

The Future of Romanian Diplomacy through the Eyes of Its Citizens: A Public Perception Study

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Abstract. *Public perception is increasingly seen as essential to the legitimacy and effectiveness of diplomacy. Although Romania is a full member of NATO and the European Union, little is known about how its citizens understand and evaluate foreign policy. This study addresses that gap by exploring awareness, trust in institutions, and public priorities through a structured questionnaire with 173 valid responses. Findings show that while respondents demonstrate strong factual knowledge of Romania's international status, they follow foreign affairs only moderately. Trust in diplomatic institutions is neutral overall, with more favorable views toward embassies and EU/NATO representations than toward domestic actors. Economic diplomacy, NATO cooperation, and regional relations with Moldova and Ukraine are seen as the most important priorities for the coming years. At the same time, most respondents believe Romanian diplomacy does not fully reflect public concerns or communicate clearly with citizens. This points to a disconnect between institutional strategies and public expectations. The results suggest the need for more transparent and citizen-focused diplomacy. The study contributes to broader debates on public diplomacy and offers a framework for integrating citizen perspectives into Romania's foreign policy planning, supporting a more democratic and accountable approach to external action*

Keywords: public perception, Romanian diplomacy, foreign policy, institutional trust, survey research.

Introduction

Public perception of foreign affairs is being viewed as a key element for legitimizing and making successful diplomacy at the local or global level. To be effective with their international approaches today, diplomats need to find ways to build credibility among their nation's citizenry, and this can only occur through informed engagement by these same citizens if they are going to provide the necessary long-term direction and accountability to the government.

There is considerable evidence from studies within several fields of research which demonstrate that public opinion does influence the development of foreign policies and the reception of diplomatic activities. There are studies focused upon "soft power," "public diplomacy" and "international cooperation" which indicate that public perception will shape how a state behaves domestically and internationally (Goldsmith et al., 2021; Kertzer, 2021). Nevertheless, there still exists a dearth of empirical studies assessing how national publics assess diplomacy specifically within the context of Central and Eastern Europe.

While Romania has made significant progress toward achieving its foreign policy objectives through diplomatic means such as Euro-Atlantic integration and regional partnership frameworks, citizens continue to demonstrate limited interest and participation in debating foreign policy. Research conducted on this subject indicates that there exists a sizeable gap between the actions of institutions involved in international relations and levels of public confidence/trust and awareness regarding these efforts (Public Attitudes in Romania, 2022; RAND, 2021), which lead to the question of whether the strategic orientation of the state's foreign policy aligns with the expectations of its citizens.

The objective of this study was to determine whether the Romanian government has an adequate knowledge of what its public thinks about their diplomatic efforts. There are studies at the European Union (EU) Level (JOINT, 2023) and among Romanian diasporic communities (Dolea, 2022). However, there is no nationwide research that assesses the perceptions of Romanians in regards to foreign policy, institutional trust, and/or strategic priorities such as economic diplomacy and regional leadership.

Evidence for various applications supports that systematic, or structured, questionnaires are an efficient method of collecting public perception. For example, Chang et al. (2023) developed and administered large-scale questionnaires to evaluate the influence of education diplomacy on public opinions in South Korea. Similarly, Rhee et al. (2022) conducted survey experiments within the United States to determine whether reported reasons for actions influence respondents' reactions to diplomatic action. Both studies demonstrate the utility of these models in assessing confidence and acceptance in diplomatic approaches. Although there exists a wealth of information regarding structural models from around the world, the study of Romania's domestic environment has yet to be systematically studied by way of survey research. Therefore, it is unclear as to how Romanian citizens perceive contemporary and prospective diplomatic initiatives; therefore, the absence of public involvement in shaping Romania's foreign policy may lead to illegitimized foreign policy strategies and missed opportunities for more representative and inclusive diplomacy.

This research will investigate how well-informed Romanians are concerning their knowledge of diplomacy, to what degree they believe in and trust institutions, and which diplomatic priorities would be most important for them over the course of the next five years. As part of this research, a structured questionnaire will be utilized to collect new empirical data concerning awareness of public perceptions toward current and future diplomatic initiatives.

The objective is to provide the first in-depth academic study of Romanians' perceptions regarding the diplomatic activity (using empirical survey methods). This will be a starting point for larger-scale discussions and studies concerning the democratic legitimization of foreign policy decisions and it can provide useful information for establishing an alignment of public opinion with Romania's strategic decision-making.

This study has been divided into four primary sections. In the first part, literature review, several conceptual frameworks are discussed, along with relevant previous studies concerning the relationship between public opinions and diplomacy; both internationally, and specifically in Romania. The second part describes the questionnaire development and its administration process, and also explains how respondents' answers have been analyzed. In the third part, the results obtained through this study, organized by research question, are presented. Finally, in the fourth part, a discussion of these results within their contextual framework takes place; finally, the conclusion includes the main outcomes of the study, possible limitations to consider and potential avenues for further research.

Literature review

It is increasingly vital to understand the perceptions of citizenry on diplomacy for both academics and policymakers. There are many examples of research showing that public opinion does not simply reflect what the government does, but rather is a driving force behind what diplomats prioritize, how institutions derive their legitimacy from the public, and where they align internationally. More recent studies have recognized that public perceptions can be measured through surveys, especially as people engage with diplomacy outside of traditional elite circles and into digital, diaspora or regionally based areas (Goldsmith et al., 2021; Rhee et al., 2022).

Public diplomacy has been substantially influenced by questionnaire-based methods of inquiry. Kertzer (2021) states that many foreign policy preferences can be measured using structured tools; this holds true even in complex policy environments with significant elite influence. The JOINT Project (2023) demonstrates the potential to utilize cross-national survey data from six European Union member countries to measure both public attitudes toward an increasingly assertive EU foreign policy and variations in levels of trust, perceptions of threats and the role of institutions.

The results of several studies conducted in the Romanian context have shown significant disparity between the level of involvement of the general public and their knowledge of the work of foreign policy institutions. According to a study titled "Romania's Views of Russia" issued by RAND (2021), many Romanian respondents expressed strong support for both NATO and EU membership, yet showed low levels of confidence in the ability of Romanian leaders to effectively represent their country diplomatically. These same views were also reflected in "Public Attitudes in Romania" (2022), where it was found that although security issues are a priority issue to many Romanian citizens, they generally show little interest or participation in other aspects of international diplomacy. Moga et al. (2021) pointed out that although Romania is viewed as a smart power internationally due to its external relations activities, there is little evidence to indicate that Romania has developed into a regional leader in terms of foreign policy development. Using a six-component model, including those factors most likely to be measured through surveys, such as military strength, institutionally-driven foreign policy activity, and strategic presence, the authors demonstrated how people perceive an entity's ability to influence foreign policy is impacted by what can be observed about that entity.

Comparative analysis can be beneficial in other national settings. For example, Chang et al. (2023) surveyed both a sample of German university students as well as a broader sample of the general public to understand their perceptions of South Korean public diplomacy. The results from this study supported previous research by showing that cultural and educational exchange programs have positive effects on a country's national image as long as they are organized and visible. Zhang (2023) also demonstrated that identity, geographic location of diaspora community relative to diplomatic mission(s), media exposure and social networks all contribute to an individual's trust and willingness to engage in public diplomacy activities toward China. All of the above referenced studies utilized structured surveys which included Likert-scaled statements assessing individuals' views on level of trust, support and perceived success of government's diplomatic efforts.

Across the various methodologies developed within these studies there were several consistent trends among them. Many studies employed Likert scaled statements to measure levels of trust, support and belief about the effectiveness of the public diplomacy strategy being implemented. A few studies assessed the baseline knowledge regarding the subject matter through factual based testing (Moga et al., 2021); while many studies incorporated experimental design elements including hypothetical scenarios and/or randomized controlled group experiments (Goldsmith et al., 2021; Rhee et al., 2022). Kertzer emphasized that the most value was derived from utilizing multi-methodology approaches as part of a larger program evaluation model which includes demographic data collection and longitudinal data collection to identify changes in attitudes and opinions toward a particular country over time.

Although there is great variability in the different contexts where publics are understudied in foreign policy, one commonality among them is that national publics have historically been largely absent from research. There is growing recognition of the role that foreign audiences and diasporas can play in foreign policy, however, the voice of ordinary domestic citizens is infrequently included. The data available to researchers on the perceptions of Romanians regarding the country's diplomatic activity, information provided to them about the country's foreign activities and potential areas for future development are very fragmented; to date, no comprehensive questionnaire survey has been conducted which examines all three aspects.

Increasingly scholars emphasize the significance of public opinion on diplomacy, especially in democratic and transition environments. Recent studies by Goldsmith & Horiuchi (2021); Rhee et al. (2022), illustrate how public opinions influence the legitimacy and effectiveness of foreign policy strategies. Regional surveys like the JOINT Project (2023), examine European Union citizen attitudes toward EU foreign and security policy; while Chang et al., (2023), shed light upon Korea's foreign image abroad. Nonetheless, studies concerning Romania or similar countries within Central/Eastern Europe remain sparse; therefore, there exists an empirical need to continue examining this area of interest.

There is a lack of understanding if these concerns are echoed through the voices of ordinary citizens and/or if they feel engaged/informed/represented in diplomatic processes. Due to Romania being positioned

simultaneously as both a stable member of the European Union and a frontline State in a rapidly changing region, Romania represents a unique opportunity to fill current voids in research on public diplomacy.

Problem statement and research question

The purpose of this project was to fill notable research gap that exists in the current literature; there has been little empirical data collected on how Romanians view their country's diplomatic efforts. Although Romania participates actively within regional organizations such as the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), very few studies have focused on assessing public opinion toward foreign policy issues. In contrast to much of the previous research which assesses decision making from the perspective of the elite, this project assessed the views of ordinary citizens with respect to these issues. As such, four key research questions were central to the design of this project.

RQ1: How informed are the respondents about the country's diplomatic efforts?

RQ2: What level of trust does the public have in Romanian diplomacy?

RQ3: What diplomatic priorities does the population support?

RQ4: How does the public view the future role of Romanian diplomacy?

The existing literature on foreign policy for Romania has focused largely on institutional surveys that have evaluated strategic foreign policy or elite driven perspectives. The current study contributes a new level of insight into foreign policy by assessing public opinion independently of those elites, using a citizen centered framework. State sponsored and commissioned barometers are limited to measuring awareness and trust toward institutions and do not capture how citizens perceive connections between foreign policy issues and national priorities. Therefore, this study uses both objective measures of knowledge (i.e., the objective knowledge test) and subjective measures (Likert scales and open-ended question responses) to provide a detailed assessment of how citizens understand and expect to see foreign policy develop over time.

This study assesses the impact of diplomatic awareness on institutional trust and ultimately foreign policy support within the context of a conceptual chain. The conceptual chain used in this study is as follows; Diplomatic awareness → Institutional trust → Foreign Policy Support. Awareness is foundational in terms of information regarding foreign policy, Trust is indicative of the credibility of the institution providing foreign policy, and Support is indicative of alignment with stated strategic objectives. Using this conceptual chain, we can begin to evaluate how the public's perception of foreign policy may be seen as an input into the policy legitimacy.

Methodology

This article utilizes a quantitative survey methodology to determine Romanian citizen's perceptions regarding Romania's diplomatic efforts. The aim is to measure the levels of awareness among Romanian citizens with regards to Romania's foreign policies, the levels of trust they have towards institutions involved in decision making, and also what are the top three priorities that Romanians would want to see from Romania's diplomacy over the next five years. In addition, this study will examine how Romanian citizens perceive Romania's role within NATO, EU, and other regional and global settings.

Survey design

The tool used to collect data was an instrument named "perceptions about Romanian diplomacy". This survey instrument consists of Likert scale statements, multiple-choice questions, matrix rating scales and some limited numbers of open-ended questions. The instrument has eight themes:

1. **Media exposure & information** - To measure how frequently do people follow international news and how much they can believe information from different media outlets (TV, Internet, Social networks etc.).
2. **Institutional Trust** - Measures the degree of trust in the most important foreign policy institutions in Romania, namely MAE, Presidency, Embassies and Romania's Representation at the EU and NATO.

3. **Evaluation & Priorities** - Requests that the respondent evaluate what he believes are the effectiveness of Romanian diplomacy and its priority setting compared to the public's expectations; also requests that the respondent identify which aspects of Romanian diplomacy should be the focus in the next years (e.g., NATO, Moldova, Economic Diplomacy).
4. **EU & NATO** - Evaluates the benefits that have arisen from Romania's membership in both the EU and NATO and assesses the level of confidence in these memberships as well as the willingness to defend national interests through defense policies.
5. **Economic Diplomacy** - Measures the perceived significance of economic diplomacy by Romania and identifies the most effective instruments of this diplomacy (e.g. Export Support, Investment Promotion).
6. **Cultural Diplomacy / Academic-Scientific** - Measures opinions regarding the cultural image of Romania abroad and opinions regarding instruments such as scholarship programs or cultural institutes.
7. **Romania's Image & Agenda Alignment** - Measures perception of Romania's image within the European Union, whether the official diplomatic agenda corresponds to citizen's priorities and engagement of Romania in the region.
8. **Socio-Demographic Data** - Collects socio-demographic data including gender, age category, education, profession, region and location type

The questionnaire uses a 1-5 Likert scale for the majority of perception-based items (where 1 represents "very low/total disagreement" and 5 represents "very high/total agreement"), multi-response questions for identifying primary sectors/instruments, and an open text field to provide participants an opportunity to identify their preferred change(s) to Romania's diplomatic policy.

Participants included 173 valid surveys completed during a four-week time frame with a sample that was predominantly from an urban location. While this research does not intend to be statistically representative of the entire Romanian nation, it is suitable for exploratory research, and sufficiently sized to reveal significant patterns/trends among respondent demographics. The combination of closed-ended and open-ended data provides additional interpretative depth to the results through comparison (quantitatively) and analysis (thematic) of participant expectations.

Although there were 173 valid responses to the survey, the sample is not nationally representative. For example, a large percentage of participants reported being students (41.3%), living in cities (86.6%), and residing within the Bucharest-Ilfov region (45.9%); therefore, this research will refer to "participants/respondents," instead of "Romanian citizens." Exploratory insights into the subject are still valid; however, caution should be taken when making generalizations.

Target population and distribution

The target for the survey were all Romanian residents over the age of 18, regardless of their location, gender or educational background. In order to maximize response rates a non-random sampling strategy (non-probabilistic) was adopted using Google forms disseminated through social media channels, university email lists, professional networks, and other civil organizations. The respondent will remain anonymous and participation in the study is entirely voluntary.

Data collection and processing

The collection of the data took place from November 17th, 2025 to December 17th, 2025. The questionnaire was completed in Romanian language; the results were translated as needed for academic purposes. All participants' responses remained anonymous. Most of the analysis was conducted by utilizing the built-in chart feature of Google Forms that converts respondents' answers directly into a graphic format that allows the researcher to visually evaluate trends immediately. The researchers utilized these charts to view the distribution frequencies, determine the most common responses to each question (i.e., dominant response patterns), and compare the results among the key variables.

The researchers analyzed the responses to all the open-ended questions via manual thematic coding. This allowed researchers to find commonly-mentioned words/terms/suggestions and connect them to larger patterns observed in the quantitative data.

Ethical considerations

Participation was anonymous and no personally identifiable information was collected. The data is stored securely and was used only for academic research purposes.

Results and discussions

A total of 173 valid responses has been collected via a survey instrument containing over 20 items for assessing both factual knowledge and public perception of Romania's diplomacy. Only the direct-to-the-questions that assessed the four core Research Questions (RQs) will be analyzed for this paper.

The selected items include awareness levels, institutional trust, perceived performance, desired future directions and expectations for changes. All other question items were directed toward evaluating or understanding specific sectoral instruments (e.g., instruments of cultural or economic diplomacy), and therefore are being removed from the current study and could possibly be studied separately at some time in the future.

The research starts off by looking at the first Research Question (RQ) as it examines how well-informed the respondents are about Romania's foreign diplomacy. The findings in this part of the study were based on two separate measures from the survey: one examined how frequently respondents followed international news; the second assessed where they got most of their information about foreign policy. To measure the extent of knowledge about foreign policy among the sample population and, thus, assess whether there was sufficient opportunity for the use of effective communication by Romanian diplomatic organizations, both of these areas had to be explored.

Based upon the responses to questions about how often the respondents followed international news, the results showed a relatively high degree of exposure to international news across the entire sample (n= 173). Respondents that selected a score that fell into the middle category (score = 3) made up the greatest number of the sample (29.5%). Respondents selecting a higher frequency of exposure to international news (scores = 4 & 5) comprised nearly half of all participants (46.8%), while respondents reporting lower frequencies of exposure to international news (scores = 1 & 2) accounted for just over one-fourth of all participants (23.7%). Approximately eight percent (8.1%) indicated that they rarely follow international news. Collectively, these findings indicate that the sample has reasonable levels of knowledge pertaining to international relations and, therefore, follows international news fairly regularly.

However, such an approach does not represent a sophisticated or in-depth examination of issues related to foreign policy. Therefore, such an assessment reflects a general understanding of issues related to international affairs rather than an expert-level comprehension. Such an interpretation is also supported by respondent demographics.

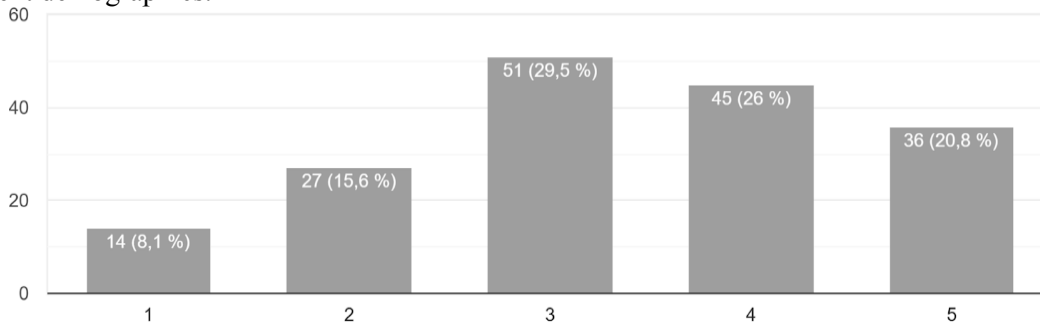


Figure 1. “How often do you follow international news?” – Frequency of following international news

Source: Author’s own elaboration based on questionnaire responses (n = 173), collected via Google Forms.

Results from respondents' preferred means for obtaining information about foreign affairs (see Figure 2), show a preference in the study group (n=173) for accessing foreign policy information through both digital and non-formal media. Online newspapers (74%) and social networks (72.3%) were listed most often as primary access points for foreign affairs information. Formal channels, which included government websites (25.4%) and podcasts (28.3%); television news programs (43.9%); General Television (12.1%); and telegram (0.6%) were the least common.

These results suggest that respondents prefer to access foreign affairs information through faster, easier-to-access and less formalized channels than those traditionally associated with government institutions. The high reliance on digital media indicates an environment in which it is possible for institutional voices to be lost amid other competing messages; however, this reliance also represents an opportunity for public diplomacy practitioners to leverage digital media in their efforts to reach broader audiences.

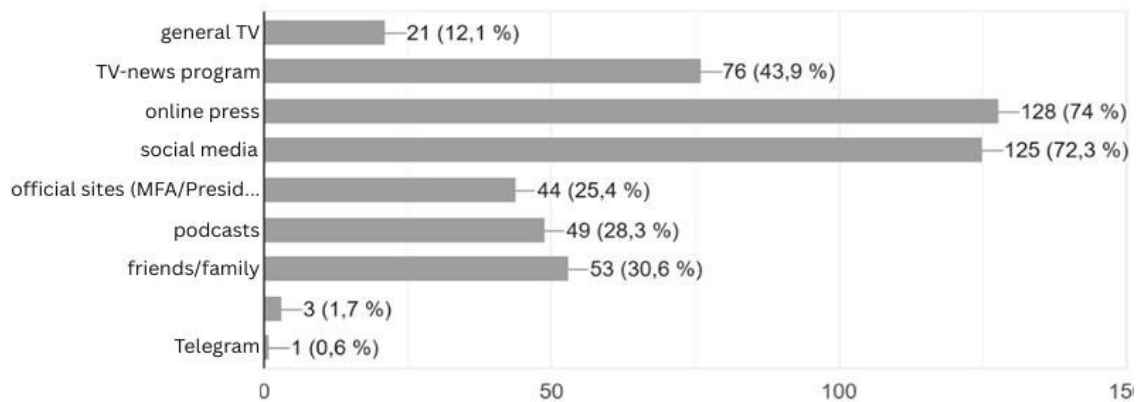


Figure 2. "What are the main used sources"-Frequency of used sources

Source: Author's own elaboration based on questionnaire responses (n = 173), collected via Google Forms.

The evidence from these data supports the conclusion that there exist moderate levels of engagement by the Romanian general public, particularly represented here, towards international news coverage, and an exceptionally high degree of reliance on informal or non-institutionalized digital-based information sources; rather than through traditional institutional-based media outlets. These trends are representative of the overall consumption patterns of a younger, more urban based population and the wider trend away from institutional media-based dissemination. Additionally, it can be interpreted as an opportunity for Public Diplomacy organizations to increase their reach and effectiveness through focused engagement with digital communication platforms.

These results concerning the respondents' identification of the various components of the institutional knowledge of Romania's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Figures 3), demonstrate a high degree of accurate factual recognition within the sample. Nearly all respondents (97.1%), identified the Minister of Foreign Affairs as being the Head of the MFA and only a few respondents selected incorrect options including the "President of Romania" or "Romanian Ambassador to Brussels." The very high degree of correct identification of these institutional functions demonstrates that respondents have a strong fundamental comprehension of the role of institutions. Therefore, although there may exist deficiencies in terms of participation, trust or other aspects of the relationship between the government and its citizens, they appear to maintain a solid foundation of understanding regarding the structural framework of Romania's foreign affairs. This finding supports the notion that the institutional presence and familiarity with high level leaders is generally well-established.

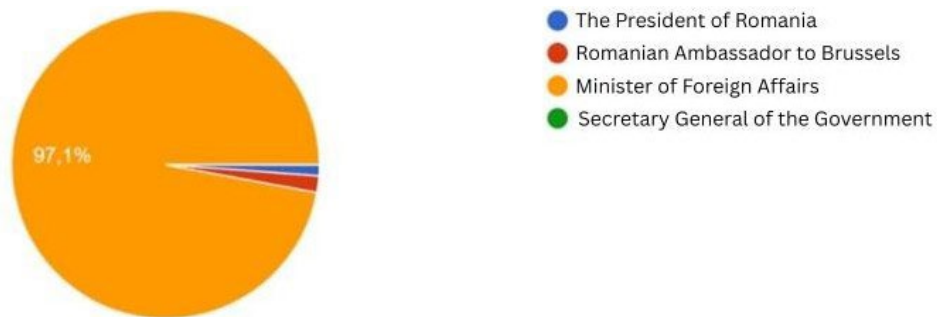


Figure 3. “Who is running the Romanian MFA?”- Awareness of institutional leadership

Source: Author’s own elaboration based on questionnaire responses (n = 173), collected via Google Forms.

The response data for the question regarding Romania's international status provided significant evidence of how much factual information about Romania's international status is known among this population. Overwhelmingly (98.3%) all but 1.7% of the sample correctly stated that Romania was a full member of NATO and the European Union. Only a small number of subjects selected "NATO observatory state" or "EU membership with limited rights" from the list of possible choices for international status of Romania. Clearly there appears to be a widespread understanding at the base level regarding Romania's geopolitical commitments, although it may be less clear as to how deeply engaged members of this community feel toward these same institutions.

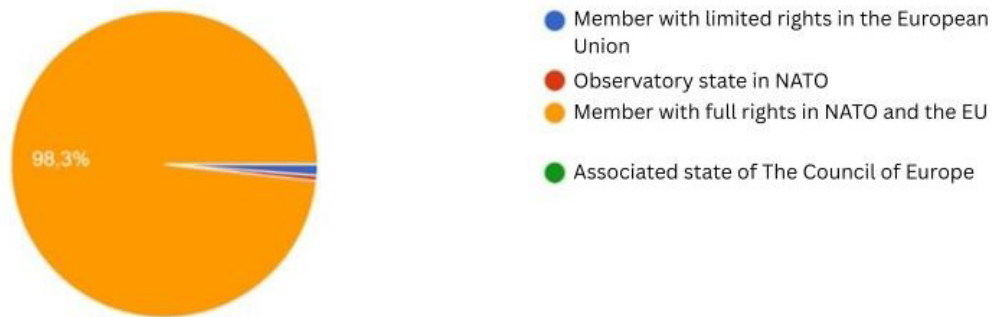


Figure 4. “Romania currently holds the status of...”

Source: Author’s own elaboration based on questionnaire responses (n = 173), collected via Google Forms.

The second RQ focuses on the degree of support (trust) that respondents have in the various diplomatic institutions; i.e., do Romanian diplomats serve and represent the people of Romania? The way to measure this is by asking respondents to rate their trust in several of the main players involved in foreign policy, which include: The President; The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA); Parliament; Embassies & Diplomatic Missions; The European Union (EU), and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). These will allow researchers to understand the perceived credibility & legitimacy of these entities and also help us determine whether there are any significant differences between trust in government/parliamentary bodies domestically & international/diplomats internationally. The overall trend across all groups is the large number of respondents who selected a score of 3, indicating an average, neutral level of distrust.

A total of 43.6% of the respondents selected a score of 3 for the MFA, while 26.25% selected a score of 4. Likewise, the presidency has an almost identical profile: A total of 39.4% of respondents selected a score of 3 and 22.1% selected a score of 4. In contrast, the Parliament received a much lower percentage of respondents who chose a score of 3 at 34.3%, however, 18.6% of the respondents selected a score of 4. It is interesting to note that 22.1% of the respondents selected a score of 2 for the Parliament indicating some skepticism about legislative involvement in foreign policy.

In terms of respondent ratings for Romanian embassies and diplomatic missions, 36.6% selected a score of 3, while 30.8% selected a score of 4. Thus, respondents appear to view the performance of diplomatic efforts outside of Romania's borders as being relatively good. Finally, respondents appeared to hold very high levels of trust in Romania's representation to both the EU and NATO. Specifically, a combined 49.4% of respondents selected a score of either 4 or 5 when responding to this question. Conversely, only 17.5% selected a score less than 3.

Overall, it would appear that institutional trust levels are generally moderate and that respondents tend to express greater confidence in Romania's external representations, especially those operating under multilateral frameworks such as the EU & NATO. Domestic trust in political institutions seems more cautious or even ambivalent. The data suggest there may exist some disparity in how members of the general public perceive Romania's execution of its diplomacy externally vs. the political structures internally that shape its diplomacy.

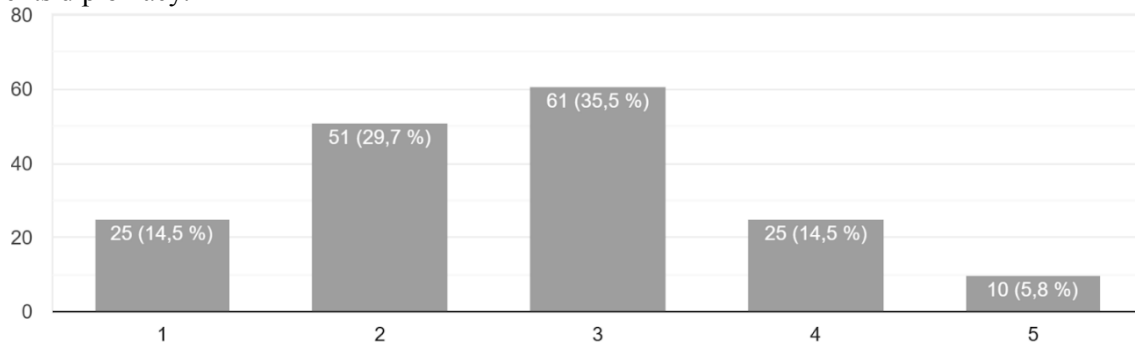


Figure 5. “To what extent does Romanian diplomacy reflect the priorities of the population?”- Perceived alignment between public priorities and diplomatic action

Source: Author’s own elaboration based on questionnaire responses (n = 173), collected via Google Forms.

Hereafter, participants will be required to report how closely Romanian diplomacy is aligned with their own social values (see Figure 5). Data shows an overwhelming sense of detachment among the sample (n = 172) regarding the extent to which the Romanian government has been responsive to its people's interests. Although slightly less than half of the sample (44.2%), reported either extreme negativity toward Romania's current level of engagement with society through diplomacy (scores of 1 & 2), the remaining portion of the sample demonstrated little confidence in the efficacy of their foreign policy decisions. Of those polled who assessed the ability of Romanian diplomacy to reflect the values of its people; only a small number (less than 20%) believed that their government was either very effective or somewhat effective. Therefore, this data suggests that the vast majority of individuals polled believe that there exists an unacceptable disconnect between the foreign policy priorities of their government and their own. As such, the lack of transparency in decision making processes and/or participation in Romanian foreign affairs practices clearly necessitates reform.

The third research question of this study seeks to identify which specific diplomatic priorities are supported by survey respondents. To accomplish this goal, the first step was to ask each respondent to evaluate the success of Romania's foreign policy during the last three years (see Figure 6). The majority of respondents selected a middle-of-the-road answer when evaluating the success of Romania's foreign policy. This result indicates that many respondents have a critical view of the Romanian government's foreign policies. Nearly 40 percent of respondents indicated that they felt the Romanian government had performed "adequately" while another 42 percent of respondents indicated that they thought the Romanian government had performed poorly. While some respondents felt that Romania's foreign policies had been successful, these respondents made up a relatively small percentage of total respondents.

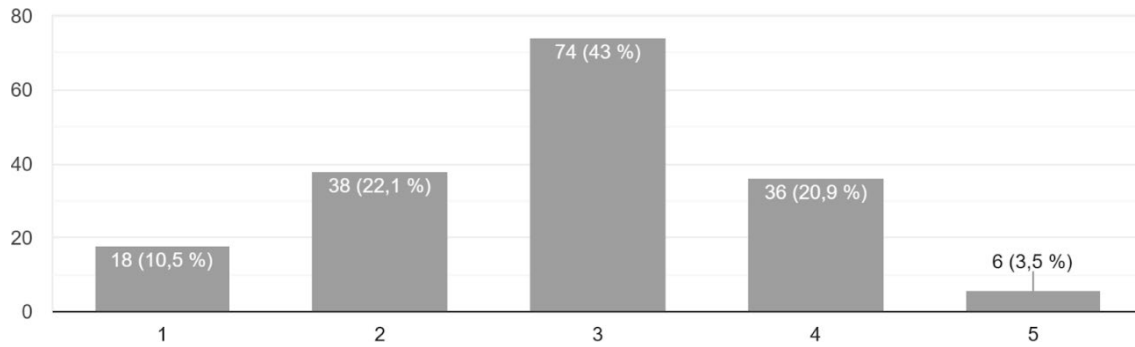


Figure 6. “How do you evaluate the performance of Romanian diplomacy for the past 3 years?” — Public assessment of Romania’s diplomatic performance (2022–2025)

Source: Author’s own elaboration based on questionnaire responses (n = 173), collected via Google Forms.

When asked to identify the top three priority areas for Romania's foreign policy in the next five years (see Figure 7) the pattern that emerges is a clear emphasis on pragmatism and strategy. The greatest number of participants (71.5%) identified economic diplomacy as their first choice; this result suggests an overwhelming interest among the general public for promoting investments and engaging globally economically. Next was security issues/related to NATO (58.7%) followed by continued EU cooperation (50.6%). As well, 40.5% of respondents view regional cooperation with Moldova and Ukraine as important. All other softer diplomatic arenas including cultural (30.2%), digital (34.9%), and diaspora rights (7%) received far less attention. This pattern indicates that there is a broad-based public desire for the current government to prioritize both economic and geo-political consolidation at the expense of symbolic or longer-term soft power initiatives.

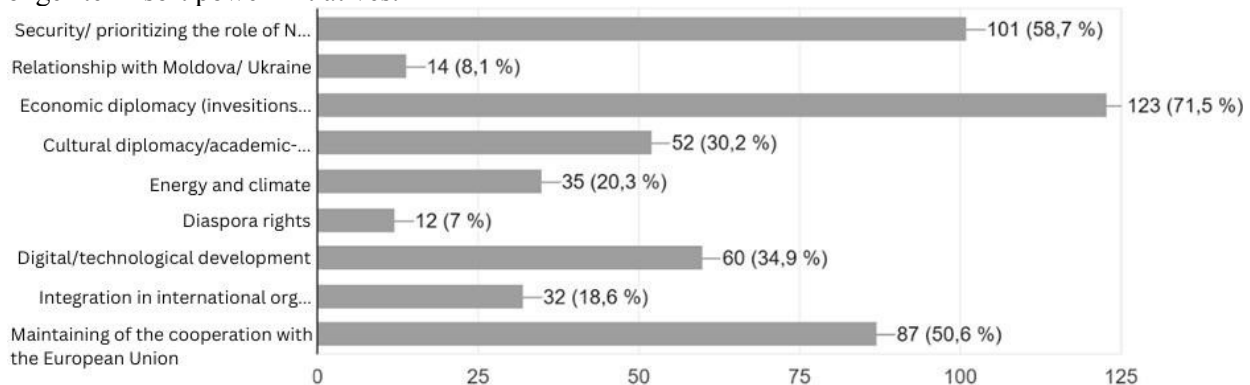


Figure 7. “Choose the most important 3 priorities for Romanian diplomacy over the next 5 years” – Public preferences for Romania’s future diplomatic priorities

Source: Author’s own elaboration based on questionnaire responses (n = 173), collected via Google Forms.

The fourth RQ evaluates respondents’ views on the future role of national diplomacy. National Diplomacy was measured by two complementary items. Respondents were first asked if Romania’s image inside the EU is currently better than it was five years prior (Figure 8). Based on the distribution of answers there appears to be an overall positive response from the sample population. Almost 40 percent of the sample population rated the Romanian image at "four," while nearly 21 percent rated it at "five." Thus, over 57 percent of the sample population believes that Romania's image has improved. Twenty-seven percent of the sample population chose the middle point ("three") on this scale, which indicates no improvement or decline. Nearly 17 percent of the sample population responded with a negative rating on this question. Therefore, although there are those who recognize some positive changes in Romania's image due to its relatively stable position in European Union affairs, its commitment to security, and its efforts toward full integration (such as becoming part of the Schengen area), the results indicate a somewhat cautious optimism.

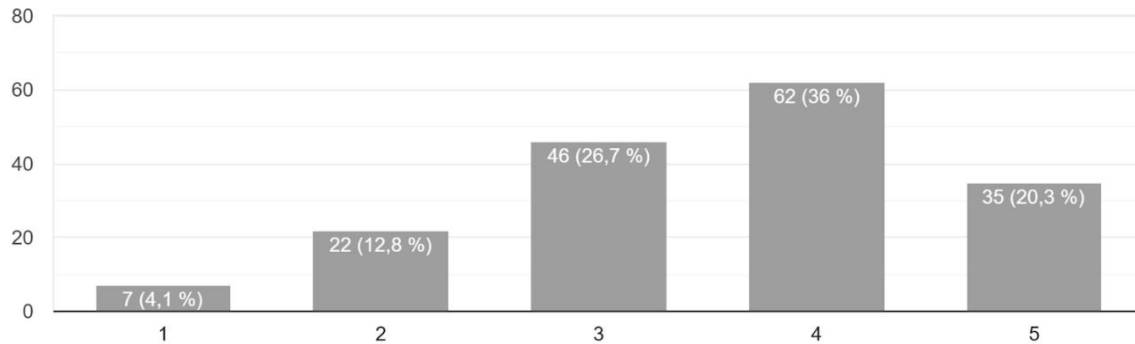


Figure 8. „Your perception: Romania has a better image within the EU than it did 5 years ago” — Public assessment of Romania’s image evolution within the European Union

Source: Author’s own elaboration based on questionnaire responses (n = 173), collected via Google Forms.

The open-ended comments showed that there is a very high level of consensus among Romanians about their desire to see change within the Romanian Diplomacy, but few respondents provided specific information about what they would like to see changed in diplomacy. While many respondents indicated that they were unhappy and/or called for reforms to be made, few provided clear recommendations for how those reforms should take place. Many respondents who did provide some form of recommendation suggested little more than that there needed to be greater professionalism and appointment based upon merit; therefore, less political influence and an increased emphasis on competency and results.

Respondents also frequently referenced improved communication between diplomats and the public, specifically citing a need for increased transparency and better explanation from the diplomats of why they are doing what they are doing. Several respondents also emphasized the need to attract foreign investment and strengthen Romania's ability to compete internationally economically. Finally, some respondents mentioned such issues as improving Romania's global reputation, providing a clearer sense of strategy and economic security and improving the presence of Romanian Embassies abroad.

Table 1. Thematic grouping of the open-ended question “What is the most important change you would like to see in Romanian diplomacy?”

Theme	Number of mentions
General reform	111
Professionalization/ merit-based appointments	15
Better communication with the public	8
Attracting foreign investment	8
Improving Romania’s international image	3

Source: Autor’s own computation.

Respondent Profile

There is clearly an imbalance shown on the gender breakdown, with 64% of the respondents being females and 36% males. Similarly, there was also an overrepresentation of those living in urban environments, with 86.6 % of all responses coming from urban dwellers, whilst only 13.4 % came from rural communities. Regionally, 45.9% of participants lived in the Bucharest-Ilfov region, followed by South Muntenia (28.5%), whilst the other regional categories namely; Northeast, Southeast and West were under-represented.

Occupation-wise, 45.9% of respondents identified themselves as employed persons, whilst 41.3% indicated that they were students. Categories including entrepreneurs, pensioners and unemployed persons were also apparent, however within smaller categories than others mentioned above.

This group may have a higher degree of exposure to issues relating to international affairs, be likely to exhibit stronger preference towards future-oriented diplomatic policy-making options and have more active engagement with the use of soft power tools such as academic, digital and cultural diplomacy.

The respondents had an almost even split by age group, with 38.7% being in the 18–25-year-old category; 24.3% in the 26–35-year-old category and 18.4% in the 36–45-year-old category, with older categories having the remainder of the respondents. The fact that most of these respondents are younger is due to how the sample was created (an online survey), and also because this group is much more likely to be connected via technology and live in larger cities.

Respondents indicated they have some awareness of foreign policy issues but it's mostly from non-traditional, informal, digital based sources. For example, many get their news about international relations through the internet and/or social media. In terms of Romania's international standing, there is good knowledge for factual information regarding Romania's position internationally. However, when asked about trust in formal institutions that represent Romania abroad (diplomatic missions), the responses indicate average levels of trust. External representation (EU or NATO missions etc.) received better ratings compared to domestic institutions.

Most respondents perceived recent diplomatic activity as neutral to slightly negative and believed that Romanian diplomacy currently reflects many of the priorities of the Romanian people very poorly. Most preferred futures directions for Romanian foreign policy include: (1) economic diplomacy; (2) greater engagement by Romania on issues of security and NATO; and (3) increased cooperation at the regional level with neighboring countries such as Moldova and Ukraine. The support for these options suggests that Romanians value an economically beneficial, strategically stable, regionally focused diplomacy.

As well as commonalities in terms of future directions, there were several consistent themes expressed throughout the various respondent answers. One of the most commonly articulated was the desire for diplomats to be more professional, transparent, and communicate more effectively with their institutions. Overall, the data supports the conclusion that in order for the public to have a more positive view of the work being done by diplomats, they will need to see both a closer alignment between their expectations and the actions taken by diplomats, as well as improved communication about what has been accomplished.

This study provides multiple avenues for further comparative research regarding the extent to which similar gaps exist between elite-driven foreign policies and citizen involvement among other Central and Eastern European countries. In addition, the findings provide evidence supporting the use of public feedback mechanisms as part of the strategic planning process of Romania's foreign policy. A more inclusive model of diplomatic engagement based upon trust and knowledge may provide Romania with enhanced credibility within the context of both regional and multilateral forums.

Lastly, this study provides insight into broader discussions in International Relations concerning how smaller states develop legitimacy and identity via diplomacy. As Romania continues to explore new ways to position itself internationally in light of changing alliances and evolving global challenges, public participation could become not only a democratic necessity but also a strategic advantage.

Conclusion

This study aimed to assess the respondents' perceptions about the country's diplomacy and its future development. The four research questions examined (1) the respondents' degree of knowledge, (2) the respondents' confidence in governmental organizations, (3) which diplomatic activities should be prioritized in the future, and (4) the respondents' opinions on what types of roles Romanian diplomacy could play in the future. Each research question received a positive response.

Firstly, it appears the general population has an intermediate level of familiarity with matters related to diplomacy, where this information comes from the Internet instead of official government sources. Second, there is an average level of trust toward institutions responsible for conducting diplomacy. In addition, the public prefers that these institutions focus outward as opposed to inward. Third, the top five priority areas that the public supports as being important in the future include economic diplomacy; defense/security; involvement with NATO; and relations with Moldova and Ukraine. Finally, even though

respondents believe Romania has a better reputation within the EU than before, many still do not believe that Romanian diplomats represent their own interests nor communicate effectively.

In summary, the responses suggest that citizens would like to see a professional, open and engaged diplomatic system, which represents national interest while also being seen and held accountable. As such, the survey provides insight into ways that trust can be rebuilt and that citizen participation in foreign policy can be enhanced.

Academic contributions

This paper has three contributions. Conceptually, it links citizen perceptions of public diplomacy with democratic legitimacy by providing a causal model. Methodologically, it combines empirical (factual) and subjective (attitudinal) indicators into a singular measurement tool. Empirically, it provides unique empirical evidence on Romania which is an under-explored example in the public diplomacy literature.

Empirically, it uses Romanian data as the primary source for its analysis. It represents one of several countries that are relatively poorly represented in the comparative literature on public diplomacy. In addition to filling this regional knowledge gap, this work also provides a model for researchers wishing to conduct similar research in other contexts where public diplomacy research has been less well developed.

Limitations

Although this research makes an important contribution, there are also some limitations. Because the survey was conducted on-line based on non-profitability, these results can be generalized to the whole of Romania population. Individuals who have access to Internet and who have higher education levels are probably overrepresented in the respondents' group, therefore they could influence the results as more informed or more involved in the political process than other people. Although the questionnaire is designed to measure both the perception and knowledge about the European Union, the lack of qualitative interviews and/or longitudinal data that would allow us to understand how these perceptions were created/developed during time is a constraint for further development of this topic.

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