of digital governance because it facilitates horizontal communication among citizens, enabling peer-to-peer exchanges, collective action, and information sharing, while also allowing vertical interaction between citizens and the state, such as direct engagement with policymakers, service feedback, and policy advocacy (Bertot, Jaeger & Grimes, 2010; Medaglia & Zheng, 2017). Its governance significance lies in its capacity to expand civic space, enhance transparency, and democratise information, while simultaneously challenging state control over information flows and authority (Feldstein, 2021; Diamond, 2019).

Democratic accountability, in this context, relates to the ability of citizens to monitor government actions, demand justification, and sanction misconduct through both formal mechanisms, which may include elections, audits, and legal oversight. Or informal mechanisms, including public protests, social media campaigns, and media scrutiny (Schedler, 1999; Mechkova & Wilson, 2022). Social media enhances accountability by increasing transparency, amplifying marginalised voices, and enabling collective scrutiny of state performance (Barberá, 2020). However, it also complicates governance by facilitating the rapid spread of disinformation, polarisation, and transnational influence, which can undermine institutional trust and distort public debate (Gorwa, 2019; Helberger et al., 2022). The regulatory responses of the state, therefore, reflect broader tensions between authority, rights, and legitimacy in the digital age, illustrating the challenge of balancing public order with democratic freedoms in highly networked societies (Suzor, 2016; Brennan Center for Justice, 2024).

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design and was based on a case study approach to analyse the relationship between and among social media, governance, and government policy in Nigeria. A qualitative case study is well thought-out and appropriate, as the study is concerned not primarily with measuring the frequency or magnitude of social-media use, but with understanding the meanings, processes, institutional responses, as well as governance consequences associated with significant episodes of digital political interaction.

Two cases, the #EndSARS movement of 2020 and the Federal Government's suspension of Twitter (now X) in 2021, were purposively selected. The two cases were selected using four principal criteria. Firstly, each case represented a significant episode in the interaction between social media and government in Nigeria. Secondly, both cases involved substantial interaction among citizens, state institutions, and digital platforms; in that way, they provided evidence for examining changing state-citizen relations. Thirdly, the selected cases generated significant governmental policy and regulatory responses, thus making them suitable for analysing the use of state instruments in regulating digital communication and online political activity. And, fourthly, both cases generated substantial documentary, media, civil-society, and scholarly materials, making it possible to undertake a sufficiently rich analysis using secondary sources.

The selection of these cases also allows analytical comparison, while the #EndSARS case illustrates the use of social media primarily as a mechanism for civic mobilisation, collective expression, agenda-setting, and demands for governmental accountability, the Twitter suspension illustrates the state's regulatory response to a major digital communication platform and raises questions concerning freedom of expression, access to information, digital rights, and the limits of governmental regulatory authority. Therefore, the study does not claim that these cases exhaust the range of social-media-related governance experiences in Nigeria; rather, they are treated as information-rich cases through which broader governance and policy issues can be examined.

Although the #EndSARS movement and the 2021 Twitter suspension constitute the two principal cases analysed in the study, subsequent policy and regulatory developments are examined as contextual developments for assessing the continuing relevance and evolution of the governance issues revealed by the cases.

The study relied exclusively on secondary data, comprising government policy documents, official statements and directives, legislative and regulatory documents, reports of governmental and regulatory institutions, academic publications, and reputable national and international media reports. These sources were selected based on their relevance to the two cases. The data were analysed thematically, focusing on patterns of civic mobilisation, government policy responses, regulatory instruments, and implications for democratic governance.

The study recognises limitations associated with its reliance on secondary sources and case-study analysis. For instance, the exclusive use of secondary data means that the study does not capture the direct perceptions and experiences of citizens, government officials, social-media users, or other stakeholders through interviews, focus groups, or surveys. Thus, the study does not claim to provide a comprehensive representation of all online interactions associated with the two cases. Instead, it focuses on documented evidence available through credible secondary sources. The purposive selection of two high-profile cases limits the universality of the findings in a statistical sense; thus, the study sought analytical rather than statistical generalisation.

Despite the methodology limitations, the combination of purposive case selection, multiple documentary sources, thematic analysis, and cross-source comparison provides an appropriate methodological basis for examining the governance and policy implications of social media in Nigeria.

4. Government regulation of social media in Nigeria: Policy instruments and governance implications

Social media platforms have become integral to Nigeria's public sphere, influencing political communication, social mobilisation, and information dissemination. However, their growing significance has also heightened government concerns about misinformation, hate speech, and content capable of inciting violence or undermining public order. In response, the Nigerian government has deployed a range of policy instruments to regulate digital spaces.

Legislative initiatives have included proposals such as the Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill (2019), commonly referred to as the Social Media Bill, which sought to criminalise the spread of false information online. Although the bill faced widespread criticism and did not become law, it signalled the state's regulatory intent. Administrative instruments have also featured prominently, notably the National Information Technology Development Agency's (NITDA) Code of Practice for Interactive Computer Service Platforms (2022), which introduced content moderation, registration, and local presence requirements for digital platforms.

Beyond formal regulatory frameworks, the government has employed coercive measures, most notably the indefinite suspension of Twitter in June 2021. This action followed the platform's deletion of a tweet by President Muhammadu Buhari for violating Twitter's policy on abusive behaviour. The suspension disrupted communication for millions of users, affected businesses reliant on the platform, and drew condemnation from international actors, highlighting the reputational and economic costs of heavy-handed digital regulation (Amnesty International, 2021).

The eventual lifting of the ban, following negotiations that required Twitter to establish a legal entity in Nigeria, illustrates a pattern of ad hoc enforcement followed by negotiated settlements rather than judicial resolution. This episode underscores the importance of clear legal frameworks, due process, and institutional capacity in digital governance. It also reveals how executive discretion can substitute for formal regulation in weak institutional contexts, raising concerns about predictability, accountability, and the rule of law.

5. Social media, governance, and policy responses: #Endsars and the Twitter suspension

The #EndSARS movement and the Twitter suspension highlight the intricate relationship between social media, governance, and policy-making in Nigeria. Both cases stress the urgent need for digital governance frameworks that balance the protection of citizen rights with the legitimate interests of the state. This section, therefore, focuses on these two significant events that prompted policy responses from the Nigerian government.

The #EndSARS Movement

The #EndSARS movement of October 2020 represents one of the most significant instances of digitally mediated civic activism in Nigeria. Originating as a youth-led online campaign against police brutality by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), the movement rapidly evolved into a nationwide protest that combined online mobilisation with offline demonstrations. Social media platforms served as organisational hubs, facilitating coordination, fundraising, documentation of abuses, and global amplification of citizen grievances.

Digital platforms enabled protesters to aggregate testimonies, disseminate visual evidence of police misconduct, and bypass traditional institutional channels that were widely perceived as ineffective. The movement compelled the government to respond swiftly, including the announcement of SARS disbandment, thereby demonstrating the capacity of social media to exert political pressure and shape policy outcomes. At the same time, the protests exposed enduring tensions between civic freedom, state authority, and information control in Nigeria's governance system.

The Twitter Suspension

In contrast, the Twitter suspension of June 2021 illustrates the state's coercive response to perceived challenges posed by digital platforms. The government justified the suspension on grounds of national security and corporate integrity, arguing that the platform was being used to undermine Nigeria's stability (Federal Ministry of Information and Culture, 2021). Critics, however, interpreted the action as retaliatory and authoritarian, reflecting official discomfort with social media's agenda-setting power.

The suspension disrupted civic communication, media operations, and digital commerce, while also triggering debates about sovereignty, platform governance, and freedom of expression. It highlighted how restrictive regulatory measures can erode public trust, constrain civic space, and signal tendencies toward digital authoritarianism. Together, the #EndSARS movement and the Twitter suspension illustrate contrasting yet interconnected dimensions of social media's role in governance: empowerment through mobilisation and repression through regulation.

5. Policy implications and governance tensions

Social media functions as a double-edged sword in governance, simultaneously enabling participation and generating regulatory challenges. Its governance implications in Nigeria can be examined across several interrelated domains.

Public Policy Implementation and Crisis Management

Social media enables real-time interaction between policymakers and citizens, facilitating more transparent and participatory policy implementation (Medaglia & Zheng, 2017). During crises, platforms allow governments to rapidly disseminate information, gauge public sentiment, and adjust responses accordingly. However, these benefits are counterbalanced by the risks of misinformation, rumour proliferation, and poorly managed engagement, which can distort policy outcomes and erode government legitimacy. Regulatory interventions perceived as arbitrary or politically motivated exacerbate these risks, undermining public trust and the effectiveness of policy implementation.

Democratic Accountability and Civic Space

Digital platforms expand the civic space by empowering citizens, journalists, and civil society organisations to monitor government performance, mobilise collective action, and demand accountability (Diamond, 2019; Mechkova & Wilson, 2022). Movements such as #EndSARS illustrate how online activism can catalyse political pressure and policy attention. Yet, governance responses framed around national security, such as platform suspensions or extensive monitoring, may result in digital repression and surveillance, narrowing civic space and weakening democratic accountability (Feldstein, 2021). This tension underscores the delicate balance between ensuring security and upholding citizen freedoms in digital governance.

Rule of Law and Institutional Capacity

The effectiveness of digital governance is contingent upon strong institutions and adherence to the rule of law. When enforcement powers are broad and unchecked, there is a risk of excessive executive discretion, arbitrary decisions, and unpredictability in legal outcomes (Suzor, 2016; Taylor, 2021). Strengthening institutional capacity, through independent regulatory bodies, transparent procedures, and judicial oversight, is therefore essential to harness social media’s democratic potential rather than using it as a tool of suppression.

Platform Behaviour and Information Ecosystems

Social media governance is also shaped by the policies and algorithmic designs of the platforms themselves, which influence information flows and public discourse (Gorwa, 2019). Regulatory pressures can encourage platforms to improve transparency, responsiveness, and accountability, but excessive intervention may lead to over-moderation, reducing pluralism and the diversity of voices in public debate. Balancing regulatory oversight with platform autonomy remains a key challenge for policymakers aiming to maintain open yet accountable digital spaces.

Economic and Innovation Impacts

Beyond political and social implications, social media plays a significant role in economic development. It facilitates entrepreneurship, innovation, and market access, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (Appel et al., 2020). Heavy-handed regulation, arbitrary platform shutdowns, or prolonged bans disrupt these economic activities, deter investment, and weaken the digital ecosystem. Policymakers must therefore weigh the economic costs of restrictive digital governance against security or regulatory objectives.

6. Recent developments in Nigeria's digital governance and policy environment

The governance implications of social media in Nigeria have continued to evolve beyond the #EndSARS movement and the 2021 suspension of Twitter. Subsequent developments have indicated a gradual broadening of the state's approach from individual regulatory interventions to a more comprehensive digital-governance framework. Thus, a comprehensive digital-governance framework encompasses data protection, privacy, digital rights, platform governance, digital infrastructure, as well as responsible use of digital technologies. This evolution is reflected in the institutionalisation of data-protection regulation, the implementation of broader digital-economy strategies, and the continuing development of regulatory frameworks for emerging digital technologies (Federal Ministry of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy, 2026; National Information Technology Development Agency, 2020; Nigeria Data Protection Commission, 2026).

A major development was the enactment of the Nigeria Data Protection Act, 2023. It established a statutory framework for the protection of personal data and the regulation of data processing in Nigeria. The Act also established the Nigeria Data Protection Commission as the principal institutional mechanism for overseeing and enforcing data-protection standards. The Commission's mandate includes safeguarding the rights of natural persons to data privacy, promoting secure and privacy-conscious data-processing practices, and strengthening the legal foundations of Nigeria's digital economy through the trusted use of personal data (Nigeria Data Protection Commission, 2023). Thus, the emergence of this framework represents an important development in Nigeria's digital-governance architecture. This is because it places privacy, data security, accountability, and lawful data processing more explicitly within the institutional relationship between citizens, government institutions, businesses, and digital platforms. The Act further provides mechanisms for data-subject rights and remedies, thereby linking digital governance with broader questions of accountability and public trust (Nigeria Data Protection Commission, 2026).

The post-ban evolution of platform-state relations also provides an important extension of the analysis. Following the 2021 suspension of Twitter in Nigeria, access was restored in January 2022. This was as a result of negotiations between the platform and the Nigerian government and the fulfilment of conditions regarding the platform's operations in Nigeria. The episode demonstrated that relations between governments and global digital platforms increasingly involve questions of regulatory compliance, national sovereignty, freedom of expression, content governance, and the responsibilities of technology companies. The Nigerian experience, therefore, illustrates a broader governance dilemma. While governments may have legitimate interests in addressing harmful content, public order, national security, and regulatory compliance, measures that substantially restrict access to communication platforms can also affect citizens' opportunities for expression, access to information, association, and political participation. The Twitter episode, consequently, remains significant as an illustration of the tension between governmental regulatory authority and the protection of democratic digital spaces.

More recent developments further demonstrate that digital governance in Nigeria is becoming increasingly institutionalised. The National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy established a broad policy framework organised around eight pillars, including developmental regulation, digital literacy and skills, infrastructure, digital services, digital society and emerging technologies, and indigenous content development (National Information Technology Development Agency, 2020). This policy orientation has subsequently been complemented by institutional and regulatory initiatives involving the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), the Nigeria Data Protection Commission (NDPC), the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), and the Federal Ministry of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy. NITDA's Strategic Roadmap and Action Plan (SRAP 2.0), 2024-2027, for example, emphasises digital inclusion, regulatory frameworks, innovation, cybersecurity, and the development of Nigeria's digital economy (National Information Technology Development Agency, 2024). In 2026, the Federal Government also announced a National Digital Cloud Policy, designed to provide a framework for cloud computing and data infrastructure while addressing government digital transformation, data security, and digital sovereignty (Federal Ministry of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy, 2026).

The regulatory landscape has consequently moved beyond the exceptional use of platform restrictions toward a more differentiated system involving legislation, specialised regulatory institutions, policy frameworks, compliance mechanisms, and sectoral oversight. This does not necessarily mean that restrictive approaches have disappeared; rather, it suggests that Nigeria's digital-governance model increasingly combines regulation, institutional coordination, digital-development policies, and rights protection. The continuing challenge is to ensure that these instruments are transparent, proportionate, legally grounded, subject to appropriate institutional oversight, and consistent with democratic principles. The Federal Ministry's 2026 directive for a harmonised approach to the regulation of internet platforms and online intermediaries illustrates the continuing need to coordinate the mandates of institutions such as NITDA, the NCC, and the NDPC as digital technologies increasingly cut across traditional regulatory boundaries (Federal Ministry of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy, 2026).

These developments since 2021, therefore, reinforce rather than diminish the significance of the #EndSARS and Twitter cases. The former demonstrated the capacity of social media to facilitate large-scale civic mobilisation, collective expression, agenda-setting, and demands for governmental accountability, while the latter revealed the capacity of the state to exercise regulatory authority over digital communication. The subsequent expansion of data-protection institutions and broader digital-governance frameworks suggests that the central policy challenge has moved beyond the question of whether governments should regulate digital platforms to the more complex question of how digital platforms can be governed in ways that protect privacy, democratic participation, freedom of expression, public trust, and meaningful state-citizen engagement while also addressing legitimate concerns relating to security, harmful content, and regulatory compliance. The continuing evolution of Nigeria's digital-governance framework, therefore, underscores the need for a balanced regulatory approach that recognises both the democratic potential of social media and the legitimate responsibilities of the state in the digital sphere.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

This study demonstrates that social media has profoundly reshaped governance in Nigeria by expanding civic engagement, political mobilisation, and public discourse. The #EndSARS movement illustrates how digital platforms can empower citizens to demand accountability and influence policy, while the Twitter suspension reveals the risks associated with coercive regulation and executive overreach.

While social media introduces governance challenges such as misinformation and hate speech, the Nigerian government's regulatory responses have exposed gaps in institutional capacity, adherence to the rule of law, and trust between the state and citizens. Excessive or heavy-handed regulation undermines freedom of expression, narrows civic space, and erodes democratic legitimacy.

Based on the findings, the study recommends that:
The Nigerian government should adopt transparent, proportionate, rights-respecting, and consultative digital-regulation frameworks in order to balance legitimate government interests with freedom of expression, access to information, and civic participation.
The government should also strengthen the capacity, as well as coordination of digital-governance institutions, clarify institutional mandates, improve inter-agency collaboration, and develop specialised technical and regulatory expertise.
Furthermore, the government should ensure due process, vis-à-vis applying appropriate judicial or independent oversight for decisions that considerably restrict access to digital platforms, with clear legal authority, publicly stated reasons, and avenues for review and redress.
Lastly, the government should institutionalise continuous state-citizen and state-platform dialogue through public consultations, digital feedback devices, and multi-stakeholder engagement on major digital policies. And strengthen the implementation of data-protection and privacy safeguards, specifically under the Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023, to improve accountability and public confidence in digital governance.

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PUBLIC AUDITING IN TRANSITION ECONOMIES: THE ROLE OF PUBLIC AUDITING IN STRENGTHENING PUBLIC SECTOR INTEGRITY AND MITIGATING CORRUPTION RISKS[1]

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Abstract. *Public auditing is extensively acknowledged as an essential foundation in combating corruption and promoting good governance, particularly in transitional economies characterized by fragile institutions and inadequate accountability frameworks. The objective of this article is to examine the significance and efficacy of public auditing in combating corruption in the Republic of North Macedonia. The research employs a qualitative case study methodology, analyzing legislative structures, formal audit reports, and pertinent policy documents, utilizing institutional theory. The findings indicate that North Macedonia has made significant strides in conforming its public auditing framework to global benchmarks; yet, substantial obstacles persist in executing audit recommendations, fostering inter-institutional collaboration, and enhancing institutional independence. The research indicates that the anti-corruption capacity of public auditing is inadequately utilized and highlights the disparity between formal institutional frameworks and practical implementation. The research contributes to the current understanding of public sector accountability by providing empirical data from a transitional economy and offering policy-relevant recommendations for enhancing follow-up processes and the efficacy of anti-corruption governance.*

Keywords: *Public auditing, Anti-corruption, Transition economies, North Macedonia, Public sector accountability.*

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1. Introduction

Corruption continues to be a primary obstacle in transitional economies, eroding institutional credibility, economic viability, and public confidence (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016). In situations characterized by post-socialism and post-authoritarianism, deficiencies in public sector governance have been observed, as swift transformations in political and economic frameworks frequently occur prior to the establishment of robust accountability and monitoring mechanisms (Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2010).

There is growing acknowledgment of public audit as an institutional mechanism for identifying and mitigating corruption. Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) are required to assess the efficacy, efficiency, and legality of public expenditures to enhance accountability and transparency in the utilization of public resources (INTOSAI, 2019). Empirical data indicates that robust and autonomous audit businesses promote financial accountability and diminish the likelihood of rent-seeking activities (Olken, 2007; Schelker & Eichenberger, 2010).

In transition economies, the efficacy of public auditing is often obstructed by external factors, inadequate implementation of audit suggestions, and insufficient institutional independence (Stapenhurst & Titsworth, 2006). While formal legislative structures may adhere to international standards, practical deficiencies frequently hinder the real impact of audit results on anti-corruption efforts.

The situation in North Macedonia serves as a particularly vivid example of these phenomena. As a nation undergoing ongoing governance reform and European integration, North Macedonia has implemented various legal and institutional measures to enhance public financial management and auditing capabilities.

The study investigates these matters by analyzing the institutional structure, operational effectiveness, and deficiencies of public auditing in North Macedonia. The investigation is directed by the subsequent inquiries specifically:

RQ1: To what extent does the formal structure of the State Audit Office (SAO) of North Macedonia align with global auditing standards?

RQ2: What trends of fiscal discrepancies and governance issues can be discerned in the most recent SAO audit reports?

RQ3: What is the genuine impact of public auditing on corruption in North Macedonia?

RQ4: In what manner does the interplay between auditing entities and other relevant institutions affect the follow up on audit recommendations?

Although the State Audit Office is the major subject of this research, the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption (SCPC) is also taken into consideration as a supplementary body in the framework of anti-corruption measures.

This methodology aspires to contribute to the broader academic discourse on accountability and governance in transitional economies.

The paper is structured in the following manner. Section 2 presents a literature assessment of Supreme Audit Institutions and anti-corruption efforts in transitional countries. Section 3 examines the conceptual framework grounded in institutional theory. Section 4 examines the qualitative case study methodology. Section 5 presents the findings derived from the documentary examination. Section 6 discusses the results in relation to existing literature, while Section 7 concludes with ramifications for policy and future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Auditing and accountability in the public sector

Public auditing is extensively recognized in scholarly works as a cornerstone for accountability and transparency within the public sector. It serves as an external oversight apparatus to hold governments responsible for the legality, efficiency, and efficacy of public resource management (Power, 1997). Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) are important in public administration, enhancing legislative scrutiny and furnishing voters with trustworthy data regarding public fund utilization (Lonsdale, Wilkins, & Ling, 2011).

Accountability specialists contend that public auditing narrows the information disparity between governmental entities and stakeholders, hence lessening the likelihood of public resource misuse (Schedler, 1999). Audit institutions facilitate vertical responsibility to the populace and horizontal accountability to legislative and oversight entities via independent and evidence-driven evaluations. Auditing transcends mere technical financial oversight and evolves into an essential component of institutional checks and balances (Pollitt et al., 1999).

The theoretical framework is bolstered by empirical data. National assessments reveal that nations possessing robust auditing frameworks get superior outcomes in public financial management and fiscal discipline (Blume & Voigt, 2011). Schelker and Eichenberger (2010) propose that the presence of autonomous Supreme Audit Institutions correlates with reduced budgetary manipulation, hence enabling auditing to limit self-serving political behavior.

2.2. Audit independence and institutional effectiveness

A crucial factor identified as influencing the efficacy of the audit is the independence of the auditor. Independence includes legal sovereignty, operational adaptability, fiscal resilience, and immunity from political influence in the audit planning and reporting processes (INTOSAI, 2019). In the absence of these conditions, audit institutions may risk transforming into mere symbolic entities with less influence in reality.

Blume and Voigt (2011) argue that formal legal autonomy is inadequate when informal influences remain present, such as through fiscal oversight or selection procedures. In a similar vein, Schelker (2013) observes that audit entities influence financial outcomes when their advice is taken into account within robust accountability frameworks.

The literature also emphasizes the significance of executing audit recommendations. Santiso (2009) asserts that audits foster accountability solely when their outcomes prompt institutional reforms, sanctions, or corrective actions. Ineffective follow-up protocols will result in the recurrence of identical deficiencies in audit cycles, thereby diminishing the reliability and deterrent impact of auditing.

2.3. Public auditing and anti-corruption

Extensive studies have been conducted in public administration and economics regarding the correlation between public auditing and anti-corruption initiatives. Corruption is frequently perceived as a breakdown in governance, characterized by excessive discretion, lack of oversight, and absence of transparency (Rose-Ackerman and Palifka, 2016). Public auditing directly tackles these elements, enhancing supervision and revealing discrepancies in public spending.

Empirical data demonstrate the capacity of audits to mitigate corruption. Olken (2007)'s experimental findings indicate that an increased likelihood of audits significantly diminishes corruption in public infrastructure initiatives. Ferraz and Finan (2011) further illustrate that the public disclosure of audit data enhances electoral accountability and deters corrupt public officials.

2.4. Public auditing in transition economies

The public audit in transitional economies exhibits various institutional frameworks. The transition from centralized governance to democratic and market-driven institutions frequently surpasses the establishment of efficient supervision structures (North, Wallis, & Weingast 2009). As a result, formal auditing frameworks are often paired with informal processes that weaken accountability.

Research concerning post-socialist and transitional nations reveals ongoing issues, including politicization, insufficient administrative competence, and failure to implement audit findings (Stapenhurst & Titsworth, 2006). Global entities advocate for the implementation of sophisticated auditing standards; yet, this is predominantly sporadic or inconsistent (OECD/SIGMA, 2023).

The study indicates the necessity for context-aware evaluations that extend beyond the formal institutional framework to analyze the actual operations of auditing. Case study methodologies are particularly adept at elucidating these processes and clarifying cross-national variations in audit efficacy (Yin, 2018).

3. Theoretical framework

This research is grounded in institutional theory, which offers a comprehensive analytical framework for examining the impact of statutory regulations, informal norms, and organizational processes on the conduct and effectiveness of public sector entities. Institutional theory proves invaluable for comprehending public audits and anti-corruption initiatives in transitional countries, where externally driven alterations frequently coincide with entrenched internal customs and institutional practices.

3.1. Institutional theory and public sector governance

Institutional theory posits that organizations are influenced not only by efficiency factors but also significantly by their institutional environments, including legal frameworks, professional norms, and shared cognitive structures. Institutional frameworks within the public sector influence not just the official organization of entities but also their operational functionality.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) delineate three forms of institutional isomorphism: coercive (legislation, regulations, and political pressures), normative (professional benchmarks and expertise), and mimetic (organizations emulating effective paradigms). These procedures are particularly pertinent to public audits. Global auditing standards impose normative influences on supreme audit institutions, while international organizations advocate governance frameworks that provide mimetic demands for implementation, and audit legislation alongside constitutional limitations introduces coercive pressures.

3.2. Public auditing and institutional theory

The utilization of institutional theory in public auditing exposes the disparity between formal institutional frameworks and their real-world effectiveness. Audit organizations possess the legal authority to implement international standards and optimal practices; however, their efficacy is contingent upon the degree to which these standards are assimilated and utilized within specific political and administrative environments (Scott, 2014).

Academics contend that audit institutions in transitional economies frequently display a type of "ceremonial compliance," wherein legislative and procedural enhancements are implemented mainly to signify adherence to international standards (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), rather than effecting genuine changes in governance practices. In some instances, audit reports might be accessible to the public, although the ramifications of responsibility remain minimal.

Institutional theory elucidates the disparity between the robust appearance of public auditing systems and their actual inefficacy. This framework shifts the analytical focus from legal requirements to informal constraints like external constraints, organizational ethos, and enforcement capabilities.

3.3. Institutional barriers and anti-corruption outcomes

North et al. (2009) contend that corruption is a systemic issue stemming from frail or imbalanced institutional frameworks, rather than from personal wrongdoing. The efficacy of anti-corruption measures is contingent upon the alignment of regulations, follow-up, and societal norms.

Institutional discord is especially evident in transitional economies. The discourse surrounding post-socialist governance has introduced the concept of "professional islands": entities that ostensibly comply with international benchmarks regarding their legal structures, personnel, and processes, yet exist within a wider governance context characterized by broader institutional challenges, including fragmented collaboration and limited follow-up capacity. (Meyer-Sahling, 2009; Dimitrov, 2018). This underscores the paradox of institutional authority among systemic inefficacy.

3.4. The study's analytical implications

This research employs institutional theory to frame public auditing as an institution integrated within a multifaceted network of formal and informal governance frameworks. The structure facilitates the examination of:

- the difference between audit objectives and outcomes;
- administrative and external influences on audit effectiveness; and
- the conditions in which public auditing can make a major contribution to anti-corruption governance.

The theoretical framework additionally shapes the ensuing methodological structure and directs the interpretation of empirical results, allowing the research to extend beyond mere descriptive analysis to a theoretically grounded elucidation of public auditing efficacy in a transitional economic setting.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research design

The research methodology employed is a qualitative case study approach, specifically concentrating on North Macedonia as a prototypical transitional economy in Southeast Europe. The case study method is particularly adept at examining intricate institutional phenomena like public auditing and anti-corruption governance, where legislative frameworks, organizational practices, and political dynamics interrelate in context-dependent manners (Yin, 2018).

North Macedonia serves as a significant empirical context owing to its protracted transition process, persistent efforts to accede to the European Union, and the critical function attributed to public oversight institutions in governance reform initiatives. The study framework facilitates an in-depth examination of the operational dynamics of public auditing and its role, whether direct or indirect, in anti-corruption efforts.

4.2. Case selection and institutional scope

The empirical analysis focuses on two major public oversight institutions:

1. The State Audit Office of North Macedonia (SAO)
2. The State Commission for Prevention of Corruption (SCPC)

These organizations were chosen due to their official duties including financial oversight, accountability, and the prevention of corruption. The engagement of these entities mirrors the wider institutional framework of integrity governance in North Macedonia.

The State Audit Office serves as the principal entity for external public financial scrutiny. The State Commission for Prevention of Corruption is an expert body tasked with identifying conflicts of interest, overseeing asset declarations, and launching anti-corruption initiatives.

While the research inquiries predominantly center on the SAO, the SCPC is incorporated into the examination since it signifies the wider institutional framework of integrity governance.

4.3. Data collection methods

The study's primary data collection approach is documentary analysis. The examined materials include:

1. The State Audit Office's annual and special audit reports (SAO, 2024; SAO, 2025a; SAO, 2025b; SAO, 2025c; SAO, 2025d; SAO, 2025e);
2. The State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption's public decisions, annual reports, and strategic documents (SCPC, 2024-25);
3. National laws that govern public auditing, public financial management, and anti-corruption;
4. The European Commission's progress reports on North Macedonia's governance and rule of law reforms (European Commission, 2024; European Commission, 2025);
5. GRECO compliance reports (GRECO, 2025; Council of Europe, 2025);
6. Transparency International National Integrity System Assessments (Transparency International Macedonia, 2024a; Transparency International Macedonia, 2024b).

The document corpus covers the period 2022–2025, comprising the State Audit Office's annual and special audit reports, international assessments, and national legal frameworks relevant to public auditing, public financial management, and anti-corruption. Documentary analysis is suited for institutional research because it allows for a methodical assessment of formal norms, stated objectives, and reported outcomes, as well as the detection of contradictions between declared commitments and observed actions (Bowen, 2009).

4.4. Analytical strategy

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, guided by the institutional theory framework previously described. Thematic coding followed the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Hsieh and Shannon (2005), proceeding in three stages:

1. **Open coding:** Initial reading of all documents to identify recurring issues (e.g., "budget planning failures," "unfounded payments," "recommendation non-implementation");
2. **Axial coding**: Grouping codes into broader categories (e.g., "compliance failures," "enforcement gaps," "institutional cooperation weaknesses");
3. **Selective coding:** Identifying core themes (e.g., "professional islands in a captured system").

The analysis aimed to identify reoccurring motifs associated with:

- Audit findings on financial irregularities and systemic deficiencies;
- Follow-up mechanisms and the treatment of audit recommendations by relevant institutions;
- References to corruption concerns, conflicts of interest, and the misuse of public monies;
- Coordination and information sharing among audit and anti-corruption authorities.

The coding process was iterative, facilitating the emergence of themes inductively, and was grounded in theory. This method facilitates a more refined comprehension of the role of public auditing in promoting transparency and accountability, as well as the institutional limitations that hinder its effectiveness against corruption.

4.5. Validity, reliability and limitations

The research synthesizes information from multiple authoritative sources to establish construct validity and juxtaposes audit results with anti-corruption documentation and external evaluations. Outcomes are seen more reliable when the sources of data and the methods of analysis are thoroughly recorded. Individuals may replicate the identical analytical procedures to determine if they achieve congruent outcomes.

The paper, meanwhile, acknowledges various limitations. Initially, relying on publicly accessible documents may overlook informal practices and political factors that influence institutional conduct. Secondly, employing a single-country case study constrains the generalizability of the findings; however, they can be analytically applied to other transition economies exhibiting comparable institutional traits (Yin, 2018).

5. Findings

5.1. The State Audit Office identified recurrent financial irregularities

The most recent audits conducted by North Macedonia's State Audit Office demonstrate a pattern of serious financial and operational irregularities across several governmental organizations, indicating chronic governance deficiencies.

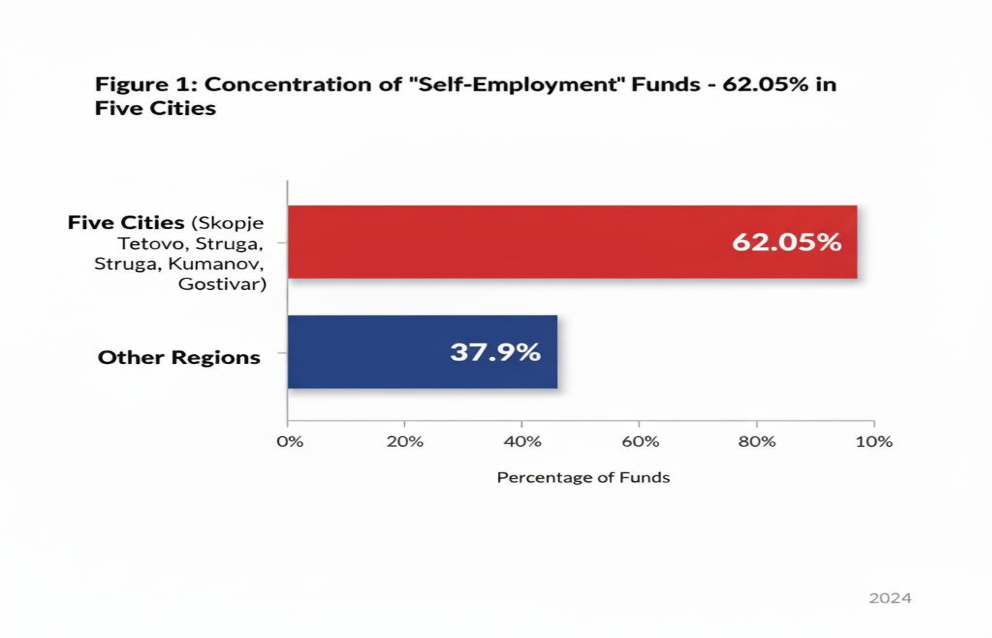
Film Agency (2024)

The examination of the Film Agency for 2024 yielded a negative assessment regarding the financial statements and adherence to regulations (SAO, 2025c). Persistent problems are those recognized in the 2021 audit that continue to be unaddressed (SAO, 2025a). The Agency consistently assumes greater financial responsibilities than its budget can accommodate. The sanctioned budget maintains a 1:5 proportion to project liabilities, indicating that the commitments exceed the available money by a factor of five (SAO, 2025a). The Agency lacks a development strategy and does not possess an essential internal audit unit. The Agency's assets, receivables, and liabilities remain unaccounted for (SAO, 2025a).

Employment Agency (2024)

According to the 2024 assessment of the Employment Agency, governance and financial management were significantly weak (SAO, 2025; Sloboden Pechat, 2026). Official commitments to support balanced regional development were not matched by a uniform distribution of active employment initiatives. Despite some municipalities getting funds up to four times higher than expected, only five municipalities: Skopje, Tetovo, Struga, Kumanovo and Gostivar, received 62.05% of the available finance under the framework of the Self-employment program (Sloboden Pechat, 2026). Besides, out of the 735 participants, only 184 completed the final exam, and this means a success proportion of less than 25% for the IT skills training program (Sloboden Pechat, 2026). Moreover, the lack of sufficient paperwork for some of the transactions and the fact that the majority of payments went to a single attorney sparked further questions regarding accountability and transparency in the allocation of legal services (Sloboden Pechat, 2026). The Agency's handling of past audit recommendations showed little improvement, with three of them being partially or not fulfilled by 2024 (SAO, 2025). The findings point to continuous difficulties with supervision and internal controls, which may indicate the misuse of resources and perhaps corruption.

Figure 1. ***Concentration of 'self-employment' funds - 62.05% in five cities***



Source: State Audit Office, 2024; Sloboden Pechat, 8 July 2026.

Social Assistance System (2022 - June 2025)

An oversight audit regarding the "Disbursement of social protection benefits" revealed that €236,000 (14,536,000 denars) was allocated to 235 beneficiaries who concurrently received social assistance and a pension (SAO, 2026c; Sloboden Pechat, 2026b). This outcome stemmed from "deficiencies in system controls and ex officio data interchange" (Sloboden Pechat, 2026b). Crucial documentation is stored in cardboard containers and registrars within the hallways and offices of the Inter-Municipal Center for Social Affairs Skopje, lacking adequate security measures (Sloboden Pechat, 2026b).

2024 Core Budget

The compliance audit of the 2024 Core Budget revealed significant deficiencies in the design and implementation of the budgetary process (SAO, 2025d). A significant portion of budget proposals exhibited insufficient strategic planning, necessitating the Ministry of Finance to establish temporary allocations, which compromised the congruence of public resources with institutional priorities (SAO, 2025d). The audit additionally underscored discrepancies from the legally mandated structure for court funding, eliciting apprehensions over compliance with statutory fiscal regulations (SAO, 2025d). Moreover, substantial discrepancies between sanctioned and executed capital expenditures indicated ongoing inefficiencies in public financial management, with a notable amount of resources remaining unutilized despite the persistence of related financial commitments (SAO, 2025d). These results indicate deficiencies in budgetary governance, transparency, and accountability that could lead to the misallocation of public resources and elevate the potential for corruption (SAO, 2025d).

State Archives (2026)

The SAO discovered inconsistencies in the functioning of the State Archives, such as noncompliance with legal financial reporting requirements, mismanagement of liabilities and concessions, and an inability to properly implement procurement procedures. The assessment expressed an unsatisfactory opinion about the financial statements' compliance and objectivity (SAO, 2025e).

5.1.1. The State Commission for Prevention of Corruption's public decisions and actions

In addition to the financial discrepancies noted by the State Audit Office, the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption (SCPC) has implemented substantial measures to mitigate corruption risks, albeit its efficacy has been hindered by institutional obstacles and insufficient enforcement follow-up. The SCPC is the principal entity tasked with identifying conflicts of interest, supervising asset declarations, and implementing anti-corruption initiatives.

SCPC Casework Summary (2024-2025)

In 2024, the SCPC received 689 complaints and adopted 742 decisions across corruption, conflict of interest, campaign financing, and asset declarations (Transparency International, 2025). In 2025, the SCPC opened 43 cases and adopted decisions in 38 of them (KOHA, 2026). During the same year, only 42% (635 out of 1,514) of institutions submitted the required vehicle registration data (KOHA, 2025).

5.2. Post-audit follow-up and institutional response

The SAO is legally mandated to report instances of violations or misappropriation of funds to the appropriate authorities. However, indications suggest that the implementation of audit recommendations remains a challenge. Audit reports indicate significant financial infractions; yet, there is limited visibility into the actions taken after audit findings are reported, including administrative, legal, or corrective follow up (Transparency International Macedonia, 2024a).

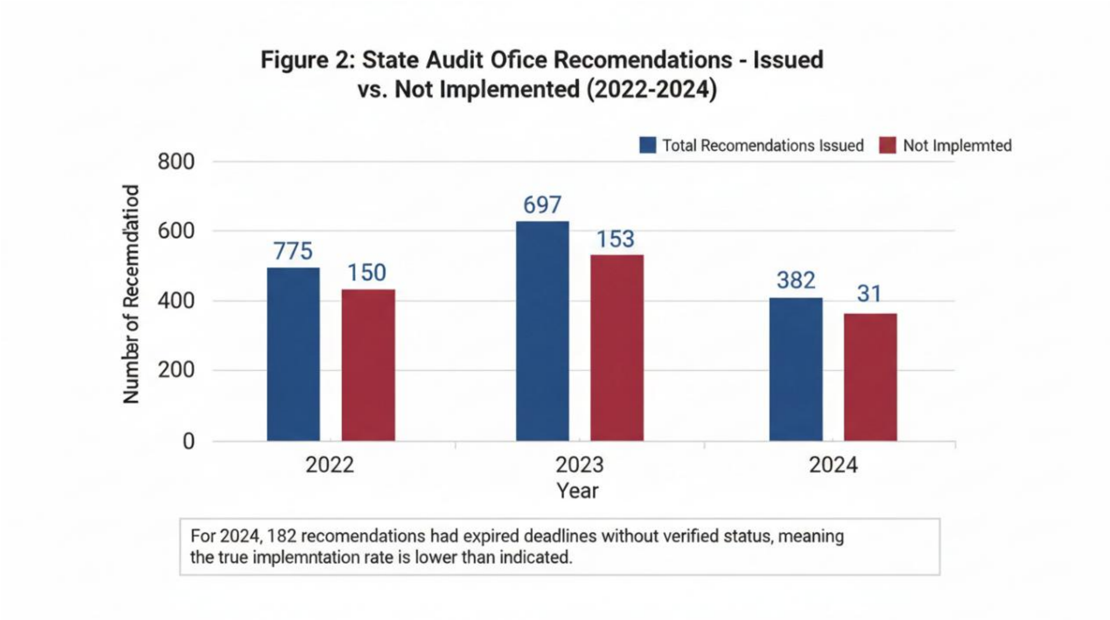
The auditing body possesses considerable strength, boasting a high integrity score of 86 out of 100 as per the National Integrity System evaluation; however, its effectiveness is constrained by the auditees' delayed execution of its recommendations (Transparency International Macedonia, 2024a).

The SAO Annual Report 2024 emphasizes that the adoption rate of audit recommendations provided, relative to the total issued, remains a persistent concern (SAO, 2025g). The European Commission (2025) similarly observed that prominent corruption trials are often postponed, resulting in the expiration of the statute of limitations or yielding minimal penalties, hence exacerbating public skepticism.

The Employment Agency failed to implement 3 out of 8 recommendations from the 2023 audit, while 3 were only partially executed in 2024 (SAO, 2025b). This represents a fundamental incapacity to address recognized shortcomings.

This trend of non-implementation is not an anomaly but signifies a pervasive enforcement deficiency among all examined organizations. As seen in Figure 2, from 2022 to 2024, a considerable quantity of audit recommendations went unexecuted, with the 2024 figures further diminished by 182 suggestions that lapsed without confirmed status.

Figure 2. ***State Audit Office recommendations - Issued vs. not implemented (2022-2024)***



Source: State Audit Office annual report 2024 (pp. 13-16). Note: For 2024, 182 recommendations had expired deadlines without verified status, meaning the true implementation rate is lower than the 85% shown.

5.3. Institutional cooperation and institutional limitations

The auditing framework in North Macedonia includes institutional arrangements for collaboration between the State Audit Office and several governmental entities, including Parliament, the Government, the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption, the Public Prosecutor, etc. These collaborative agreements aim to enhance the communication of audit findings, the exchange of information, and the initiation of actions based on audit evidence.

However, the establishment of cooperative channels has not yet resulted in effective anti-corruption enforcement. Structural restrictions may include:

1. Capacity constraints among the relevant oversight bodies (Transparency International Macedonia, 2024a);
2. Administrative follow-up is sometimes influenced by external considerations (European Commission, 2025);
3. No binding requirements for implementing audit recommendations (SAO, 2025g);
4. Fragmentation of anti-corruption mechanisms (Transparency International Macedonia, 2024b).

5.4. Post-audit follow-up and institutional response

The governance ramifications of audit evidence are further emphasized by autonomous oversight from civil society, notably by Transparency International Macedonia (2024b). Corruption barometer analyses have revealed occurrences of fiscal discrepancies in publicly-funded entities like health institutions and judicial systems, highlighting inadequate financial oversight, significant non-adherence to procurement protocols, and governance shortcomings that pose a corruption risk due to insufficient enforcement follow-up.

Furthermore, the National Integrity System Assessment 2023 underscores the necessity for reforms that guarantee a substantial degree of transparency, including the provision of audit results, governmental activities, and judicial decisions in a readily accessible format, to enhance anti-corruption governance overall (Transparency International Macedonia, 2024b).

Empirical summary

We note that, according to the reported audit outcomes in North Macedonia:

1. The SAO continues to uncover significant financial irregularities and governance problems across different public entities and sectors.

2. Audit evidence is frequently large amounts of public money (millions of euros in deviations and procedural errors).
3. While formal institutional collaboration mechanisms exist, their implementation and follow-up have been less consistent than the audit reporting process.
4. Civil society assessments emphasize that procedural compliance does not always result in satisfactory institutional responses to audit findings.
5. The recurrence of similar findings for several years may suggest that audit recommendations are not being adequately implemented.

6. Discussion

6.1. The gap between audit reporting and institutional follow up: A structural challenge

The outcomes in North Macedonia align with a recognized trend in transitional economies, characterized by a persistent disparity between exposure and enforcement (Stapenhurst & Titsworth, 2006; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). The State Audit Office frequently uncovers significant violations, although the findings of audits seldom lead to enduring corrective steps or legal consequences (Transparency International Macedonia, 2024a).

It should not be regarded as a comprehensive failure of the auditing entities as organizations. Conversely, auditing bodies in transitional economies frequently operate as isolated entities within wider governance frameworks that remain influenced by institutional inertia, bureaucratic stagnation, and inadequate implementation of the rule of law (Meyer-Sahling, 2009; Dimitrov, 2018). In this instance, the audit serves an informational purpose rather than a transformational one; it records and warns about hazards; however, it lacks the authority to compel institutions to act on its findings.

The recurring audit results across various institutions (such as procurement infractions, inadequate internal controls, and misappropriation of public funds) indicate that the impediment exists beyond the auditing phase, specifically within the realms of institutional follow-up, legal oversight, and broader governance frameworks (SAO, 2025b; SAO, 2025g).

6.2. Formal institutional strength versus functional effectiveness

The robust formal capabilities of North Macedonia, coupled with minimal practical influence, exemplify institutional dualism, as referred to in transition literature (North et al., 2009; Scott, 2014). Regarding legal authority, professional benchmarks, and methodological alignment, audit institutions excel in integrity evaluations (Transparency International Macedonia, 2024a); however, this proficiency does not manifest in results.

This dichotomy is strengthened by audit institutions' limited authority to:

1. Require corrective actions;
2. Demand the execution of recommendations;
3. Ensure transparent follow-up by audited entities (SAO, 2025g).

Consequently, despite the SAO's rigorous and professional audit work, the implementation of its recommendations depends largely on the responsiveness of other institutions. This outcome aligns with the overarching empirical observations from post-socialist and EU accession nations, where institutional reforms emphasize structure and form, however the authority to implement them is feeble (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Stapenhurst & Titsworth, 2006).

6.3. Audit and anti-corruption fragmentation

The results indicate an absence of operational consistency between audits and anti-corruption measures. Despite the frequent identification of corruption risks in audit reports (SAO, 2025a; SAO, 2025b; SAO, 2025c), these indicators are not consistently converted into preventive or remedial actions by the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption and prosecutorial authorities (European Commission, 2025; Transparency International Macedonia, 2024a).

This division results in less accountability and reduced public confidence. In transitional economies, anti-corruption frameworks typically function as independent entities rather than components of a broader accountability system (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). Reports of corruption are frequently made, yet rarely face consequences, fostering a perception of impunity (Transparency International, 2024).

6.4. EU-driven reform and institutional mimicry

A significant characteristic of transition economies is the reform conditionality driven by external forces, as evidenced by the evaluations from the European Commission (European Commission, 2024; European Commission, 2025). North Macedonia has achieved significant advancements in conforming to EU benchmarks in audits, public financial oversight, and openness. Nevertheless, a significant portion of the harmonization has occurred inside the legislative, institutional, and procedural frameworks.

The phenomenon is institutional imitation (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) of governance frameworks within EU Member States, yet constrained by internal political economies that hinder enforcement. Consequently, audit institutions meet the criteria for admission, although there has been no comparable advancement in anti-corruption outcomes. Meyer and Rowan (1977) refer to this as 'ceremonial compliance', wherein legislative and procedural changes are implemented primarily to demonstrate adherence to international standards, rather than to alter genuine governance practices.

6.5. Evaluating audit effectiveness in transition economies

The findings suggest that depending exclusively on enforcement results to evaluate audit efficacy could be deceptive for transitional economies. The efficacy of the audit ought to be perceived as a mechanism that fosters transparency, documentation, and risk consciousness, especially in the absence of adequate enforcement (Power, 1997; Santiso, 2009).

This, nonetheless, does not lessen the necessity to fortify the audit-enforcement connection. Instead, it indicates that audit reform alone is insufficient without concurrent enhancements to judicial autonomy, prosecutorial efficacy, and political responsibility (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015).

The concept of "professional islands" (Meyer-Sahling, 2009) holds particular significance in this context, as it aligns with the theoretical framework previously established. The North Macedonian SAO exemplifies this phenomenon: it is institutionally robust and professionally adept, yet its practical effectiveness is limited by the broader governance environment, characterized by institutional fragmentation and weak follow-up capacity. This research indicates that the essence of institutional theory, the disparity between formal regulations and informal behaviors (Scott, 2014), is crucial for comprehending why audit organizations in transitional economies often do not fulfill their anti-corruption commitments.

7. Conclusion

The study examined public auditing within the framework of anti-corruption efforts in a transitional economy, utilizing North Macedonia as a case study. The findings suggest that the government has established a robust auditing framework that adheres to international and EU standards. The State Audit Office of North Macedonia has demonstrated commendable institutional professionalism, consistently producing high quality audit reports that meet international standards and providing comprehensive financial oversight across the public sector. Nonetheless, the actual effectiveness of auditing in curbing institutional weaknesses remains constrained by factors beyond the SAO's direct control.

The State Audit Office consistently uncovers significant financial discrepancies in critical areas like social funds, municipalities, cultural organizations, and public enterprises. These include irregularities in procurement, inefficacy of internal controls, misappropriation of public monies, and lack of transparency in budget execution. Despite the SAO's rigorous and methodologically sound audit work, the consistent emergence of analogous results over several years suggests that audit recommendations are not being adequately followed up by the relevant institutions.

The State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption, together with other relevant institutions and audited organizations, persists in implementing inconsistent follow up measures, and the majority of audit recommendations lack a binding mechanism for implementation. Such a fragmented chain of accountability significantly reduces the deterrent impact of the SAO's otherwise diligent and professional auditing efforts.

These conclusions are supported by evaluations from the European Commission, which recognize the SAO's institutional strength and professionalism while noting persistent issues in the follow up and execution of its recommendations.

The results yield several implications for policy. The deterrent impact of an audit would be enhanced if the audit's recommendations were subject to a more effective follow up mechanism. Secondly, rectifying the transparency deficit identified in this study necessitates improving the clarity of the follow up procedure, such as by disclosing the government's responses and judicial decisions about audit findings. Thirdly, binding protocols would enhance collaboration among the SAO, the SCPC, and other relevant institutions, therefore diminishing fragmentation. Fourth, further improvements in the rule of law and institutional capacity would contribute to a more accountable governance structure.

The paper contributes three elements to the body of work regarding Supreme Audit Institutions in transitional economies. Initially, it provides methodical documentation proof of the disparity between audit exposure and follow up in a nation undergoing EU membership, derived from a comprehensive collection of SAO reports, global evaluations, and legislative texts. Secondly, it underscores persistent patterns of institutional inadequacy, including the failure to implement audit recommendations and disjointed inter agency collaboration that previous research has noted informally but not documented quantitatively. Thirdly, it introduces the concept of "follow up transparency" as a facet of audit efficacy, asserting that the lack of public follow up data constitutes a significant accountability deficiency.

Ultimately, the North Macedonian example illustrates that public auditing is a crucial yet inadequate tool for effective governance in transitional economies. The SAO stands as a professional and competent institution, yet its impact remains limited by the broader institutional environment. Audit centric oversight initiatives will persist in revealing misconduct; nevertheless, they will not result in a sustainable improvement without the establishment of effective follow up protocols and improved cooperation between auditing and oversight bodies.

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EVOLUTION OF THE MINIMUM VOTING AGE IN THE EUROPEAN UNION AFTER THE WORLD WAR II[1]

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Abstract. *The minimum voting age has become an increasingly debated topic in European public policy and electoral law, particularly in the context of initiatives aimed at strengthening youth participation in democratic processes. While most European Union Member States maintain the voting age at 18, several countries have introduced reforms allowing citizens aged 16 or 17 to participate in elections. This article examines the evolution of the minimum voting age in the European Union after the Second World War through a comparative analysis of national electoral reforms. The research combines the analysis of legal and academic sources with a comparative approach and a questionnaire-based empirical component addressing public perceptions in Romania. Particular attention is paid to the Austrian case, the first EU Member State to lower the voting age to 16 for all elections. The findings indicate that lowering the voting age cannot, by itself, increase democratic participation. Its effectiveness depends on complementary factors such as civic education, political literacy and institutional trust. The article concludes that, in the Romanian context, any future reform should be preceded by sustained public policies designed to strengthen civic competences among young citizens.*

Keywords: *Voting age, Electoral reform, Youth political participation, European Union, Civic education, Romania, Democracy.*

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1. Introduction

Lowering the minimum voting age is one of the most-discussed topics in recent literature on how young people can participate in politics and how representative democracy evolves. Over the past twenty years, several countries in Europe have studied or implemented changes whereby the right to vote has been extended to 16-year-olds. These countries believe that if young people get involved in elections earlier, it can help strengthen democratic culture and increase civic participation in the long run. However, these initiatives have sparked discussions about how politically mature teenagers are, how well informed they are, and whether they can make responsible choices.

At the moment, most countries in the European Union have the minimum voting age set at 18, but the different types of rules show that there is no agreement across Europe on the best time to have the right to vote. The experiences of countries such as Austria, Malta, Belgium or Germany show that there are various approaches, influenced by political, legal and social factors. In Romania, although the minimum voting age remained the same after the adoption of the Constitution in 1991, the discussion about its possible reduction continues to appear both in academia and in public conversations.

With this in mind, this article examines changes in the minimum voting age across European Union countries and assesses whether it would be appropriate to lower the minimum voting age to 16. The study aims to find the most important written arguments on this subject, to compare experiences in Europe, and to examine how this reform is perceived in Romania.

The methodology used combines the study of documents from the specialized literature and European and national legislation with a comparative analysis of the changes in elections in the countries that are part of the European Union. This study also uses survey results from a group of respondents to highlight their opinions on lowering the minimum voting age and the factors that affect young people's political involvement.

The article is divided into five main parts. The first part discusses the basic ideas of the right to vote and how universal suffrage has evolved. The second part compares how the minimum voting age has changed in different European countries, including Romania. The third part analyzes the pros and cons of lowering the electoral limit. The fourth part focuses on youth political participation and the importance of civic education, and the last part presents a case study on electoral reform in Austria, followed by the conclusions of the research.

Research question

What are the main European trends regarding the reduction of the minimum voting age and how is this reform perceived in the Romanian context?

2. Theoretical foundations regarding the right to vote

2.1. History of voting

The right to vote is an essential pillar of representative democracy, giving citizens the opportunity to be involved in decision-making and to elect their representatives. The changes in this right show how democratic regimes have evolved, from the limited forms of participation in ancient times and the Middle Ages to the establishment of universal suffrage in the twentieth century until recent polarization studies (Raiu & Negoiță, 2024). The gradual expansion of the right to vote for women and other groups that were left out was one of the most significant changes in modern democratic systems. (Society of Legal Sciences, 2024).

2.2. The evolution of the electoral system in Romania in the context of the Second World War

The transformations of the Romanian political system before the outbreak of the Second World War. In the period between the two world wars, the voting system in Romania operated under the rules established by the Constitution of 1923, which guaranteed a universal, equal, and secret right to vote for the election of members of Parliament. (Scurtu, 2004, pp. 112-115).

Against the backdrop of political uncertainty and economic problems in the 1930s, Romanian democracy began to face significant challenges (Raiu, 2012). The rise of authoritarian regimes in Europe and internal political tensions led to a decline in democratic functioning and a diminishing importance of parliamentary institutions.

The 1938 Constitution reshaped the political framework and diminished the importance of political parties, replacing them with a state-run political system. In this context, elections to Parliament took on a largely formal characteristic, and political representation was subject to royal authority.

The elections for Parliament held in 1946 marked an essential point in the development of the electoral system in Romania. Even though they were officially declared democratic elections, many historical research studies indicate that the electoral conduct was strongly affected by political and administrative interventions. (Constantiniu, 2008, p. 396).

2.3. Concept of universal suffrage

Universal suffrage is one of the most important principles of democracy today. This means that all citizens of legal age have the right to choose those who represent them in politics, without being discriminated against on the basis of money, social position, race or gender. Today, universal suffrage means that all citizens can participate equally in elections and is the result of a long history, full of political reforms, social movements, economic change and good governance (Raiu, 2015).

In the earliest times of modern states, the right to vote was reserved only for certain social groups, especially those who owned property or for economic and political elites (Sabie et. al. 2025). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, electoral systems were based on the census vote, which allowed people to participate in political decisions only if they paid taxes or had enough money. This approach reflects the idea that only those people who contributed significantly to the state budget should have the right to decide on leadership. As ideas about enlightenment and equality began to spread in Europe and America, these restrictions were challenged. The political revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as the French Revolution and the liberal revolutions in Europe, laid the groundwork for more inclusive political systems and enabled the gradual expansion of the right to vote. (Wellman, 2004, p. 56).

3. Evolution of the voting age in Europe. Benchmarking

3.1. Evolution of the minimum voting age in the European States

The analysis of changes in voting age in Europe, as presented in the table, shows a significant shift. This shift was from a strict idea of political maturity to a model of participation for all. The information gathered provides an overview of how democratic countries have changed in recent years the age at which a person can influence the community to which he belongs. Thus, reducing from 21 years to 16 years in some countries.

Change from 21 to 18 years old:

After the war, most European countries, such as Germany, France, Belgium, and Greece, kept the voting limit at 21. This rule reflects a traditional mindset about civic responsibility. The first important changes occurred in the 70s. Germany (in 1970) and France (in 1974) were among the first countries to amend electoral law, lowering the age to 18, taking a significant step towards modernization.

In France, the change was linked to the modernization of political and social life, recognizing the new demographic realities. In Greece, this transition had a specific path, and the reduction of the age from 21 to 18 years was made in 1972, showing that it was aligning with the European trends of that time.

The most important part of the table shows the countries that have decided to allow voting at the age of 16, a change that is transforming democracy in Europe. Austria (2007) is considered the first and most advanced country in the European Union, being the first to set this minimum age for all types of elections. This law was a good example for the other European countries. Malta (2018) is another example of gradual change. Through changes to its law, Malta first tested youth voting at the local level in 2015, then extended this option to all elections, becoming the second country to fully recognize the ability of 16-year-olds to vote.

Table 1. ***Evolution of the minimum voting age in selected European Union member states***

Country	**Initial voting age (after WWII)**	**Current age**	**Year of amendment**	**Normative act**	**Reform type**	**Remarks**
Germany	21	18/16 (EU Parliament elections and some regional elections)	1970/2024	Federal Law Electoral / Amendment	Amendment to the Federal Electoral Act/ amendment	The general trend of expanding the political rights of young people
France	21	18	1974	Normative act adopted by the Parliament (L 74-631/ 1974)	Electoral reform	Decrease in the context of political modernization
Austria	19	16	2007	Electoral Law Amendment	Legislative reform	The first EU country to lower the minimum voting age to 16
Malta	18	16	2018	Electoral law	Constitutional and legislative reform	In 2015, the age of 16 for local elections. And in 2018 for all elections. The second state to lower the voting age

Belgium	21	18/16 (for the European Parliament)	2022	Law on elections to the European Parliament)	Legislative reform	Belgium has only allowed 16-year-olds to vote in European Parliament elections, but has kept the 18-year-old age limit for nationwide elections.
Greece	21	17	2016	Law 4406/2016) Legislative reform	Legislative reform	In 1972 the vote went from 21 to 18 years old

Source: Author's processing based on Epthinktank (2023), European Commission (2024), Oesterreich.gv.at (2023), Agerpres (2018) and European Youth Forum (2016).

An important observation that emerges from the data provided is that the right to vote is applied differently, something that is seen in Germany (2024) and Belgium (2022). These countries have set the age of 16 for European Parliament elections, but have kept different ages for national elections. This method suggests a step-by-step approach to young people's involvement in politics, first allowing them to express themselves in an international framework.

In Greece (2016), the threshold was set at 17 years, bringing a different note in the European context. This choice can be seen as a middle ground between the desire to offer more political rights and a more cautious behavior regarding lowering the voting age.

The conclusion that can be drawn from the table is that there is a clear tendency to give more political rights to young people. If in the first phase of modernization it was established that all young people have the right to vote from the age of 18, now we see that we are moving towards 16 years old. This change is not just a simple adjustment of the law on voting, but shows a transformation in the way we think about politics and subsequent fields such as religion, morality, or the environment in Europe (Raiu, 2024), giving young people the opportunity to be active in building the future of the society in which they live.

3.2. The case of Romania

The analysis of the electoral threshold in Romania shows how the right to vote has been influenced by the various types of government from the post-war period to the present day. Unlike other European countries that have discussed a threshold of 16 years (for example Austria), Romania set an earlier voting age of 18, although there have also been many significant changes in terms of ideologies, according to *"Youth Participation in Representative Democracy"*.

The year 1946 is a moment of great importance, marked by the decree of July 15. Although the minimum voting age remained at 21, the reforms brought a truly universal vote to Romania for the first time, allowing women and military personnel to vote. This stage was made in a rather turbulent political period and led to the end of the restrictive vote, thus increasing the basis of democracy.

A major change occurred in 1948, when the first Constitution of the communist regime was adopted. The table shows how the minimum voting age has been lowered from 21 to 18 years. This change was not just an administrative adjustment, but was part of a political strategy that wanted to involve youth in supporting the new regime. It is important to note that after this moment, the age of 18 remained constant in the Romanian electoral system, even after the regime changes at the end of the last century.

After Romania transitioned to democracy, it was confirmed that the 18-year threshold is maintained, but now it has a new basis of legitimacy:

Constitution of 1991: This is the main law that establishes that everyone must have the right to vote, equally, directly, in secret and freely, in a state where the law is respected. The table shows that the new fundamental law kept the age of 18 as the age limit for voting, providing real democratic value, unlike how it was used in the past.

2003 Revision: The study shows that the 2003 Constitution Amendment Act retained the same idea of the age of 18 as the age limit, considering young people to be quite mature.

4. Arguments regarding the reduction of the minimum voting age

4.1. Arguments in favour of lowering the voting age

A first argument found in the scientific article is that, with the lowering of the minimum voting age, the interests of young people for political life would also expand, and if 16-17-year-olds had been involved in the 2024 Romanian elections, the number of eligible people would have doubled, adding approx. 410000 citizens. The accelerated aging of the population is another factor for the decrease in the minimum voting age. According to the (National Institute of Statistics, 2022) (Tempo Pop107A), on January 1, 2022, the 40-54 age group was 56.71 years older than the 0-14 age group.

Another pro-argument is that the international report (Be Seen. Be Heard., 2021), shows that countries that have lowered the minimum age have much higher civic engagement from young people. This is confirmed in the federal elections in Germany. Following these elections in 2021, compared to those in 2017, the turnout of young people in the 18-20 category increased by 4.6% in states where they can vote from 16 years old and by only 0.5% in those where the minimum age is 18 years old.

Extending the right to vote for everyone and lowering the voting age are two of the most important changes in democracy. In Romania, the right to vote was granted to all men in 1918, but women did not have this right. Although women asked to vote and contributed a lot to important events in previous history, they were left out in politics. The 1938 constitution gave women the right to vote, but only to those who could read and write.

The age at which one can vote does not coincide with the age at which one becomes of age, that is, to make legal decisions on their own. Although the law says that a person becomes an adult at the age of 18 and can sign official documents on their own, in Romania, young people between the ages of 14 and 17 gradually receive various rights that allow them to actively participate in society, politics or culture.

For example, from the age of 14, young people have a limited exercise capacity, which allows them to do things like money management or signing up for small expenses. So, starting at the age of 14, there is no longer a need for parents to represent them, but only to accept what they want to do. If the parents do not give their consent, the young people can ask the judges for permission directly.

Also, from the age of 16, according to labor laws, young people can find a job without asking their parents. In addition, criminal law provides that from the age of 16, young people are responsible for their actions. This means that, from the perspective of the law, at the age of 16 there is no longer the presumption that young people do not understand what they are doing, so they can be held accountable for their actions without the need for special evidence. In conclusion, Romanian law provides young people with rights and responsibilities that make them considered more mature before they reach the age of 18. (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2022).

Another argument in support of lowering the voting age is that young people who have reached the age of 16 can start a family, acquiring through marriage the full capacity to exercise. Concluding this argument, we can ask the following question: if a 16-year-old is allowed to start a family at this age, why should he not be allowed to vote? (Niță, 2021).

Political scientist Gabriel Bădescu believes that 16-year-olds have the same opinions and convictions as 18-year-olds who have the right to vote, as they are equally informed about politics and society. He also claims that following the possibility of young people to vote from the age of 16 will develop their civic skills more quickly, which will help them throughout their lives and contribute to a more politically developed country. “Last but not least, 16-year-olds should have a voice of their own when political decisions are made that concern them.” He adds that, on the one hand, there are neuroscience studies that show how the brain is constantly changing at 16-17 years old, and the fact that 25 is the new 18.

Donald Runciman believes that people should be able to vote from the age of 6. This is a rather unusual opinion that he also mentioned in The Guardian. He says that this point of view has a logic. In ancient Athens and until the 70s, there were more young people under 40 who voted than seniors over 60. Now, however, things have changed. He argues that once older people are in control of the economy and politics, with the largest number of voters, their interests prevail.

Then, Runciman says that the idea that children are easy to influence is no longer valid. He recalls that those who opposed the vote for women used the same argument: why give them the right to vote if it is known that they will vote as their men tell them.

Teacher Ivona Mihaela Grigorescu, school counselor at the “Cuza Voda” National College, claims that young people who want to vote from the age of 16 know their rights well. He also claims that there is still a category of young people who need a deeper education in the field of active citizenship and an important role is played by the environment they come from. She observes that cognitively, children are ready to vote and bring about a change for the better. On the other hand, it also has students who do not get involved at all and for them, material values are more important.

4.2. Arguments against lowering the voting age

A reason against this idea, discussed in the places where the extension of the right to vote to 16–17-year-olds is being analyzed, including in Romania, is that they are not ready to vote responsibly and consciously. They do not understand well how democracy works, what doctrines and programs the parties that participate in the elections have and how voters express themselves. Paradoxically, from the perspective of formal education offered by the state for the development of civic skills, at the age of 16 a young person already has the necessary skills to vote. Although Romania has recognized since 2011 that one of the essential skills that graduates should have is civic and social, a 2021 report by the Romanian Academic Society and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation shows that, more than 10 years after it was included in the National Education Law no. 1/2011, in the national high school curriculum there is no real attention to the development of students' civic and social skills, but only superficial attention.

To help children realize how important voting is, countries such as the Netherlands and Germany have started projects in which students in the school participate in mock elections. Here, middle and high school students, who do not have the right to vote, can get involved in votes that imitate real elections, but without having a decisive voice. Studies in Germany show that these sham elections have positive results that could help expand the right to vote for 16–17-year-olds.

One of the reasons why some are against giving 16–17-year-olds the right to vote is that they fear that they could vote without sufficient information and that they would prefer extreme parties. However, research conducted during Germany's 2021 federal election shows that things are different. In the official elections, the far-right party Alternative für Deutschland won 10.3% of the vote. On the other hand, in the mock elections where more than a million students who cannot vote in the real elections participated, the AFD had only 5.1%, much less than in the real elections. DIE WELT (2021).

One of the arguments against lowering the voting age concerns the way teenagers obtain their political information. Recent studies show that digital platforms (Zamora-Medina et. al., 2023), such as TikTok, are one of the main sources of information for young people under 30, which can amplify exposure to disinformation and influence electoral decisions. According to a Pew Research Center study, young people under 30 use this platform for political information. McClain, C. (2024). About half of TikTok users under 30 keep up with politics and news there (Rekker, 2023).

The analysis of the presented points of view shows that we cannot view the reduction of the minimum voting age solely in terms of biological age. Both the arguments for and against this idea indicate that the success of such a change depends on civic education, political knowledge, and the institutional environment in which it is implemented. Examples from European countries studied suggest that granting the right to vote yields positive effects when accompanied by policies that help young people develop their civic skills.

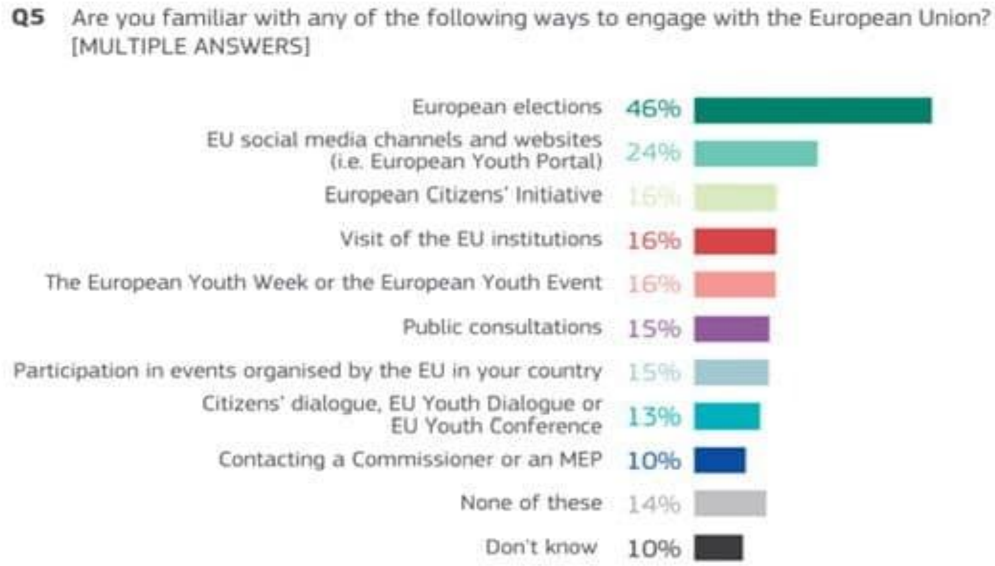
5. Youth participation in voting and influencing factors

5.1. Young people’s participation in voting

Participation in elections refers to people who can actually vote. Usually, young people vote less often than older adults. The participation of young people (15-30) in voting was analyzed separately because they have a different mentality than those who have more experience, and their beliefs are more different. They represent a distinct demographic group (Mina-Raiu et. al., 2024), and traditional ways (political parties) can influence them positively or negatively.

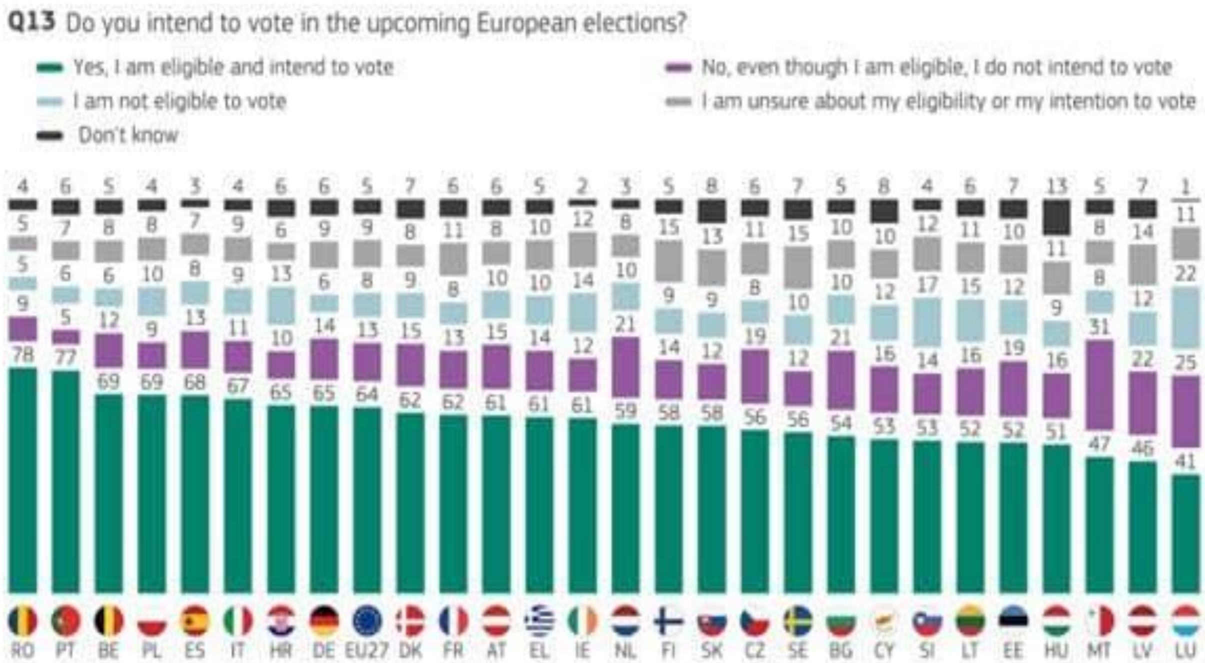
A small proportion of young people in the European Union were asked how well they know the ways to interact with the Union (Geantă et. al. 2025). 46% of them say they know about the European elections. Almost a quarter (24%) of them are aware of Union social media platforms and websites, such as the European Youth Portal. These findings suggest that, while electoral participation is relatively well recognized, awareness of other opportunities for engagement with EU institutions remains limited. Increasing the visibility of official communication channels and youth-oriented platforms could encourage greater civic participation and strengthen young people’s involvement in European democratic processes. European Commission (2024).

Figure 1. ***Young people's familiarity with ways of engaging with the European Union***



Source: European Commission (2024), Youth and Democracy - May 2024 – Eurobarometer Survey.

Figure 2. Young people's intention to vote in the upcoming European elections



Source: European Commission (2024). Youth and Democracy - May 2024 - Eurobarometer Survey.

An extremely exciting result is represented by the high percentage of willingness to vote observed in Romania (78%), the highest among all the member countries evaluated. This figure suggests an increased interest among young people to get involved in elections, even at a declarative level. However, the desire mentioned in a questionnaire does not always translate into effective participation in the vote, as this can be influenced by aspects such as the credibility of the institutions, electoral campaigns or the internal political situation. In contrast, countries such as Luxembourg, Latvia and Malta have considerably lower voting intention rates, which shows significant differences between Member States in terms of young people's political engagement.

5.2. Youth participation as an indicator of democracy

The participation of young people is seen as a very important thing for the health of a democracy because they represent the future of the community (Ribeiro et. al. 2023). Young people constitute a large group in many countries. If they don't care about politics, it could mean that public power is not perceived as legitimate. Furthermore, youth participation shows how much they believe in institutions and whether they feel the political system gives them the opportunity to express themselves and that their vote can bring about real change. For example, Eurobarometer surveys show that many young people believe that voting is the most important way to get involved in democracy (38%), while there are also young people who are not interested in politics or voting. European Commission. (2024).

According to the International Study on Civic and Citizenship Education (ICCS 2022), it shows that "2 out of 10 students (eighth grade) have difficulty understanding democracy and the functioning of the state". The study demonstrates that students have average civic knowledge. On a scale from A (advanced level) to D (minimum level), most Romanian students are placed at level B (30.6% compared to 31.1% ICCS average) and C (26.8% compared to 23.8% ICCS average) of competence; they demonstrated that they can use general civic principles and concepts (level C), respectively that they understand public institutions (level B).

Only 18.3% of Romanian students achieve level A or above. They are able to evaluate certain policies/laws based on the principles on which they are based. This proportion is significantly lower than the 2022 ICCS average (30.6%), Sweden (52.8%), Poland (47.6%), and Estonia (43.4%).

The study also contains recommendations for the Ministry of Education as follows:

Ensuring the conditions to improve the status of the Social Education discipline: specialized teachers who have a stable job in this discipline itself, inspectors and special meetings, specific projects and teaching materials, a network of experts and trainers who are qualified.

Collaborating with state institutions at the central and local levels to involve them in informing, consulting, and including children and young people in the decision-making process; City halls, the government, parliament, and other public organizations should be obliged by law to develop programs for children and young people.

The 2024 European elections saw a decrease in voting, especially among young people, so only 36% of eligible people under 25 years of age voted; in 2019 it was 42%. Giusto, H. (2024).

5.3. Civic education

Civic education is an essential element that affects the way young people interact with politics. In most European countries, education includes courses that help to understand how democratic institutions operate, citizens' rights and responsibilities, and electoral processes. The aim of these programs is to develop civic skills and encourage the political involvement of the younger generations (Raiu, 2021). Research from Europe suggests that young people who use digital tools and attend civics classes are more inclined to vote, follow political activities, and participate in various civic actions. Civics education helps cultivate democratic skills, such as critical thinking, understanding of political dynamics, and the ability to participate in public discussions.

Education programs in Europe, such as Erasmus+, also help to raise political awareness among young people and strengthen the sense of European identity. Around 67% of young people in Europe believe that the European Union influences their daily lives, and almost half of them are aware of European programs dedicated to education and civic participation. (European Commission, 2024). In this light, civic education is seen as a fundamental resource for strengthening political engagement and creating a sustainable democratic culture in European communities. The data in this chapter shows that young people show their interest in society through other methods, such as internet activism, protests or helping as volunteers. Also, civic education and knowledge levels are very important for understanding how to vote. Modern technology has a big impact on how young people obtain information and participate in politics, giving them quick access to news, but also risks of being misinformed or manipulated.

6. Case study: Austria – voting at 16

6.1. Context of electoral reform

Austria is an important example in Europe of lowering the minimum voting age. In 2007, this country was the first in the European Union to allow 16-year-olds to vote in all elections, whether parliamentary, presidential, local or European Parliament elections. (EPRS, 2023). The electoral reform did not appear out of nowhere, but was preceded by changes in the regions. In the years prior to the national reform, several areas in Austria had already lowered the voting age to 16 for local and regional elections, which made reform at the federal level possible. (Council of Europe, 2013).

The decrease in the legal voting age in Austria has been explained by several political and social reasons. The first reason was that the authorities believed that young people were directly affected by political decisions and thus should have the right to get involved in the democratic process.

Another important reason was that early voting can help form stable voting behavior in the long term. Research shows that people who participate in the first elections they can vote in are more likely to vote in future elections as well.

The reform was also supported by the idea of providing a stronger voice for young people in democracy. Lowering the voting age has been seen as a way for young people to be more influential in policies that affect their lives, such as education, environmental protection and jobs. (Zeglovits and Aichholzer, 2014).

6.2. Legislative process

The adoption of Austria's electoral reform in 2007 was the result of a long and complicated road in the federal parliament. The idea of lowering the minimum voting age was presented in the program of the coalition government formed after the 2006 parliamentary elections. During that time, discussions about youth participation in politics became increasingly important in Europe, and the Austrian authorities believed that this reform could help strengthen participatory democracy.

The draft law was created by the Ministry of the Interior and then sent to the federal parliament for discussion. The proposed law wanted to change the existing electoral rules and some aspects of the fundamental law related to the right to vote. Since the minimum voting age was set by the constitution, the reform had to be accompanied by a change in the constitution, which required the support of a qualified parliamentary majority.

During the debates in Parliament, the parties discussed whether 16 and 17-year-olds are able to participate in the elections. Supporters of the reform said that young people are already active in society and education, and that early voting could develop an active political culture for them.

The reform was also supported by the need to adapt democratic systems to the changes in today's society.

Parliament approved electoral reform in 2007, ruling that young Austrians can vote from age 16. After this change, Austria became the first country in the European Union to allow voting from the age of 16 for all types of elections. The implementation of this reform has also brought changes in the electoral law, as well as information programs for young voters. The change has also made Austrian officials focus more on civic education and political information for young people to help them participate more easily in democracy. So, when it was decided that people could vote from the age of 16, other measures were taken to help young people get involved in politics and become more interested in elections. (Zeglovits and Aichholzer, 2014).

6.3. The impact of the reform on youth participation

Allowing 16-year-olds to vote has garnered significant interest among researchers and European institutions, as Austria serves as a unique case study within Europe.

Research indicates that 16- and 17-year-olds participate in elections at rates nearly comparable to those of 18- to 21-year-olds, and in certain contexts, even higher. This is largely due to the fact that adolescents at this age remain within a stable school environment, which provides them with greater access to civic education resources (Zeglovits and Aichholzer, 2014).

Furthermore, the Austrian experience demonstrates that lowering the voting age to 16 did not result in a decline in voting quality, despite the apprehensions raised by critics of the reform (Zeglovits and Aichholzer, 2014).

6.4. Austria's significance in Europe

Based on the gathered evidence, it can be concluded that Austria's experience has exerted a major influence on debates surrounding the lowering of the voting age in other European countries. Consequently, various nations have begun implementing similar reforms for different types of elections. For instance, several countries now permit 16-year-olds to vote in local or European elections.

From this perspective, the Austrian case is frequently utilized as a benchmark to analyze how lowering the voting age affects youth engagement and the overall functioning of democratic systems.

The analysis of the Austrian case demonstrates that lowering the voting age to 16 can be successfully implemented, provided that specific social and institutional conditions are met. The reform in Austria was designed to enhance youth participation and foster active engagement in democratic processes.

The reviewed literature shows that young voters in Austria participated at levels comparable to other age cohorts and exhibited no lower level of political competence. However, the success of this reform remains heavily reliant on an educational system that emphasizes civic education and the development of essential democratic skills.

Thus, Austria’s experience proves that lowering the voting age can yield positive outcomes; nevertheless, the implementation of such a reform depends on the specific circumstances of each country and the presence of supportive policy frameworks.

7. Final conclusions

The debate on lowering the minimum voting age shows one of the current problems of modern democracies, namely how to strike a balance between encouraging people to vote and ensuring the responsible use of the right to vote. The research in this study shows that age is not the only important aspect of participating in politics; It also depends on civic education, how well-informed young people are, trust in democratic institutions and the social environment in which they form their political opinions.

The analysis of the development of the right to vote, the experiences of European states that allowed voting from the age of 16 and the pros and cons of this reform show that there is no single solution that suits all countries. The results vary depending on the features of each political system, the existing civic culture and the measures taken to prepare young people to vote.

The specific case of Austria shows that lowering the minimum voting age was part of a larger reform, which also included legal changes, civic education programs and public policies aimed at increasing young people’s involvement in democracy. The experience in Austria suggests that for such a measure to be successful, it is not enough just to change the law, but also to have a system capable of supporting the civic involvement of new voters.

Analysis of statistical data from Europe shows that young people are very interested in democratic participation, but there are also big differences between EU countries in terms of how well informed they are and whether they actually go to vote. The results of the ICCS study and the Eurobarometer also show how important civic education is to develop the skills needed to vote in an informed manner. In relation to Romania, studies show that lowering the minimum voting age should not be seen as a simple change in electoral laws. Such a change would require improvements in civic education, the creation of ways to inform young people about politics, and the implementation of public strategies to encourage democratic participation during adolescence. Without these actions, extending the right to vote would not significantly impact young people's actual involvement in elections.

Thus, the research clearly confirms neither the acceptance nor the refusal to lower the voting age. The main message is that the success of such a reform depends on the institutional framework in which it is implemented and on the fact that there are policies in place to help young people develop their civic and political skills. From this point of view, lowering the minimum voting age can strengthen participatory democracy, but only if accompanied by measures that translate the formal right to vote into active and responsible participation.

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NOMINAL GROUP TECHNIQUE (NGT)[1]

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Abstract. *The paper presents the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) as a participatory method used in public administration research for identifying, clarifying and prioritising participants' opinions. It analyses the epistemological and methodological foundations of the method, the main stages of its application, examples of its use in European and Romanian public administration, as well as its limits and advantages. The paper also highlights the usefulness of integrating NGT into doctoral research, as an instrument for grounding decisions and for analysing complex administrative phenomena.*

Keywords: *Nominal Group Technique, Public administration, Participatory research, Decision-making process, Doctoral research.*

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, public administration has evolved into an increasingly complex field, characterized by the diversity of actors involved, the expansion of institutional responsibilities, and the growing demand for effective outcomes. In this context, participatory research methods have gained heightened importance, as they facilitate the understanding of administrative phenomena from the perspective of those directly involved in decision. The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) is among these methods, being recognized for its capacity to combine the active participation of group members with a structured process aimed at the generation, clarification, and prioritization of ideas.

The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) is among these methods, being recognized for its capacity to combine the active participation of group members with a structured process aimed at the generation, clarification, and prioritization of ideas (Delbecq, Van de Ven and Gustafson, 1975, pp. 7-15).

The reason for selecting this technique for the present paper is closely linked to its particular relevance within the context of public administration. By its very nature, public administration constitutes a domain of collaboration and consultation, in which policy formulation and decision-making cannot occur without a thorough understanding of the perceptions, interests, and experiences of the actors involved. The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) provides a structured framework for identifying not only group opinions but also their genuine priorities, through a process that minimizes domination, discussion hierarchies, and conformity effects.

Within doctoral research, NGT has a dual significance. On the one hand, it facilitates the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data in an efficient, rapid, and reproducible manner. On the other hand, it represents an excellent instrument for the exploratory phases of a dissertation, where it is essential to identify factors perceived as relevant within a specific administrative domain, such as policy implementation, the digitalization of public services, employee performance, or citizen interaction. According to the approach outlined by Yang and Miller (2008), the method falls within a mixed epistemological framework, situated between the interpretative tradition which emphasizes experiences, meanings and the positivist tradition, which underscores procedural rigor and the systematic analysis of data (Yang and Miller, 2008, pp. 117-130).

This paper aims to highlight the epistemological and methodological foundations of the Nominal Group Technique (NGT), the internal logic underlying its use, examples of its application within European and Romanian public administration, as well as the opportunities and challenges associated with its integration into a doctoral research project.

2. Epistemological and methodological foundations

Citizen involvement constitutes a crucial element for the democratic functioning of local authorities, extending beyond the mere exercise of voting and encompassing sustained collaboration between the population and public institutions. According to the guide on citizen participation in the decision-making process, democracy requires a continuous flow of information between public authorities and the community, as well as the establishment of mechanisms through which citizens can exert a genuine influence on decisions. Informing and consulting the public are regarded as fundamental pillars of participation, contributing to enhanced transparency, strengthened trust in state institutions, and the adoption of decisions that are better aligned with the authentic needs of the local community.

The implementation of community participation at the local level requires the application of clear methods of information and consultation, such as public meetings, hearings, debates, opinion surveys, or the establishment of citizen-based consultative committees. The manual emphasizes that these instruments support two-way communication between the administration and citizens, thereby enabling the incorporation of community concerns, needs, and values into the decision-making process. Although citizen involvement entails certain administrative and logistical costs, the benefits are substantial, including increased legitimacy of public decisions, improved public services, and the development of a durable collaborative relationship between the population and local authorities (Matei, 2002).

Citizen participation does not constitute a merely formal act, but rather an ongoing process of communication and cooperation between local public administration and the community, aimed at integrating citizens' interests into the decision-making process (Dincă, 2002).

The methodological and epistemological grounding of the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) is essential for understanding how this participatory approach is integrated into research on public administration. According to the framework articulated by Yang and Miller (2008), studies in public administration are profoundly diverse, being shaped by multiple epistemological paradigms that coexist and overlap in various ways. Consequently, no method can be meaningfully understood in isolation, but only within the context of how it generates knowledge about administrative reality. NGT is distinguished by its combination of elements specific to interpretative research with features characteristic of positivist approaches, positioning it within a hybrid methodological space that renders it particularly valuable for the analysis of complex administrative phenomena (Yang and Miller, 2008, pp. 30-45).

Within public administration research, the positivist paradigm emphasizes that social reality can be observed, measured, and assessed from an objective standpoint. Quantitative studies, regression analyses, and statistical research originate within this paradigm. By contrast, the interpretative paradigm is grounded in the belief that administrative reality is a social construction, shaped by the perceptions, experiences, and interactions of institutional participants. For this reason, methods such as interviews, content analysis, and participant observation are preferred within this tradition. The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) succeeds in integrating significant elements from both paradigms: it elicits and clarifies participants' perceptions. A process typical of interpretative inquiry while simultaneously transforming these perceptions into orderable, quantifiable, and replicable data, a feature characteristic of positivist approaches.

From an epistemological perspective, NGT is grounded in the idea that administrative reality is not an objective given that can be captured through simple measurement, but rather a domain of meanings that emerges through the interactions of organizational actors. The problems identified by civil servants, the perceived causes of dysfunctions, the solutions proposed, or the priorities for action reflect the manner in which reality is interpreted by individuals within specific institutional contexts. By incorporating a stage of individual idea generation, the method enables the capture of this subjective reality in its most unmediated form. Participants are not influenced by the position, status, or expressive style of other group members, which confers a distinct epistemic value on the data obtained, as they reflect participants' genuine convictions rather than opinions that are "negotiated" or "imposed" during group discussion.

The validity of NGT rests on its procedural structure, which constrains the typical biases associated with group interactions. Through the use of anonymous voting, the technique reduces pressure to conform to the views of the majority or of formal and informal leaders. The clarification stage eliminates ambiguities, facilitating a shared understanding of the terms and concepts employed. Finally, the numerical aggregation of scores provides a transparent and replicable mechanism for identifying priorities, thereby rendering the technique comparable to quantitative methods in terms of methodological rigor (Dincă, 2010).

Thus, although it generates data based on subjective perceptions, the manner in which these data are processed and organized confers stability and coherence upon the results obtained.

With regard to causality, NGT does not seek to identify objective causal relationships in the manner of statistical techniques or experimental designs, but rather focuses on what may be termed "perceived causality." In the public sector, the way in which actors perceive the causes of a problem is often as critical as the objective mechanisms that generate it. Perceptions shape choices, behaviors, the acceptance of reforms, and the implementation of public policies. Consequently, NGT provides a meaningful form of knowledge by highlighting the factors that participants directly involved in administrative processes consider relevant. Such data may serve as a foundation for the formulation of operational hypotheses or may assist in the selection of variables within an advanced research design.

The interpretation of results obtained through NGT has a dual dimension. On the one hand, the quantitative analysis of scores offers a clear picture of the level of group agreement, while the ordering of ideas reflects the perceived importance and urgency of the issues identified. On the other hand, the observations and discussions generated during the clarification stage provide an essential qualitative background for understanding the nuances, contextual elements, and reasoning of the actors involved. In this way, the method simultaneously produces both qualitative and quantitative data, positioning itself within the framework of mixed methods, which are highly valued in contemporary public administration research.

Overall, the epistemological and methodological foundations of NGT demonstrate that this approach is not merely a participatory tool, but a coherent system for generating knowledge about administrative phenomena. It provides access to the manner in which actors define institutional reality, to their decision-making logic, and to the priorities that shape organizational behavior. By combining procedural simplicity with analytical rigor, NGT emerges as a particularly valuable method for doctoral research in public administration, especially in the exploratory phases and in the participatory validation of research hypotheses.

3. Presentation of the method

The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) constitutes a structured participatory method designed to generate and rank ideas in a manner that minimizes hierarchical influences and the control dynamics characteristic of unstructured discussions. This method was developed in the 1960's by Andrew H. Van de Ven and André L. Delbecq, at a time when research in organizational studies was seeking instruments capable of ensuring equitable participation among group members. NGT was rapidly adopted within the public sector, as it provides a balance between individual freedom of expression and the rigor of collective decision-making processes, and is regarded as particularly effective in contexts that require the structuring of opinions and the identification of consensus (Delbecq, Van de Ven and Gustafson, 1975, pp. 3-18).

Fundamentally, the method is organized around a rigorous procedural process that begins with the individual generation of ideas. This preliminary stage serves to capture authentic perspectives before participants are exposed to the influence of group discussion. Within public administration, where power relations and status hierarchies are particularly salient, this individualized approach ensures the elimination of hierarchical pressures and facilitates balanced participation among all members. Subsequently, the ideas are collected and presented sequentially through a transparent process in which each participant contributes an equal number of items, thereby preventing the domination of discussions by particular individuals.

The subsequent clarification stage is crucial for transforming the preliminary list of ideas into a coherent set of options that are interpreted consistently by all participants. At this stage, no evaluative judgments are made; rather, each idea is explained in order to eliminate ambiguities. This aspect is especially important in public administration, where concepts such as “performance,” “administrative barriers,” or “service quality” may carry different meanings for different actors. Clarifying these concepts ensures that the subsequent vote accurately reflects participants genuine preferences.

Anonymous voting constitutes a central feature of NGT, as it effectively transforms the qualitative process into a semi-quantitative one, enabling the aggregation of individual preferences and the identification of a clear hierarchy. Participants assign scores to each idea, which are then aggregated to produce a final ranking. Anonymity plays a fundamental role by eliminating pressure to conform to the views of the majority or of actors holding superior status. Consequently, the results of NGT are regarded as valid from both a methodological and an ethical standpoint, as they accurately reflect the actual distribution of preferences within the group (Dincă, 2010).

Nevertheless, the application of the method entails certain conditions. NGT functions most effectively in small to medium-sized groups, typically comprising between six and twelve participants. A number that ensures a sufficiently focused process to maintain coherence while remaining diverse enough to generate a broad range of perspectives. Moreover, the method is particularly suitable for situations in which the primary objective is the identification of perceived problems or solutions, rather than the analysis of causal relationships or the evaluation of objective outcomes. Within the public sector, this method is especially appropriate for consultation sessions, needs assessments, strategic planning, the identification of perceived barriers in policy implementation, and the participatory evaluation of public services.

The types of data produced through NGT are diverse and highly valuable for doctoral studies. The approach yields both qualitative data, reflected in the concepts and explanations provided by participants, and quantitative data, expressed through the scores assigned and the resulting rankings. This dual nature renders NGT an ideal method for mixed-methods research, where the analysis of administrative phenomena requires both an understanding of meanings and their systematic organization within analytical frameworks (Dincă, 2010).

4. Applications in European public administration

The application of the Nominal Group Technique within the European public administration sector has experienced steady expansion in recent decades, driven by the promotion of participatory governance and by the need to involve experts and stakeholders in decision-making processes (OECD, 2017-2023). Across several Member States of the European Union, NGT has evolved into an essential operational instrument for needs assessment, public programme planning, the analysis of population perceptions, and the development of sectoral strategies. The characteristics of this method, such as a balanced participation, a clearly defined procedural structure, and the capacity to establish priorities have led to its adoption in multiple institutional contexts, ranging from the local level to the central and European levels.

A particularly notable example of implementation can be found in the United Kingdom, where the National Health Service (NHS) has incorporated this method into processes for evaluating the quality of healthcare services and identifying the professional needs of staff. NGT is applied in hospitals to identify the most pressing issues faced by patients and healthcare personnel, to rank measures required for service improvement, and to establish intervention priorities within local strategies. Owing to its participatory structure, the method has proven effective in complex organizations, where perspectives may differ significantly depending on individual roles and professional specializations.

In the Netherlands, local administrations employ NGT in the development of urban planning documents, particularly in projects concerning mobility, community development, and the reconfiguration of public spaces. The method is used in consultations with citizens, local experts, and representatives of non-governmental organizations in order to identify major community challenges and to determine priority actions. Given the Dutch tradition of public participation, NGT has become a key instrument for building consensus between administrations and communities, contributing to transparent decision-making that is broadly accepted at the local level.

Denmark makes use of NGT in the context of updating and digitalizing administrative services. As part of reforms focused on digital services and smart governance, Danish institutions have adopted this technique to examine the main barriers perceived by civil servants and service users, as well as to identify viable solutions. Within an increasingly digital administrative landscape, consultations structured through NGT have proven beneficial in minimizing misunderstandings and highlighting the essential factors affecting the success of institutional transformation.

In Ireland, the method is frequently employed in community development projects and in programmes financed through the European Structural Funds. Local authorities implement NGT to engage citizens in identifying community needs, setting investment priorities, and monitoring the implementation of public projects. The clearly defined structure of the method facilitates the rapid achievement of consensus, rendering it particularly valuable in administrative processes subject to strict reporting deadlines.

In Romania, the Nominal Group Technique is increasingly utilized in a variety of local administrative processes and across different sectors. Within strategic planning for local community development, Local Action Groups apply this method to identify key challenges facing rural areas and to rank priorities for projects eligible for funding under European LEADER programmes. In the field of education, County School Inspectorates have adopted NGT in consultations concerning curricular reforms, in the assessment of deficiencies within educational institutions, and in the establishment of priorities for professional training. Furthermore, in the area of digitalization, cities such as Cluj-Napoca, Iași, and Brașov have implemented NGT in consultations on the modernization of electronic public services, enabling the collection of feedback from civil servants, IT experts, and representatives of the business sector.

These cases illustrate that NGT is a highly adaptable and flexible technique across diverse administrative contexts. Whether applied to strategic planning, public policy evaluation, stakeholder consultation, or organizational development, the method offers a rare combination of inclusiveness, procedural rigor, and analytical capacity. Within European public administration, its semi-quantitative character makes it particularly suitable for situations in which not only the collection of opinions is required, but also their ranking according to relevance or urgency. This ability to produce clear, prioritized, and easily interpretable outcomes explains why NGT remains widely employed by institutions seeking evidence-based decision-making and transparent governance.

5. Limitations, risks and methodological challenges

Although the technique known as the Nominal Group Technique is widely regarded as one of the most effective participatory methods in the public sector, it nonetheless presents a number of limitations and methodological challenges. Awareness of these aspects is essential both for the proper application of the technique and for the accurate interpretation of the data obtained. One major limitation of NGT lies in the fact that the method is most effective when applied to small groups. While this feature facilitates moderation and balanced participation, it simultaneously limits the representativeness of the results. In the context of public administration, where the issues addressed are often relevant to a wide range of actors, a group comprising 8 to 12 participants may capture only a portion of the diversity of perceptions, thereby requiring caution in the generalization of conclusions.

Another significant limitation concerns the fact that NGT captures perceptions and representations rather than objective realities or demonstrable causal relationships. As such, the proposals formulated reflect the personal experiences of participants and are influenced by the organizational contexts from which they originate. In public administration research, a focus on “perceived reality” is valuable, but it cannot substitute methods grounded in objective empirical data, such as statistical analyses or document-based research. For this reason, NGT is frequently employed as a complementary method, integrated within a broader research framework (Androniceanu, 2017, pp. 143-155).

With regard to the risks involved, group dynamics remain an aspect requiring careful management, even though the method incorporates mechanisms designed to reduce individual influence. During the clarification phase, participants may introduce subtle evaluations or suggestions that can shape how others perceive particular ideas. The facilitator plays a crucial role in maintaining neutrality, and any failure to exercise this function adequately may adversely affect the quality of the process. In the field of public administration, where institutional tensions and power hierarchies are common, the risks of indirect influence cannot be entirely eliminated, even though anonymous voting mitigates the effects of social pressure.

Participant selection also constitutes a methodological challenge. If the group is predominantly composed of individuals with similar experiences or from the same professional fields, the results may reflect a limited perspective. Conversely, highly diverse groups may encounter difficulties in clarifying ideas and achieving consensus. Striking a balance between diversity and coherence is complex and represents one of the fundamental methodological decisions facing the researcher.

A major challenge lies in integrating NGT results into a well-structured academic analysis. Although the scoring process provides a clear ranking of concepts, the absence of contextual discussion may lead to superficial conclusions. Conversely, an excessive focus on qualitative arguments may diminish the significance of the method's semi-quantitative dimension. In the context of doctoral research, the difficulty consists in establishing an appropriate degree of triangulation with other approaches, so that the data generated through NGT are both valid and relevant to the argumentation of the dissertation.

Moreover, NGT requires rigorous logistical and methodological preparation. Defining the research question, planning the session, facilitating the process, and analyzing the data are stages that demand careful attention and experience. Any shortcomings in these stages may affect the consistency of the results. In the public sector, where time is often a limited resource and participants are frequently overburdened, organizing an NGT session can itself become a significant challenge.

NGT is a valuable and adaptable method; however, its use must be accompanied by particular attention to the methodological limitations and risks involved. Awareness of these aspects enables the researcher to apply the method responsibly, to interpret the results with due caution, and to integrate it effectively into a complex research design specific to the field of public administration.

6. Integration of the method into the doctoral project

The integration of the Nominal Group Technique into a doctoral project in the field of public administration constitutes a significant opportunity for the researcher, as the methodology enables both the early exploration of administrative phenomena and the participatory validation of previously formulated hypotheses. The application of NGT in the doctoral context is justified by the method's ability to capture the perceptions, experiences, and evaluations of institutional actors directly involved in administrative processes. This participatory dimension represents a major advantage in public administration research, given that the phenomena under study are often complex, multi-layered, and profoundly influenced by the behaviors and perceptions of the individuals involved (Androniceanu, 2017, pp. 52-68).

Within a doctoral project, the methodology may be introduced either during the exploratory phase, with the aim of identifying relevant issues within a specific administrative domain, or during the concrete empirical stage, in order to classify the factors that affect policy implementation or the functioning of a public service. The formulation of the research question for NGT is closely linked to the subject of the dissertation and may, for example, seek to identify the main perceived obstacles in the digitalization of public administration, human resources management, or the delivery of local public services. The outcome produced by the method, a clarified and prioritized list of ideas, contributes to strengthening the empirical argumentation of the dissertation and to structuring its hypotheses or conclusions (Văcărel, 2008, pp. 121-135).

The effective implementation of the method within doctoral research involves several stages that require detailed planning. In the initial phase, the researcher must establish the group of participants, as the selection process is crucial to the relevance of the results. Depending on the subject of the dissertation, the group may include civil servants, institutional managers, experts, representatives of civil society, or members of the academic community. The diversity of the group must be carefully calibrated in order to provide as comprehensive a perspective as possible on the phenomenon under study, without compromising the coherence of the process. Organizing the sessions entails the creation of a neutral environment, either physical or virtual, that allows participants to interact without institutional influences.

During the actual conduct of the NGT, the researcher, acting as facilitator, must adhere to the standard procedure: individual idea generation, collection and listing of ideas, group clarification, and anonymous voting. Each of these stages generates data that will subsequently be analyzed. Individual idea generation enables the collection of a wide range of perspectives; the clarification stage contributes to a shared understanding of concepts; and anonymous voting provides an objective ranking of the factors deemed significant. This sequential process ensures the production of robust empirical material, suitable for the development of an empirical chapter within a doctoral dissertation (Dincă, 2010).

The analysis of data resulting from the application of NGT encompasses both the interpretation of scores and the narrative exploration of the justifications provided during the clarification stage. From a doctoral perspective, this dual approach is essential, as the scores reflect the degree of group consensus, while participants' explanations provide the necessary context for a deeper understanding of administrative phenomena. Within a doctoral dissertation, the results may be presented in the form of tables, prioritization charts, or descriptive sections that analyze the meanings attributed to the identified issues. These findings may support working hypotheses, guide the formulation of public policy recommendations, and contribute to the theoretical discussion concerning organizational dynamics or institutional behavior.

Another significant dimension of incorporating NGT into doctoral research is triangulation. The researcher may integrate this technique with interviews, document analysis, or quantitative methods in order to enhance the external credibility of the conclusions. For example, where NGT identifies certain obstacles perceived by officials, interviews may be used to explore the underlying reasons for these barriers in greater depth, while statistical analysis may determine their effects in quantifiable terms. In this manner, NGT becomes a fundamental component of a clear and well-structured methodological design.

7. Conclusions

The Nominal Group Technique constitutes a particularly important methodological instrument for the study of public administration, due to its capacity to combine procedural rigor with the active participation of institutional actors. In a sector characterized by complexity, interdependence, and organizational variability, methods that facilitate the integration of diverse perspectives become essential for understanding administrative phenomena. NGT provides a setting in which each individual's opinion may be expressed free from hierarchical constraints, while the final outcome reflects, in an organized manner, the group's preferences and priorities.

Findings from specialized research suggest that this method is effective in identifying problems, defining courses of action, and assessing participant's perceptions across a wide range of administrative processes. Its application in European and Romanian contexts demonstrates its flexibility and relevance in diverse areas, including strategic planning, public health, education, administrative digitalization, and community development. This breadth of application indicates that NGT is not an isolated technique, but rather an adaptable instrument capable of being integrated into a variety of institutional processes.

For doctoral-level research, the significance of NGT lies in its ability to facilitate access to participatory knowledge, which is essential for analyzing perceptions, challenges encountered by actors, and the solutions they deem relevant. Moreover, the method generates both qualitative and quantitative data, enabling an integrated, coherent, and in-depth analysis. This mixed character strengthens the scientific rigor required of a doctoral dissertation, as it allows for data triangulation and the reinforcement of conclusions.

At the same time, the method also presents a series of challenges, primarily related to participant selection, the role of the facilitator, and the interpretation of results. Nevertheless, these limitations can be addressed through appropriate methodological structuring and by combining NGT with other research methods. When applied responsibly and adapted to the specificities of the context, NGT can make significant contributions to both the theoretical development and practical advancement of public administration.

Overall, the Nominal Group Technique represents a robust, adaptable, and valuable method that facilitates a deep understanding of organizational dynamics and decision-making processes. By incorporating this technique into doctoral research, the doctoral candidate can obtain a comprehensive and balanced view of administrative phenomena, thereby contributing to the formulation of well-grounded, meaningful, and practically relevant conclusions for both the academic community and public administration practice.

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BOOK REVIEW: PEOPLE OF THE "SYSTEM". UNWRITTEN RULES, COMPROMISES AND SURVIVAL IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, BY DRAGOȘ-VALENTIN DINCĂ[1]

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Abstract. *People of the "System". Unwritten Rules, Compromises and Survival in Public Administration, by Dragoș-Valentin Dincă, offers an unconventional journey into the inner workings of Romanian public administration, drawing on professional experience, institutional observation, memory and a kind of humour that makes even its dysfunctions easier to endure. This review deliberately adopts a personal perspective, also because the author and the reviewer belong to the same generation of public administration graduates and were classmates at SNSPA. Beyond its memoir-like dimension, the book opens a highly relevant discussion about the relationship between formal legal rules and informal practices, between merit and acceptability, between reform and institutional self-preservation, as well as about the individual's ability to pass through institutions without becoming captive to their mechanisms. The book's principal merit lies in its refusal to treat the "system" as an abstract entity and in its decision to return people to the centre of the administrative explanation. In this sense, Dragoș Dincă's volume is not merely a book about public administration, but also one about character, adaptation, institutional memory and the limits of compromise.*

Keywords: *Public administration, Administrative system, Unwritten rules, Civil servants, Public officials, Administrative reform, Institutional culture.*

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1. A book I cannot read merely as a reviewer

There are books one reads with a pencil in hand and books one reads with memory wide open. People of the "System" belongs, for me, to the latter category. It is difficult to place Dragoș Dincă exclusively in the role of an author whom I am expected to assess methodically, from the safe scholarly distance normally required of a reviewer, because there is a shared history preceding this book. We were classmates at National School of Political Studies and Public Administration SNSPA, at a time when Romanian public administration itself was still learning, very much on the move, what it wanted to become, while we were learning, with the seriousness peculiar to students, how it was supposed to function. Those were years in which we drew institutions into diagrams, divided competences, learned principles, functions and procedures and still enjoyed the privilege of believing that, if a rule was written clearly enough, reality would somehow have the good manners to comply with it. Professional life later offered us an elective course, much longer and with no possibility of skipping the seminar: institutions do not live in books. They live through people.

Enough years have passed for the joke to become almost philosophical. Dragoș, my former classmate, now writes a book about the "people of the system," while I, his former classmate, review it after both of us have had more than enough time to enter institutions, leave them, manage them, observe them, attempt to change them and, at times, simply endure them. Had someone told us during our student years that we would eventually find ourselves here, we would probably have asked for the bibliography. Today, we know that the bibliography would not have been enough. In the meantime, we have both discovered that there are laws, procedures, organisational charts and job descriptions, but there is also something else, never published in the Official Gazette: that remarkably solid body of unofficial norms expressed through formulas such as "this is how it is done," "this is not the right time," "we shall see," "let us not rush" or, in more sophisticated institutional language, "I do not believe there is yet sufficient predictability for this decision." The translation varies. The outcome is strikingly familiar.

For that reason, I cannot pretend that this review is entirely impersonal. Nor do I want it to be. Behind the law professor reading this book today stands the public administration student of those years, and behind the university manager stands the person who learned very early to judge institutions through the people who inhabit them. In this respect, my first model did not come from a textbook. It was my father. From him I learned, long before I could formulate the idea academically, that an office does not automatically lend value to the person who occupies it; sometimes, if we are fortunate, it is the person who lends value to the office. It is a distinction I have carried with me throughout my career, and one that returned insistently to my mind while reading Dragoș's book. Because, in a different form, his entire volume is precisely about the distance between the institution and the person who inhabits it.

2. The system does not live in a secret room. Fortunately. Or perhaps unfortunately.

The word "system" has enjoyed an extraordinary career in Romania. We use it when we do not know exactly who is to blame, when we suspect that someone knows more than we do, when something does not work or, paradoxically, when it works suspiciously well for the wrong people. "The system" decides, blocks, promotes, removes, retaliates and, if one listens to public conversation long enough, probably controls the weather as well. It is such a convenient explanation that it almost seems a pity to ruin it. Dragoș ruins it. And rightly so.

His book begins precisely with a refusal of mythology. There is no secret room in which a few people sit around a table directing Romanian public administration through a giant control panel. In a way, that would be comforting. At least we would know where to send the official letter. The "system" described by Dragoș is far more ordinary and, for that very reason, far more difficult to change. It is produced by institutions, by people, by their reflexes, their fear of making mistakes, accumulated experience, compromises and informal rules that emerge somewhere between what the law says and what a person can, wants or dares to do. The system does not stand above people. The system is continuously produced through people.

This, I believe, is one of the genuine contributions of the book. Dragoș does not write as a disappointed former insider seeking retrospective revenge on public administration, nor as a reformer promising to fix everything within the first hundred days. It is far more interesting than that. He looks at institutions with the irony of someone who knows them too well to idealise them, but also with a certain professional affection that only people who have spent a long time within a field can still retain. His characters are not exclusively heroes or villains. Some are outstanding, others mediocre, some highly competent, others impressively gifted at avoiding any responsibility whatsoever, but most are simply people attempting to survive within an institutional environment that simultaneously demands initiative and caution, speed and procedural cover, reform and the careful preservation of existing balances.

3. The password is "password" and other advanced lessons in public administration

The book possesses a quality encountered less often than it should be in literature on public administration: it is genuinely enjoyable to read. Dragoș does not establish his authority through sentences sufficiently complicated to make the reader feel guilty for failing to understand them. He prefers stories. Some have precisely that form of administrative humour no work of fiction would dare invent for fear of appearing implausible. An institution receives a software application, does not use it for two years and then discovers, when an inspection finally arrives, that nobody remembers the password. The password was, naturally, "password." Had Kafka spent a little time in Romanian public administration, he might have abandoned literature and started writing audit reports.

Then come rabbits transported in luggage to training sessions, meetings, official visits, strategies, reorganisations, electoral programmes, institutional encounters and one memorable trip to Arad culminating in a "speech" lasting only a few seconds, a politically colourful backdrop and a spit-roast better organised than the conference for which the journey had been made. Elsewhere, institutional offices are transformed into small jungles of plants brought in, cultivated, inherited and moved around along with staff, departments and successive reorganisations. The image is excellent: institutions change, leaders come and go, organisational charts are redrawn, yet the ficus survives. Sometimes I suspect that, in a truly serious history of Romanian public administration, office plants would deserve at least a footnote.

The humour does not diminish the seriousness of the observation. It makes it more visible. Behind the forgotten password lies an unused public investment. Behind the conference attended by almost no one lies a form of institutional simulation. Behind the succession of strategies lie resources, time and, quite often, professionals who genuinely tried to do things properly. Dragoș is intelligent enough not to over-moralise these episodes. He allows them to speak for themselves. The reader laughs and then, with a slight delay, realises that perhaps there was not that much to laugh about. It is an extremely effective technique and probably one of the reasons the book manages to say serious things without becoming heavy.

For those of us who studied public administration at a time when Romania's institutional transformation appeared to follow an almost inevitable upward path towards modernisation, these episodes also have a nearly sentimental dimension. One recognises the language, the human types, the meetings, the optimism surrounding the beginning of a new project and that mysterious loss of energy occurring somewhere between launch and implementation. One even recognises the characters without knowing their names. Everywhere there is the indispensable colleague who knows exactly whom to call, the manager who discovers the institution only after being appointed to lead it, the civil servant who has witnessed enough reforms not to unpack his metaphorical suitcase before checking whether the latest one survives six months and, inevitably, the person capable of explaining in exquisite detail why something cannot be done. Occasionally, one wonders what might happen if the same intellectual energy were invested in discovering how it could.

4. From the "right person" to the "acceptable person"

Of all the ideas in the book, one remained with me more strongly than the others: the distinction between the right person and the acceptable person. It appears near the beginning and subsequently functions as a key to the entire volume. The right person is the one we would choose if competence, experience, suitability and the institution's best interests were the only criteria that mattered. The acceptable person is someone capable of passing through the network of balances, preferences, relationships and sensitivities without creating excessive turbulence. Sometimes the two are the same person. The problem begins when they are not.

At this point, Dragoș's book leaves the territory of anecdote and reaches one of the fundamental problems of institutions. Every organisation requires compromise in order to function. Law itself is, to a certain extent, the civilised architecture of compromise among freedoms, interests and limits. But compromises are not all equal. There is the compromise that makes cooperation possible and the compromise that transforms the exception into the rule; the compromise that protects the institution and the compromise through which the institution gradually forgets its own purpose. A system that continuously selects "acceptable" people may achieve stability, but it risks paying for that stability through the loss of initiative, competence and courage.

Perhaps this is precisely why the idea sent me back once again to the model I received at home. My father gave me a simple measure that professional life later complicated but never succeeded in erasing: it is not enough to occupy a position; one must be worthy of it. I have always looked at academic, administrative or managerial offices through this lens. An institution does not become better simply because the organisational chart is correct and the procedure legal. It becomes better when the people entrusted with authority understand that authority is, first and foremost, an obligation. It may sound idealistic. But sometimes idealism is not the opposite of realism. It is the only reason one bothers trying to change reality.

Seen from this perspective, the “acceptable person” should not be demonised. Institutions sometimes genuinely need people capable of building bridges and reconciling conflicting interests. Yet the question left behind by the book is whether, by repeatedly applying this criterion, we eventually begin to design institutions that no longer seek excellence but merely the absence of discomfort. And an administration excessively afraid of discomfort will inevitably avoid precisely those decisions through which it might evolve.

5. Written law and the other law

For me, as a lawyer, one of the book’s most fertile dimensions is the relationship between written rules and unwritten rules. Law lives with a certain methodological optimism: we assume that we can identify the applicable rule, interpret its meaning and explain the legal effects that follow from it. We need to proceed in this way; otherwise, we would no longer have law but improvisation. Yet institutions are not populated by rules. They are populated by people who apply rules. Between text and behaviour there inevitably opens a space.

That space is filled by institutional culture, memory, reflexes, fears, personal relationships, experience of previous inspections, accepted tolerances and the small taboos of every organisation. It is there that “the other law” develops. It cannot repeal formal law, yet it can profoundly alter its practical effects. Two institutions may apply exactly the same statute and produce almost opposite administrative experiences. Two departments within the same institution may interpret the same procedure with completely different degrees of flexibility. Sometimes the difference is not legal. It is human.

Dragoș’s book is at its best when describing this frontier zone. The civil servant who prefers paper is not necessarily an incurable nostalgic. He may simply have learned that paper protects him. The person asking for one more signature is not always lacking in courage; he may be the product of an environment in which any individual assumption of responsibility can, years later, become the object of a hostile interpretation. When the risk is personal and immediate while the benefit is institutional and distant, caution ceases to be merely a defect and becomes a rational survival strategy. This does not mean it should be accepted. It means we cannot change it unless we first understand it.

This distinction is, I believe, essential for any serious discussion of administrative reform. The legislature can change a legal rule overnight. Institutional culture does not read the Official Gazette at the same speed. It moves much more slowly. This is how we end up with institutions reformed in law while remaining almost untouched in behaviour. A title changes, two departments are moved, a digital platform is created, modernisation is announced, and the old reflex quietly finds itself a new office.

6. Reforming reforms and the remarkable resistance of institutions to enthusiasm

Dragoș writes convincingly about reform precisely because he no longer appears seduced by the word. In Romanian public discourse, "reform" has been used so often that it risks becoming one of those terms that mean everything and, for that very reason, almost nothing. Every new political cycle arrives with its own reform, every new leadership discovers that the old structure needs reorganising, every reorganisation generates organisational charts, committees, procedures and, very probably, a PowerPoint presentation in which all arrows point reassuringly in the right direction. Reality, however, has the annoying habit of refusing to fit into PowerPoint.

One of the important ideas of the book is that resistance to reform does not always manifest itself through opposition. Silence can be far more effective. Everybody agrees, nobody says no, the project moves forward and yet its speed gradually slows until it becomes geological. Questions arise, approvals are needed, clarifications are requested, new priorities appear, leadership changes and, occasionally, another reform arrives just in time to replace the previous one. It is almost an administrative perpetual-motion machine: we reform the reform before discovering whether the first reform ever worked.

The author also captures the deeply human nature of resistance. Reform redistributes power, responsibility, comfort and risk. Benefits may be collective and visible in several years; the risk borne by the person signing the document is individual and begins today. From this emerges an institutional logic that political discourse sometimes too easily interprets as laziness or bad faith. There is, of course, laziness and bad faith as well. It would be naïve to pretend otherwise. But the systemic explanation is much more interesting: some apparently irrational behaviours become perfectly rational when viewed from the perspective of someone trying to survive within an institution.

This is also one of the few areas in which I would have liked Dragoș to go even further. His material is rich enough to support, in the future, a broader theoretical conceptualisation of the informal rules of Romanian public administration. From the stories in this book, one could extract typologies, mechanisms and perhaps even an explanatory model capable of comparison with other administrative cultures. I say this not as criticism, but as a sign that the book leaves behind more questions than it found at the entrance. For a book, that is a considerably greater compliment than the convenient claim that it has "exhausted the subject."

7. From classmate to fellow member of a generation

While reading the book, I repeatedly had the feeling of returning to a conversation that had begun a very long time ago. Not because we shared identical professional experiences, but because we began in the same intellectual laboratory. During our years at SNSPA, public administration was explained to us through concepts. Afterwards, each of us followed his own road and discovered public administration through people. Dragoș came to observe it from academia, consultancy, public projects and from inside a position of public authority. I moved through law, legal practice, academia, university leadership and institutional management. Looking back, the differences between our paths make this encounter more interesting, not less relevant.

Perhaps this is also why, while reading the book, I sometimes hear not only the voice of the present-day author, but also an echo of the student from those years. There remains the same kind of curiosity: why do things work this way? Only now the question is no longer addressed to the professor standing at the front of a classroom. It is addressed to the institution itself. And institutions usually reply through stories.

I would like to believe that we, too, have changed without completely losing that reflex. Experience has the unpleasant habit of making us harder to impress, but it may also have the advantage of transforming youthful idealism into a more pragmatic form of responsibility. We probably no longer believe that a good law can transform an institution by itself. Yet neither should we accept the opposite conclusion, namely that institutions cannot be changed. Between naïveté and cynicism lies a more difficult territory, inhabited by those who know how hard change really is and continue to attempt it nonetheless.

8. How not to become a person of the system

The book's final major merit is that it does not end where it would have been easiest to end: with a verdict on institutions. After discussing offices, public officials, competitions, organisational charts, motivation, procurement, politics, reform and unwritten rules, Dragoș turns the question back towards the individual: how does one avoid becoming part of the system in the worst sense of the term?

This may be the most difficult question in the book. Institutions do not transform us through one dramatic act of conversion. Nobody wakes up one morning announcing, "from today onwards I shall abandon my principles." Things happen slowly. You accept one exception because the situation appears special. The second time, there is already a precedent. The third time, it becomes practice. After long enough, something you once found intolerable at the beginning of your career may begin to look merely like "realism." Moral boundaries rarely collapse spectacularly; most of the time, they move only a few centimetres at a time.

Perhaps this is where my reading becomes most personal. Beyond our studies, careers and offices, I believe that at the end of a professional life there remains a question much simpler than all the organisational charts we have passed through: what kind of person did you become while trying to succeed?. Offices pass. Terms come to an end. Titles lose their shine remarkably quickly once separated from the person who carried them. What remains is how you treated people, what you built and which boundaries you refused to cross.

Dragoș does not preach, and that is an advantage. He does not offer a handbook of administrative purity. It would not be believable. He proposes something much more mature: understand the system without becoming dependent on it, know its rules without confusing them with truth and be capable of compromise without one day discovering that you have compromised yourself. The distinction is delicate, but within it probably lies the entire ethics of institutional life.

9. Instead of a conclusion: Dragoș, who are "they," after all?

When the book is closed, one irony remains, quietly prepared by its title. We begin reading by asking who the people of the system are, almost as if we were about to discover some separate species. By the end, the answer becomes uncomfortably simple: they are public officials, civil servants, advisers, professors, consultants, managers, those who sign, those who do not sign, those who change something and those who prefer not to take the risk. Sometimes, they are us.

Perhaps this is the best challenge Dragoș offers his reader. It is easy to speak about the system in the third person. "They" do this, "they" do not want that, "they" block everything. It is far harder to accept that institutions are built every day from the sum of individual choices, including our own. The system does not begin somewhere far away. It begins the moment one of us decides whether to say yes or no, whether to assume responsibility or pass it on, whether to choose the right person or merely the acceptable one, whether to respect a rule for the meaning it carries or merely for personal protection.

For this reason, People of the "System" is more than a book about Romanian public administration. It is a book about the relationship between the person and the institution, between character and office, between rule and behaviour. It is serious enough for the specialist and free enough for the reader who has never opened an Administrative Code. It combines observation, experience and precisely that amount of self-irony without which, I suspect, neither public administration nor academic life could be crossed in complete intellectual health.

For me, however, the book contains something else that cannot easily be measured by the conventional instruments of a review. While I was reading it, between Professor Dragoș Dincă in 2026 and the printed page, my classmate from SNSPA three decades ago appeared from time to time. And I found myself thinking that perhaps, without realising it, we were already studying for this book back then. Only the most important part of the course was still to be taught after graduation: by institutions, by the people we encountered, by our own mistakes and by the passing of time, which forced us to recognise the difference between what is written in a law and what happens when that law finally reaches human hands.

And if I had to compress the entire volume into a single question, I would not ask how we can defeat the "system." That would be too simple and, after reading Dragoș, even slightly childish. I would ask something else: how do we build institutions in which the right person can finally also be the acceptable person? If we ever succeed in doing that, perhaps we will stop talking quite so much about "the system." And Dragoș will have to write another book. Knowing him, I do not think that would necessarily be a problem.