Paradigm

Diversity of Political Attitudes among Balkan Youth: Insights from Quantitative Data

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Abstract. *This paper examines how young Romanians and Balkan residents define their political opinions about social and economic issues, as well as religious belief, gender equality and perceived corruption and financial stability. Southern Eastern Europe stands out as one of the least democratic regions in the world after the fall of communism and is also affected by economic uncertainty and broad disillusionment in political institutions. In this sense, young people from the Balkan countries form an especially important subject for study because the youth generation isn't always defined by the typical Left - Right ideological spectrum. Low institutional trust and political disinterest on the part of the youth have been widely discussed among experts, as well as the appeal of nationalist, conservative or anti - establishment attitudes. These observations suggest that political ideology alone, based on a general left - right positioning, can't fully capture young people's political opinions. The central research question of this paper therefore addresses how young people in the Balkan countries and Romania could be classified into several groups based on their moral, religious and political views. The research uses data collected via the Youth Studies Southeast Europe 2023/2024 survey carried out by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2023/2024). Latent class analysis is applied to the data to reveal hidden groups of young people by relying on the survey questions about political identification, interest in politics, current financial situation, participation in religious activities and attitudes toward corruption and tolerance of corruption. As a result of the analysis, three main groups have been identified: (1) Engaged and mainly left - wing young people with a moderate financial situation and anti - corruption views, (2) Disengaged and ideologically indeterminate with low financial stability and (3) Conservative - minded youth facing financial hardship and a high tolerance toward corruption. By taking into account the political, moral and social attitudes, as well as economic stability among the youth generation in post - communist countries, latent class analysis is presented as a valuable method to discover new typologies beyond commonly used categories and to shed more light on their political identities.*

Keywords: Youth, Politics, Perceptions, Latent Class, Southeast Europe, Romania, Balkan.

Introduction

In a democracy, political views are translated into voting behavior, determining who will lead society and to what end public policies will serve. Policies impact every single segment of our economy, from personal taxes to corporate taxes, state spending on public services or infrastructure projects and regulations relating to trade and commerce. Political views might thus serve as a kind of indicator of where our society will head next from an economic standpoint.

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Elections do the work of determining which political parties take charge and implicitly, what sort of economy we'll experience. Left - leaning political parties typically promote the redistribution of wealth and income, increase taxes and give the state a larger role in business. On the other hand, right - wing parties support tax cuts and lower levels of government involvement in the economy and business. These distinctions aren't, however, always rigid.

Against this theoretical background, the present study attempts to answer the following research question:

What types of groups can young people from the Balkan countries and Romania be classified into based on their moral, religious, and political values?

To answer these questions, a classification analysis of social and political opinions in which qualitative variables are the main dependent variable was applied. As a classifier, this study adopts latent class analysis (LCA) (McCutcheon, 1987), methodologically suitable to extract typologies from data structured as categorical variables, although caution must be exercised about the interpretation thereof.

The data is sourced from the Youth Studies Southeast Europe 2023/2024 (Hasanovic et al. , 2024), an opinion survey conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung that involves 6,692 respondents in ten Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia (Western Balkans countries, members of the EU) plus Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia. The Western Balkans is an area that undergoes rapid social, economic and political change that determines how values differ among young generations in that region. LCA is applied in various disciplines, from sociology (Weller, 2020), psychology (Cavanaugh, 2012), public health (Kino, 2017), education (Fagginger, 2016), to political science for the classification of values or behaviors, although it doesn't present indisputable truths but latent typologies in social and political opinions not easily seen by other techniques. This article fills an underexplored gap in literature through LCA to unmask such multi - dimensionality of social typologies hidden behind the common political dichotomy. Besides political affiliation, the analysis integrates the relationship among economic conditions, political interest, religious commitment, corruption tolerance, advancing the literature on how young people's stance on politics is developed throughout Southeastern Europe marked by democratic deficit and considerable disparities.

Literature review

Political orientation: the dimensions of left and right in political science

The Left - Right political spectrum is a dimension that's typically used to classify political positions. The origins of the Left - Right distinction are found in the French Revolution, where the deputies who supported the king, monarchy, conservatism, the Ancien Régime and the powers of the church and aristocracy sat to the right of the presiding officer, while the deputies who advocated for the reform of the French society through liberty and an end to the powers of the church and monarchy sat to the left of the presiding officer. "The left is defined by its concern for equality, solidarity and cooperation over individualistic competition. "

Left - wing parties, as social democrats, democratic socialists, socialists, communists, green politics, anarchists and others, have been consistently more in favour of a higher level of quality equality, income equality, poverty reduction, civil liberties, progressive taxation, universal benefits, environmentalism, non - discrimination, a larger government apparatus, greater state interventionism in the economy (either via command economy, state socialism, socialism or Keynesianism) and generally anti - clerical attitudes or tolerance for religions not seen to oppose secularism. However, while Left politics does favour equality on paper, the actual interpretations

and applications of this vary , depending on each country or culture. It can range from an emphasis on equality of outcome (e. g. , through redistribution of wealth and resources from the rich to the poor) or the redistribution of income or property to achieve equality.

Right - wing politics prioritises individual freedom (and an absence of state intervention, in the economic field), less regulation and private property rights. "The right conceives inequality as a natural result of differences between individuals and social groups, which the state isn't obliged to correct completely. " Right - wing policies on a variety of issues have varied in emphasis and application depending on a variety of political ideologies, such as conservativism, neoliberalism, libertarianism, paleoconservatism and fascism. The right - wing has a long history of advocating for social conservative issues like traditional values, ordered Liberty, religion, nationalism, patriotism, family values, militarism, and, on occasion, protectionism. In modern Western politics, the right - wing is more aligned with neoliberal capitalism and privatisation of public services, economic deregulation, fiscal conservatism and is often hostile to multiculturalism or perceived excessive levels of diversity, minority rights or secularism. Despite the modern Left - Right political divide, there were earlier and other splits, such as the liberal vs illiberal split over liberty vs the right to interfere with liberties, Left vs Right as in Left wing vs Right wing, Progressive vs Conservative in the 19th century and Progressive vs Moderate in the 21st century.

Table 1 summarizes the five core distinctions betweenLeft Wing and Right Wing Political Orientation and Attitudes: the Role of State, Equality, Economic Policy, Social Values and Minority/Diversity attitudes.

Table 1. Characteristic elements of political orientations Left vs. Right

Political Dimensions	Left Wing	Right Wing
The role of the state	Active, redistributive	Limited, guarantor of the free market
Equality in society	Priority (including economic)	Secondary, natural by merit
Economy	Interventionism, progressive taxation	Economic liberalism, low taxation
Social values	Progressive, liberal	Traditionalist, conservative
Minorities and diversity	Inclusion and protection	Scepticism towards multiculturalism

Source: developed by the author, adapted from Ignazi, 2003.

Review of the literature: the political orientation of young people in the Balkan countries

Young people's political outlook has always been the biggest challenge facing Western Balkan democracies and their societies. These societies continue to be heavily influenced by complex political transitions, economic instability and ethnic conflicts. In a post - communist space, marked by post - conflict and democratic transitions, young people share a mixed set of attitudes and political orientations toward the political system and institutions, both domestically and from outside. This study aim to analyze these phenomena across the Western Balkan countries, with a particular emphasis on Romania and separate attention to Bulgaria.

One of the constant findings in the literature concerning this group is political apathy stemming from the lack of trust in institutions, which may also be interpreted as one of the consequences of the complex process of democratization. In Romania, for example, sociological analyses have found that many young people don't trust the existing political system. They see politicians as corrupt, inefficient and detached from society's actual problems. This may explain

why Romania has historically had low voter turnout and only symbolic participation in political parties. Studies published in Bulgaria have shown similar trends of young people withdrawing from the public arena, with many having come to embrace a pragmatic, almost fatalistic, stance towards the ubiquitous problem of corruption, which is seen as an inherent and unchangeable aspect of their society (Ganev, 2014).

However, over the last decade, at least in urban Romania, a different form of civic participation started to gain traction over time. Protests in 2012, the ones in 2015 following the Colectiv nightclub fire and those in 2017 prompted by Ordinance 13 in Romania, rallied thousands of young people who used social media as a primary tool of organization and communication (Grecu & Rughiniș, 2017). Such practices weren't part of traditional forms of political engagement, but remained mostly informal civic spaces.

Youth attitudes about politics in the Balkans appear to bear similar patterns of limited trust in their governments' institutions, political apathy and practical orientations toward politics. In Bulgaria, large youth anti - corruption protests, such as those that took place in 2020, managed to bring thousands to the streets to protest for transparency and reforms, but this still remains a fragmented form of participation in the face of massive emigration and the persistent apathy and disillusionment faced by young Bulgarians today (Bechev, 2021). Looking at support for membership of the European Union, young people in the Balkan region continue to express high levels of support, though it's primarily driven by aspirations for economic opportunities and perceived standards of living than strong ideological adhesion, while Romanian youth occasionally experience frustration about being treated as second - class EU citizens and Bulgarian youth doubt whether the EU can effectively push forward meaningful change (Eurobarometer, 2023, Mineva, 2021).

Similar trends can be witnessed across Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. A recent analysis of European Social Survey data has found that the political culture of Serbian youth is largely cynical, marked by low political interests, participation levels and a high level of dissatisfaction with public institutions (Mandić, 2025). Studies published on the political culture of young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, based on European Social Survey and survey data collected from young people on political culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina, have also identified low levels of trust toward the political system and its actors, with a vast majority of young people expressing distrust towards political parties and politicians while also reporting feeling alienated from politics altogether (Krvavac & Đipa, 2024). In sum, the evidence coming from the Western Balkans paints an image of a region where young people face similar challenges with their institutions, political participation levels and political orientations toward life, much alike those already explored in the analysis of young Romanians' attitudes to politics.

Methodology

This paper uses data collected from the empirical study "Youth Studies Southeast Europe 2023/2024, " conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES). The research is being conducted concurrently in ten Southeast European countries and Western Balkans. Its main aim is to explore how young people position themselves about current societal issues, with a particular focus on Croatia in the original report.

Data collection was done by standard questionnaire with primarily closed - ended questions, covering education, the job market, politics, family, leisure and technology use, along with personal values and attitudes. The study's sample was organized by region, location (rural/urban), age and gender, including over 6,600 individuals between the ages of 14 and 29 in ten Southeastern European countries. Between January and March 2024, researchers used CAPI (Computer -

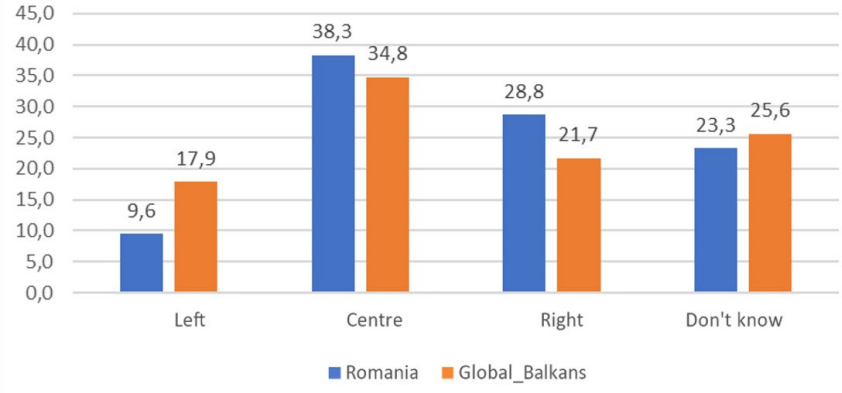
Assisted Personal Interviewing) for data collection, with national representative samples in each of the participating countries allowing for significant inter - country comparisons.

In Romania, latent class analysis was performed to probe the internal political belief space by only analyzing data collected within that nation. All Romanian respondents were dropped from the original data file by country, yielding an 849 valid complete cases once anyone missing data on any of the variables involved in the analysis was removed (this form of data reduction was done because of the few invalid responses and because it's conventional to use listwise deletion for variables, which are in this case categorical).

The central variable of the research is the question: "G8 – Do you consider yourself on the left or right wing of the political spectrum?" Initially, this is measured on a self-assesed scale from 1 to 10, from Extreme Left (1) to Extreme Right (10). For analysis, the scale was recoded into a nominal variable with four categories: Left (1–3), Center (4–7), Right (8–10) and „I don't know"/„No comment"

The distribution of responses shows an interesting difference between Romania and the rest of the Balkan countries: young Romanians tend to place themselves more frequently in the center and on the right, while in other countries in the region, orientations are more dispersed or less pronounced (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Distribution of young people by political orientation. Romania and the Balkan

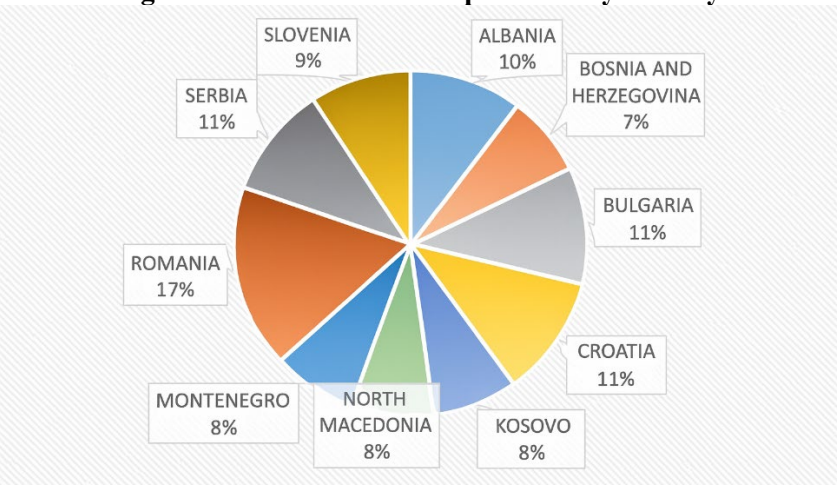


Graph source: Own processing in SPSS 20 based on FES 2023/2024 data.

To better understand how young people form their perceptions of their own political orientation, several explanatory variables can be taken into account. Among the most relevant are age, gender, place of residence, socio-economic status. Each of these dimensions can influence, to varying degrees, how a young person positions themselves on the political spectrum.

The sample used in the study is considerable, with approximately 6,600 respondents. The gender distribution is almost balanced, with a slight numerical advantage for boys (50.85% compared to 49.15%). The distribution by country directly reflects the structure of the research project. As can be seen in the following figure, Romania has the highest number of respondents, 1150, representing about 17% of all respondents, followed by Serbia and Bulgaria, each with 650 participants (Figure 2).

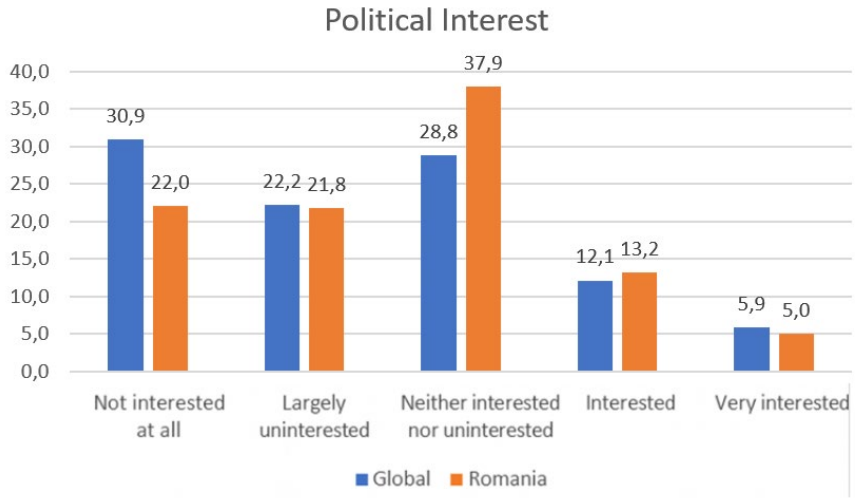
Figure 2. Distribution of respondents by country



Graph source: Own processing in SPSS 20 based on FES 2023/2024 data.

Figure 3 shows political interest by category for global and Romanian respondents: Romania records a lower share of Not interested at all (22.0% vs 30.9%) and Very interested (5.0% vs 5.9%), a similar share for Largely uninterested (21.8% vs 22.2%) and Interested (13.2% vs 12.1%), and a notably higher proportion in the neutral Neither interested nor uninterested category (37.9% vs 28.8%).

Figure 3. Distribution of respondents by interest in politics



Graph source: Own processing in SPSS 20 based on FES 2023/2024 data.

Instruments for measuring political orientations

In political science, there are several scales and models developed to map individuals and groups politically on the left - right dimension, alongside other axes. Left - right is the classic dimension most in use in surveys and according to this dimension, left represents social equality, the welfare state and economic interventionism, whilst the right represents free market, individual responsibility and a minimal state. Typically, data collection through survey questionnaires

measures this axis through questions asking about income redistribution, tax policy or the government's role in the economy.

The libertarian - authoritarian scale appears next to the economic axis, especially in two - dimensional representations of the political spectrum.

Table 2. Political Compass Model

Authoritarian left	Authoritarian right
Libertarian Left	**Libertarian right**

Source: adapted from https://www.politicalcompass.org

Libertarians champion individual rights and civil liberties, whereas authoritarians are characterized by adherence to stringent laws, order and social morality, making it essential for understanding the political spectrum as well as populism, cultural progressivism or conservatism. The different options highlighted in the second table below are classified into these four types of left and right political wings through a questionnaire consisting of sixty - two statements about religion, values or economic topics. Generally, research indicates that environmentalists, anarchists or progressive social democrats would fit within the Libertarian Left quadrant. The Authoritarian Right is where the traditional conservatives and nationalists are. Neoliberals and libertarians tend to reside in the Libertarian Right, whereas communists and more traditional socialists would fit in the Authoritarian Left.

The most widely adopted scale used in surveys, like Eurobarometer or the European Values Survey, is the self - identification scale developed in 1932 by the statistician Rensis Likert. The question asks: "On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means far left and 10 means far right, where would you put yourself? " Its strength resides in its easy - to - understand question. This specific study makes use of the same scale for that precise reason, as it allows researchers to relate the political self - identification of the young adults in the survey with additional characteristics such as age, level of education, religious beliefs, etc. Without requiring additional complexity in analysis.

Latent class analysis

Classification method (CM) is one of the major statistical methods or algorithms applied to assign data points or observations to classes according to predefined features so that a new data point can be correctly identified into one of these classes by using observed features. Classification is a fundamental process of machine learning and data analysis where you classify or predict a class or category based on observations. Classification algorithms can be separated into two groups based on the availability of data and corresponding information on the target classification.

The Supervised type works by using labeled training data and enables algorithms such as Logistic Regression, Decision Trees, Random Forest, KNN (K - Nearest Neighbor), SVM (Support Vector Machine) or neural networks to classify based on learning rules (Mehryar, 2012). Unsupervised type of classification methods works on unlabeled data and identifies specific underlying structures within the data for grouping such as latent class analysis (LCA) for classification of categorical variables or various other algorithms like K - means, Agglomerative Clustering (Wu, 2024).

Latent class analysis (LCA) is a technique that detects and characterizes homogeneous subgroups called latent classes within a population on the basis of observable categorical variables. The premise behind this is that individuals don't answer questions randomly, but instead respond

based on some unseen categorical variable (the latent class). Latent classes don't arise spontaneously or in natural clusters, but emerge through probabilitistic reasoning from observed probabilities.

Therefore, LCA falls into the finite mixture model family, which asserts that the observed relationships among various response variables can be attributed to a categorical latent variable, namely membership in a particular latent class (Vermunt, 2022). LCA becomes useful when one wants to understand different types of views, opinions, behaviors, etc. , that aren't immediately obvious to observers.

The model is based on two basic assumptions: the existence of a finite number of latent classes (C) and conditional independence of observable variables, given the latent class.

The LCA function models the probability that an observation belongs to a particular latent class C_k, as follows (McCutcheon, 1987):

$$P(X = x|C_k) = \prod_{j=1}^{J} P(X_j = x_j|C_k)$$

where:

$P(X=x|C_k)$ - represents the probability that a set of responses X belongs to a latent class Ck, respectively that a person j (in our case) belongs to class k, having the responses $X_j=x_j$.

$\prod_{j=1}^{J} P(X_j = x_j|C_k)$ - represents the product of probabilities for each variable; since the variables are assumed to be conditionally independent within a latent class, the total probability is the product of the probabilities of each variable X_j.

$P(X_j=x_j|C_k)$ – represents the probability that variable X_j will take the value x_j, given class C_k, and reflects how each variable contributes to defining a latent class.

The parameters of an LCA model are usually estimated using the EM (Expectation–Maximization) algorithm. The process has two stages that are repeated until convergence:

E-step (Expectation) – posterior probabilities are calculated for each individual belonging to each latent class. In practice, the model temporarily "guesses" each individual's membership based on current parameters.

M step (Maximization) – updates the parameters so that the likelihood function is as high as possible. In other words, the model adjusts its estimates to better explain the data.

An important aspect is choosing the optimal number of classes (C). Several models are estimated, each with a different number of classes, and then compared based on statistical criteria. Among the most commonly used are:

AIC (Akaike Information Criterion) – lower values suggest a better match;

BIC (Bayesian Information Criterion) – preferred in LCA because it penalizes overly complex models more heavily;

Log-likelihood – shows how well the model fits the data, but must be interpreted together with the other criteria;

Entropy – values close to 1 indicate a clearer classification, i.e., individuals are assigned to classes with low uncertainty.

In this paper, the selection of the number of classes was based on the BIC criterion, considered the most appropriate for avoiding overly complicated models (Wit, 2012).

$$BIC = -2 \cdot \ln(L) + k \cdot \ln(N)$$

Where ln *(L)* is the log-likelihood of the model, *k* is the number of parameters and *N* is the sample size.

After making estimates and identifying the best-performing model according to the above criteria, the quality of the model is analyzed, which is evaluated by: entropy, posterior membership probabilities, and class size distribution.

The entropy formula is:

$$Entropy = 1 + \frac{1}{N \times \ln(C)} \sum_{i=1}^{N} \sum_{C=1}^{C} \widehat{p_{ic}} \times \ln(\widehat{p_{ic}})$$

Where N is the number of individuals, C is the number of latent classes and $\hat{p}_{ic}$ is the estimated probability that individual i belongs to class c.

Each latent class has its own probabilistic profile, constructed based on how individuals respond to observable variables. After estimating the model, each person can be assigned to the class to which they are most likely to belong—a classification that, of course, remains probabilistic, not absolute.

To identify the latent typologies of young people based on their political attitudes, Latent GOLD 5.1 software[1] (Vermunt and Magidson, 2016) was used. The final model was chosen based on the BIC criterion, together with an assessment of the model's overall suitability for the data. This process allowed us to select a solution that was sufficiently informative without becoming unnecessarily complex.

Results and discussions

Analysis of common patterns among young people in Balkan countries using latent class analysis

The analyses in this section aim to answer the first research question: whether or not there are common latent patterns among young people in Romania and how these can be identified using unsupervised classification methods. The basic idea was to see whether, beyond individual statements, certain groups with recognizable political profiles emerge.

In an effort to distinguish these groups, the method of latent class analysis was applied. These results are drawn from the data collected from a sample comprising 849 young respondents, which include six categorized variables which cover the specific dimensions: the declared attitude toward Romanian political institutions, current financial situation, church - attendance frequency, interest in politics and attitude towards corruption, all considered together. Each of these variables represents a part of a larger puzzle in mapping out the typical profile of Romanian young people from a political perspective.

With a comparison of the seven tested models - one for each of the previously tested number of clusters (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10)-the most appropriate one was determined to be the model comprising 3 classes, which had the smallest BIC value (BIC = -4726.07 calculated based on the L^2 statistic), by reason that it seemed to be the best compromise of capturing essential elements while still avoiding the overfitting of the data, suggesting that 3 classes were enough to tell the main stories about these young Romanians.

[1] The analyses were conducted using the LatentGOLD 5.1 free two-week trial version.

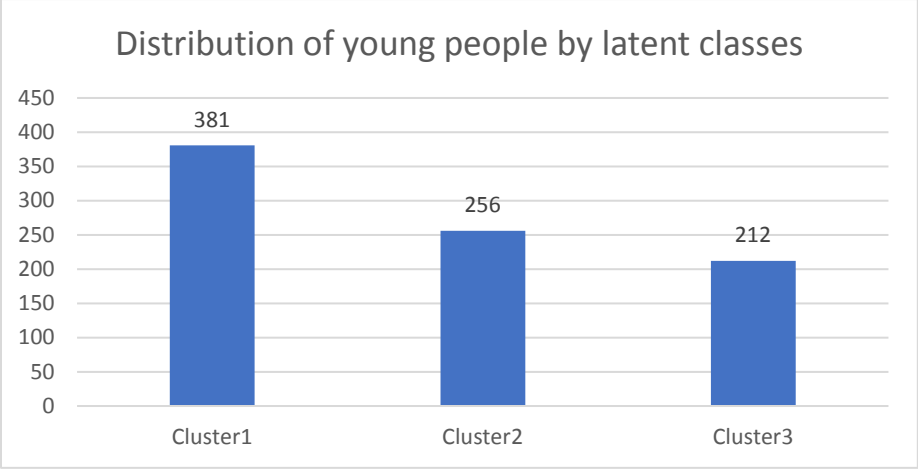


Figure 4. Distribution of young people by latent classes (young Romanians)
Source: own processing based on analyses from the LatentGold application.

Respondents were distributed across three classes. Class 1 included 381 respondents, representing 44.9% of the sample. Class 2 comprised 256 respondents, accounting for 30.1%, while Class 3 consisted of 212 respondents, or 25.0% of the total. This relatively balanced distribution indicates the presence of clearly defined typologies that characterize a substantial share of the respondents (Figure 4).

Table 3 below summarizes the average probabilities of belonging to each response within each cluster, providing an overview of the latent structure of the analyzed population.

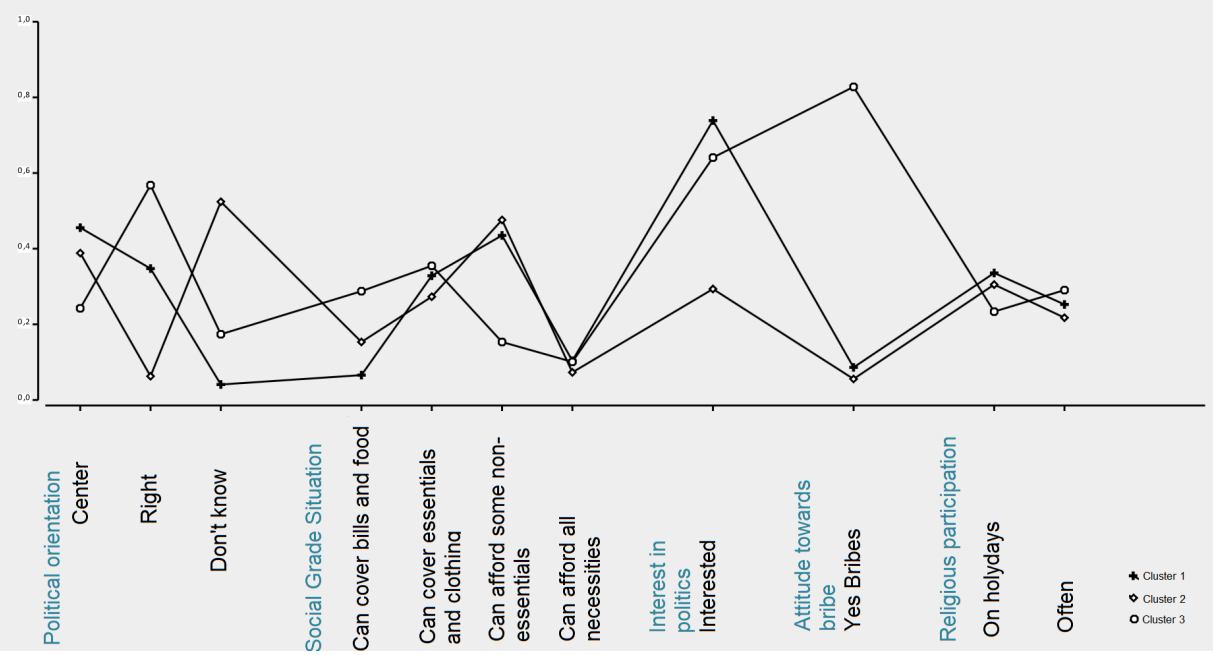
Table 3. Probability means – Latent Class Analysis (young Romanians)

	Cluster1	Cluster2	Cluster3
Overall	0.4596	0.3048	0.2356
Indicators			
Political orientation			
Left	0.8606	0.092	0.0474
Center	0.5439	0.308	0.148
Right	0.5103	0.0609	0.4288
Don't know	0.0844	0.729	0.1866
Social Grade Situation			
Cannot cover basic expenses	0.4993	0.1259	0.3748
Can cover bills and food	0.2061	0.3234	0.4705
Can cover essentials and clothing	0.4748	0.2616	0.2637
Can afford some non-essentials	0.5243	0.381	0.0947
Can afford all necessities	0.5066	0.2387	0.2547
Interest in politics			
Not interested	0.2861	0.5127	0.2012
Interested	0.5855	0.154	0.2605
Attitude towards bribe			
No Bribes	0.561	0.385	0.054
Yes Bribes	0.1569	0.0655	0.7775

	Cluster1	Cluster2	Cluster3
Religious participation			
Rarely	0.4236	0.3252	0.2512
On holydays	0.5106	0.3078	0.1816
Often	0.4626	0.2645	0.2728

Source: own processing based on analyses from the LatentGold application.

Figure. 5. Cluster profile graph



Source: own processing based on analyses from the LatentGold application.

Cluster 1 (46% of the sample): Profile of a "left-wing activist with average socioeconomic status"

Cluster 1 makes up 46% of the overall sample and corresponds to the profile of the left - wing activist with an average socioeconomic status. This is where the left - wing attitude is most prominent (close to 86% identifies as such). It's notable that this group also displays an above - average level of political interest (58.5%).

Corruption refusal is another significant characteristic of the members (over 56% claims they've never given or received a bribe), implying a fairly firm moral position.

Economically, the situation seems to be pretty stable for cluster members, as half of them state they can manage to make ends meet (around 50%) and a bit over 50% says they can afford luxuries (more than half, in fact). Religion is on the infrequent side, as almost 42% only rarely attend Mass and over 50% says they attend on holidays only, which seems to be a pretty standard choice among urbanized young adults.

Cluster 2 (30% of the sample): The "disengaged, precarious, politically undecided" profile

Young, undecided, a large proportion politically unengaged (72.9% don't know their place on the political spectrum, 51.3% are uninterested in politics). It's a cluster with a mix of a lack of a definite ideology and a fairly high level of civic apathy.

It's an economically fragile cluster, as one third of the group (32.3%) indicates they can cover just their basic expenses - food and utilities - while 38.1% admit that they only sometimes manage to purchase nonessentials. This isn't extreme poverty but a fragile middle position that might also explain the low levels of political engagement.

Religious practice is scarce, mostly involving the occasional observance of religious practices that don't differentiate this group much from the general population. What stands out about Cluster 2, though, is the low number of people that engage in acts of bribery, with just 6.5% confessing to have given or accepted bribes, which points to relatively high ethical standards although not coupled with civic involvement.

This cluster, in short, appears to be a mix of indecisiveness and apathy as far as politics and morality go and a vulnerable position in terms of economics, a position perhaps common in the younger generation.

Cluster 3 (23.5% of the sample): The "opportunistic conservative and economically vulnerable" profile

Roughly a quarter of the sample (23.5%) can be considered Cluster 3. This group's defining characteristics appear to align with "opportunistic conservative in vulnerable economic position. " People in this cluster are most likely to consider themselves conservative (42.9% of Cluster 3) and the defining aspect of their profile is an increased toleration of corruption: nearly three quarters of them report having either offered or accepted a bribe (77.7% of Cluster 3). This value is higher than for any other cluster.

They have a precarious financial situation: nearly half of the group (47%) say they're able to afford only the basics, a financial situation which might be tied to an increased toleration for bending and breaking norms and rules. While the religious behavior of Cluster 3 is less unified- 25% of respondents belong to this cluster and rarely attend services, 18% attend services regularly and 27% seldomly attend services - no particular direction dominates.

Cluster 3 represents a sort of hybrid, the conservative youth that's aware of the harsh realities of economic pressure. These individuals don't necessarily accept any moral limits. Because economic needs are so pressing, they might see their own willingness to bend or break norms in the service of those economic needs. As a result, their outlook might be more pragmatic than in other clusters.

The latent classes identified are similar to the broad European range of youth disengagement from formal politics, with the broad, disengaged and economically vulnerable category resembling findings on why young Europeans withdraw from formal politics: low trust in institutions and a weak sense of efficacy (Magdelina, 2020). The smaller segments of young adults with limited or selective engagement echo research suggesting young people might replace the older style of traditional political participation with individualized modes of expression driven by neoliberal norms and alienation from parties, often using forms of "neocitizenship" or consumer - driven protest (Kyroglou, 2017). The conservative and economically insecure segment, who exhibit higher tolerance toward corruption, resemble youth in post - communist countries where "weak youth policies" and the lack of employment can fuel a move toward more conservative or stability - oriented attitudes (Jovanov &, Stankovski, 2020). And, the engaged and civically oriented segment, whose political behavior the analysis identifies as being correlated with strong pro - democracy values, resemble youth in post - communist societies who have managed to gain a strong sense of political self - efficacy, as well as anti - corruption attitudes (Sianko et al. , 2022).

Conclusions

Our analysis demonstrates that Romanian youth political identities are molded by a confluence of political ideology, socio - economic standing and perceptions of corruption. More specifically, political interest in politics and strong anti - corruption values were found to be the most crucial drivers for membership in specific latent political classes among Romanian youth, whereas religiosity played a less significant role. Meanwhile, economic vulnerability correlated strongly withpolitical stratification. In sum, the three latent class types that were identified reveal differing political socialization paths among Romanian youth in a context of profound institutional distrust, financial insecurity and growing engagement with civic issues.

As such, policy recommendations should be specifically tailored toward the political types of Romanian youth identified in this study. Specifically, initiatives aimed at reducing material insecurity and strengthening civic education can be beneficial for the disengaged young, while a focus on reducing corruption in conjunction with some measure of economic security might benefit the conservative and financially vulnerable group. Efforts to support the civic engagement of the identified engaged young will help nurture further democratic developments in the country. Nevertheless, there are limitations to consider: the data rely on self - reported survey questions and exclude several variables which might be pertinent. Future research efforts could investigate how longitudinal changes affect youth political behavior by utilizing longitudinal survey data or adopt qualitative approaches (focus groups, in - depth interviews) to gain a deeper understanding of the varied political types among youth in post - communist Romania.

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