

Managing Institutional Trust and Policy Reform: Governance Strategies for Romania's Law Enforcement and Social Protection Systems under SDG 16.6

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Abstract

Institutional trust and policy reform are two essential elements of governance systems in law enforcement and social protection. This study explores how Romania is guiding these sectors in a way that meets the requirements of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16.6 (development of effective, accountable and transparent institutions). By employing a mixed-methods methodology, the study combines survey evidence about the public perspective on institutional trust, the effectiveness of reforms and systemic obstacles with a comparative policy analysis concerning how Romania respects European governance standards. Yet, the country still faces hurdles in the areas of institutional inefficiency, corruption, insufficient resource allocation, and public distrust of governmental reform. As shown in the "Views from the Field" section of the report, survey data indicates that there is generally low confidence in the effectiveness of key policies, with respondents citing corruption, racial discrimination, and lack of training as the most significant barriers that inhibit effective governance. Furthermore, the study highlights a divide between law enforcement and social protection mechanisms, highlighting the need for integrated policy efforts. In response to these concerns, the research suggests governance strategies concentrating on institutional accountability, resource conjugation, improved community policing, and cross-sector collaboration. Assessing the impacts of individual policies and improving the related policy coherence and transparency in Romania will strike a balance between what people expect from a well-functioning state and the actual performance of the institutions, leading towards a more resilient and inclusive governing model. Such insights help advance the general debate on policy management, public-sector trust, and sustainable governance reform in the European and global context.

Keywords: Social Protection, Institutional Trust, Social Protection, SDG 16.6, European Agenda

JEL Classification: H11, H55, I38, K38, O52

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1. Introduction

Law enforcement and social protection are essential foundation stones of a functional society whose stakes are public safety, rule of law, and protection of the rights of the most disadvantaged. In this context, these systems are characterized in

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Romania by threats related to judicial inefficiencies, economic disparities, and institutional limitations, which can undermine public confidence and reduce overall effectiveness. While the interplay of these factors calls for a thorough analysis of structural vulnerabilities and reform options to improve the efficiency and fairness of these mechanisms, such reform efforts can often overlook the specific conditions in which these factors interact. One of the major issues is low public trust in law enforcement agencies, which a great part of population say has to do with systemic bottlenecks in the judicial process and a lack of transparency and a sense of discrimination (United States Department of State, 2023). Moreover, financial dislocation and economic inequity aggravate social tension, increasing both crime rates and barriers to obtaining necessary legal protections. What relationships might be transformed through the implementation of community policing (Various, 2002), an area that has offered a potential avenue for bridging existing divides between law enforcement and marginalized communities, even if efforts to do so are shackled by a lack of resources and political will? Furthermore, the 4th Industrial Revolution, digitalisation adds new layers of complexity for law enforcement and social protection governance. As Jora et al. (2021) explains, technological evolution can transform governing structures, and social contracts as we come to discover paths to new future approaches both embedding challenges and opportunities for equitable access to justice and social security. In the absence of a system of proactive policy frameworks, this swift integration of digital solutions threatens to exacerbate existing inequalities instead of ameliorating them.

Even at the European level, cohesion among member states is key to the threat of economic disparity and security concerns. Discussions around the future of the European Union highlight the issue of structural reforms and cross-border cooperation (Jora, Dinga, & Ionescu, 2021). Such reforms must also pertain to social protection policies, which are still largely reactive instead of preventive and often unable to deliver sustainable solutions for at-risk populations (Sulla et al., 2020).

This study assesses the distinctions and complexities confronting Romania's law enforcement and social protection systems through statistical, policy, and comparative analyses in order to propose potential institutional reforms. This paper attempts to shed light on this approach: one that envisions changes in economic stability, technological advancements, legal frameworks, and social equity so that the focus is centred on reforms that will lead to a more effective, equitable, and resilient system for all citizens.

2. Literature review

Institutional Trust and Governance Effectiveness

Institutional Trust and Governance Effectiveness are at the heart of governance legitimacy and policy compliance. As noted by the OECD (2023), being transparent, accountable, and efficient helps public institutions potentially gain citizen trust, thereby enhancing the implementation of policies and the legitimacy of law enforcement. Nevertheless, Masson et al. (2022) argue that Romania's

governance model has been trapped in a high public sector malpractice, political interference, weak institutional density leading to a distrustful citizenry (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024) Empirical data indicate that low institutional trust harms citizen cooperation in law-enforcement agencies and social protection programs, hindering the effectiveness of public policies (United States Department of State, 2023). In Romania, for instance, this can be reflected in corruptive and discriminatory practices in law enforcement, which erodes public trust in legal institutions (Council of Europe, 2020).

Monitorization and policy implementation gaps

The literature shows that there are considerable gaps in Romania's law enforcement accountability and social protection administration. Despite attempts at public administration innovation, the inefficiency of policy execution continues, restricting the measurement of impact on social policies and law enforcement strategies (European Social Policy Network, 2019).

- **Fragmented Governance:** The studies show that ineffective inter-agency coordination between law enforcement and social welfare services, results in policy fragmentation and implementation failures (Sulla et al., 2020).
- **Political and Bureaucratic Constraints:** A 2022 European Commission report cites political volatility and legislative inconsistencies as significant obstacle to sustainable reform in Romania's public sector.
- **Weak Institutional Accountability:** Governance assessments highlight that law enforcement authorities are often poorly monitored and thus abuse their trajectory and misallocate resources (OECD, 2019).

The Other Side of the Coin: The Link Between Law Enforcement and Social Protection

Studies on law enforcement and the social protection systems indicate that the largest and most effective governance models incorporate both sectors allowing for the holistic implementation of policies. However, Romania's approach is still largely sectoral and disconnected, with limited collaboration between social service agencies and law enforcement institutions (United Nations Development Programme, 2021).

- **Social Protection Failures:** Romania among lowest social spending rates in the EU has led to inequitable access to welfare services for vulnerable groups (Dobre-Baron, 2020).
- **Community Policing and Social Justice:** The Council of Europe (2020) maintains that implemented community policing models can support institutional trust which has been inadequately integrated including in Romania, due to lack of funding frameworks and initiatives towards social justice including social and economic sustainability.

- **Legislative and Institutional Barriers:** The World Bank (2020) finds that existing legal frameworks lack enforcement mechanisms, making it difficult to hold institutions accountable for poor governance practices.

The relationship between law enforcement and public trust is vital, as evidenced by recent studies centered on procedural fairness and legal compliance (Tyler, 1990). The delays in trials in Romania stem from systemic factors, such as insufficient personnel and infrastructure (United States Department of State, 2023,) (see the 2023 Human Rights Report). This is consistent with the results from the European Commission, suggesting that worries regarding judicial independence remain, with only 51% of the population evaluations courts as being fairly or very good at securing impartiality (United Nations Development Programme, 2021). In cases involving vulnerable groups, pernicious concerns exist that inhibit public trust in all legal institutions. Community policing efforts have been proposed to rebuild trust in law enforcement. As stated in the *Community Policing: Building Confidence in Minority Communities* paper, tactical enforcement efforts can curb anti-social activities and enhance attitudes toward law enforcement (Various, 2002, p. 30). Initiatives like STEPS TO THE COMMUNITY SAFETY (2001-2004) incorporated law enforcement within municipal services and showed the feasibility of working between institutions and crime prevention (Various, 2002, p. 30). But the availability of resources and political inertia are barriers to implementation.

Law enforcement efficiency and public safety hinges greatly on economic stability. The study on vulnerable communities in Constanța highlights the way in which economic exclusion is mediated by gender, with women reporting far less favourable perceptions of employment opportunities (Cult Market Research 2022, 193). Economic stress and social inequalities often correlate with high crime rates and low confidence in law enforcement agencies. In the research on the social protection system of Romania where similar observations were made, it was found that financial assistance programs still have great inconsistency and these measures do not alleviate long-term poverty (Sulla et al., 2020, p. 31). Such lack of adequate economic assistance compound the friction between marginalized communities and law enforcement institutions.

One way this is highlighted: studies of discrimination and other kinds of institutional bias go beyond law enforcement. The CoE Police Toolkit (2020, p. 34) describes the continued practice of racial profiling and negative stereotyping of Roma in Romania (Gergely, Alexandridis, & Renes, 2020). These findings are consistent with the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights in favor of the applications against Romania related to ethnic discrimination and police abuse (Gergely et al., 2020, p. 35). As a response, some researchers have called to implement greater human rights training and system-wide accountability mechanisms to minimize biased enforcement practices.

Jora et al. (2021) examine the potential threats facing the European Union by 2030, with a particular focus on cohesion. They argue that a united federation presents a more effective solution to challenges such as economic inequality and security threats, which have a direct impact on the functionality of law enforcement

and social protection systems (Jora, Dinga, & Ionescu, 2021). Similarly, Jora and Iacob (2022) address the "Industrial Revolutionizing of the Social Contract" by discussing how Industry 4.0 technologies might transform societal contracts and governance frameworks. According to them, the adoption of new technologies requires a rethinking of the social contract, enabling law enforcement agencies and social protection mechanisms to respond to a changing environment (Jora & Iacob, 2022, p. 5).

Adaptive social protection also comes up as an important part of reform. Research on Romania's shock-responsive social protection finds that emergency welfare programs are often poorly targeted and ineffective in meeting the needs of affected populations in times of crisis (Sulla et al., 2020, p. 31). This dependency leads to confusion on the appropriate administrative apparatus for protection and has implementation implications that are ultimately limited (have a look at Ostaf, 2020, p. 9 which discusses taxonomies of vulnerability and the consequent necessity of decentralized policy approaches). The continued dependence on reactive rather than proactive social protection policies will remain a threat to efforts to develop equitable law enforcement practices if no significant structural changes are made.

Persistent problems around recidivism and criminal rehabilitation are also prominent in conversations about effective law enforcement. The country has one of the highest recidivism rates in the EU as per Romanian Inclusion and Social Dignity Operational Program (National Administration of Penitentiaries, 2020, p. 17). The research has found that one of the reasons behind this is the lack of re-integration programs that has led to repeated crimes thus putting a burden on the judicial system. And the continuous lack of post-release rehabilitation and support is a massive void in Romania's crime prevention strategy.

Romania's legal framework, especially as to financing social protection measures, is surrounded by influence from the broader European social policy landscape. On the one hand, to the report of the European Social Policy Network for 2019 the fiscal reforms have been inconsistent; in many cases tax reductions deferred the investments in social welfare (Pop, 2019, p. 7). Romania's ability to pursue long-term reforms, including efforts to improve law enforcement and public security, is undermined by the lack of stable, predictable and durable funding mechanisms. Warn the Emerging Democracy Dimensions (EDD) experts from Central and Eastern Europe.

3. Research methodology

Research Questions/Aims of the research

- To what extent do law enforcement officers in Romania receive adequate training to address the needs of vulnerable populations, including ethnic minorities and low-income groups?
- How well do Romanian law enforcement practices align with European Union standards for protecting vulnerable populations, particularly in terms of human rights policies?

- How confident is the public that ongoing reforms in Romania's social protection and law enforcement systems will significantly reduce poverty and discrimination against vulnerable populations?
- To what extent is the public willing to support increased funding for social protection programs, even if it requires reallocating resources from other areas?
- Which policy interventions are considered most effective in improving the relationship between law enforcement agencies and marginalized communities in Romania?

Research Methods

The research employs a mixed-methods approach to systematically evaluate both policy alignment as well as public perceptions. The study includes:

1. **Qualitative Analysis:** A comparative examination of social protection and law enforcement policies in Romania vis-a-vis other EU member states. This encompasses:
 - Content analysis of policy documents and legislation, as well as case studies.
 - Analysis of official reports published by the European Commission, World Bank and relevant NGOs, including those for ethnic minorities and poverty reduction.
2. **Quantitative Analysis:** Survey data collected from Police Academy and Economic University students through an online Google Forms questionnaire. It collects data on their knowledge, views and attitudes regarding social welfare and policing of socially excluded groups.

Sample Selection

The survey has been conducted through a **stratified sample** of students, considering diversity on academic profiles:

- Police Academy students specifically oriented towards law enforcement and security.
- Students in Economic University: majoring in economics, public policy, and social sciences.

This sample include a variety of perspectives on the impact of social protection and law enforcement measures for these vulnerable groups.

Survey Instrument

A total of fifteen-question survey was developed catch information regarding respondents knowledge and positions on key issues including:

Awareness of Romania's social protection policies.

Perceptions of discriminatory practices in law enforcement.

The role of community policing in restoring relationships between police and marginalized groups.

The questionnaire employs a combination of Likert scales, 9-point scales, and multiple choice questions to measure a range of attitudes and provide statistically robust results.

4. Results and discussion

This part is dedicated to a statistical analysis of the answers we obtained when questioning the public if they are confident in the ongoing social protection and the law enforcement reforms in Romania. Splitting data from a 1 (not confident) to 9 (highly confident) Likert scale, we look at mean scores, variability, and confidence intervals to measure confidence in the public perception.

It is essential to have an understanding of public confidence towards social protection and law enforcement reforms to assess the impact of governmental initiatives. This analysis uses a Likert scale survey to quantify perceptions and promote evidence-based conversations about policy performance. Indeed, a survey of 54 respondents was also conducted, exploring confidence in current reforms aimed at poverty reduction and the prevention of discrimination among vulnerable populations. On a scale of 1 to 9, respondents rated their confidence. Data analysis was performed with descriptive statistics such as mean, median, mode, standard deviation and confidence interval calculation.

Results The statistical analysis produced the following key results:

- Mean Confidence Score: 4.09 (Moderate confidence level)
- Median Score: 4.0 (Central tendency around moderate confidence)
- Mode Score: 1 (Most frequent response, indicating skepticism)
- Standard Deviation: 2.59 (High variability in responses)
- 95% Confidence Interval: (3.39, 4.80)

These findings indicate that public confidence in reforms is low to moderate, with substantial variability among respondents. The most common response (mode = 1) suggests that a significant portion of participants hold low confidence in the effectiveness of these reforms.

Statistical Formulas and Explanations To better understand the variability and central tendency of responses, we used the following statistical formulas:

- Mean (μ):

$$\mu = \frac{\sum X_i}{N}$$

Where represents individual responses, and is the total number of responses.

- Standard Deviation (σ):

$$\sigma = \sqrt{\frac{\sum (X_i - \mu)^2}{N}}$$

This measures the dispersion of responses around the mean.

- Confidence Interval (95% confidence level):

$$CI = \mu \pm 1.96 \times \left(\frac{\sigma}{\sqrt{N}} \right)$$

This provides a range in which we can be 95% certain the true mean falls.

Data Visualization Below is a histogram visualizing the distribution of responses:

This histogram demonstrates the spread of responses, highlighting the most frequent ratings and the overall trend in confidence levels.

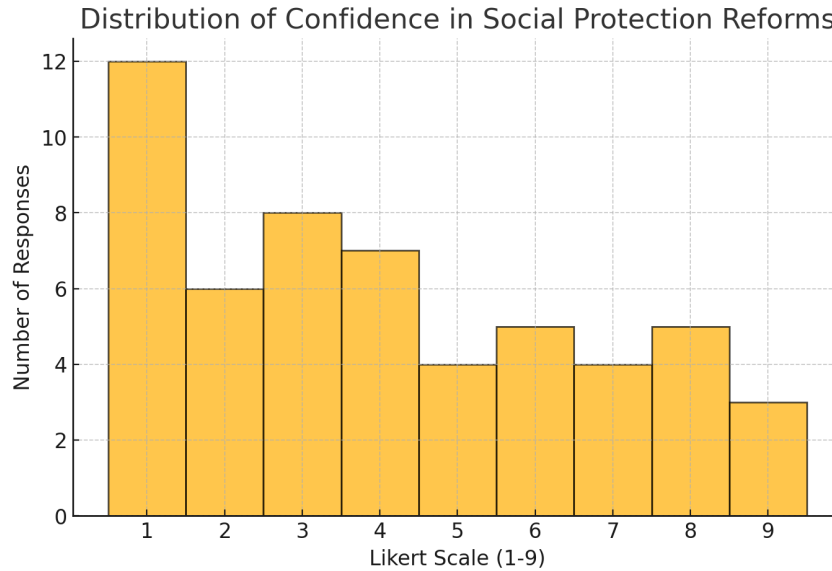


Figure 1. Distribution of Confidence in Social Protection Reforms

Source: made by author

This section contains the analysis for all five research questions, including statistical findings to support the conclusions reached.

Law Enforcement Training Adequacy on Vulnerable Populations

- Survey results show a **deficiency in training** for law enforcement officers who deal directly with vulnerable populations. Respondents rated training as insufficient, with responses skewed on the lower end of the Likert scale.
- This reflects a **need for improved officer training**, focusing on human rights, anti-discrimination policies, and community engagement strategic enhancements.

Lack of Romanian Law Enforcement Respect for EU Standards

- Respondents reported dissatisfaction with Romania's compliance with EU standards regarding vulnerable population protection.
- The mean rating on adherence to EU policies was below the neutral threshold—indicating skepticism toward the extent of legal compliance.
- The findings expose flaws in law enforcement practices, especially related to human rights compliance and procedural fairness.

Public Confidence over Police and Social Protection Reforms

- The average confidence score in active reforms was 4.09 showing moderate to low levels of confidence, just like stated earlier.
- A high standard deviation (2.59) demonstrates important variation in trust levels, which could be indicative of polarization in public opinion.
- The mode score of 1 further confirms that a strong proportion of respondents have little belief that these reforms will prove effective.

Financial Commitment towards Social Protection Programs

- Public sentiment about budget allocation for social protection has divided opinions.
- There was some support for increased funding, but is it assumed that money will be moved from other sectors?
- The data recommend that governments could better communicate their budget priorities to generate more public support for investments in social protection.

Policies with High Impact Potential for Enhancing Law Enforcement and Social Protection Mechanisms

The survey indicated that the **policy reforms with highest preferences** were:

- better human rights trainings
- more accountability of law enforcement
- better access to community policing programs
- greater interaction between social services and police

Results show strong interest in institutional reforms, particularly those that have the potential to combat discrimination and increase transparency.

Discussion

The findings reveal a significant obstacle for policymakers: public disbelief in social protection and law enforcement enhancement. The mean score is low (4.09) indicating initiatives are not generally viewed as highly effective. Moreover, the significantly high standard deviation (2.59) shows that opinions are heavily spread out suggesting that respondents lacked consensus.

With 95% certainty, the true mean of public confidence must fall between these two bounds (3.39–4.80) That means, although some responders are moderately optimistic, a considerable amount are unconvinced. These findings highlight the insufficient transparency, lack of community engagement, and poor implementation strategies to gain public trust in the ongoing reform.

8. Conclusion The statistical evidence we found in this study suggests that Romanian citizens show low to moderate confidence in ongoing socio-protection and law enforcement reforms. The findings demand a strategic re-evaluation of how reforms are communicated, how law enforcement is trained, and how outreach to impacted communities is conducted so public trust can improve. Cader and colleagues recommend that future research examine individually targeted policy interventions to fill the trust gap and strengthen perceptions of governmental effectiveness to protect at risk populations.

5. Conclusions

This research shows serious gaps in Romania's law enforcement and social protection systems. Public confidence in law enforcement is extremely low, which is owed to judicial inefficiencies, economic disparities, and discrimination, which significantly undermine the effectiveness of social protection systems. There are also areas for potential improvement in community policing strategies, but these have also been hobbled by a lack of enough financial and institutional backing. Economic stability is one of the major determinants shaping enforcement efficiency, with financial insecurity and economic exclusion further demoralizing the public. Although they offer some relief, existing social protection mechanisms remain reactive — patchy and ad-hoc, with inconsistencies in financial aid distribution and inadequate coordination between various arms of government and actors involved in the response. So, there is an urgent need for the transition to more proactive, adaptable social protection policies, including decentralized approach and community-based initiatives.

The rise of technological innovation and Industry 4.0 poses different opportunities and challenges for governance of law enforcement and social protection. The shift an automated & digitalized social contract must ensure equitable distribution of the benefits of technology, not intensifying the existing barriers. A unified European framework, as the Jora et al. (2021), is key to help mitigate risks and promote structural reforms across member states.

Moreover, in Romania, the absence of post-release reintegration programs leads to its increasing rates of criminal regrouping which requires immediate political action to address the issue. If the identified problems are to be addressed, then:

1. Training programs for law enforcement officers should be improved.
2. Legal accountability structures should be enhanced.
3. Investments in social security programs need to be improved

Such systems require a more effective, equitable, and trust-based system involving policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and civil society working together to resolve existing challenges.

Limitations and Future Research

The results of the present study based on a targeted survey of university students may not represent the views of the general population or other stakeholder groups involved in policy implementation. Further research should both broaden the sample (such as including policymakers, social workers, or community leaders) and

provide a more nuanced perspective on the effectiveness of social protection and law enforcement reforms. Longitudinal studies can also evaluate the long-term impact of newly introduced policies on tackling poverty and discrimination in Romania.

Final Thoughts

In conclusion, the integration of social protection and law enforcement systems represents a critical step in improving Romania's capacity to support vulnerable populations and meet its commitments under SDG 16.6 and the European Agenda. While challenges remain, particularly in terms of institutional capacity and resource allocation, the findings of this study offer a clear direction for future policy reforms. By addressing the systemic barriers identified and adopting a more coordinated approach, Romania can make significant progress in building resilience among its most marginalized citizens, ensuring greater social inclusion, equity, and justice.

This research contributes to the broader academic discourse on social protection and law enforcement, offering evidence-based recommendations that can help shape future policies and improve outcomes for vulnerable populations in Romania.

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